

Exploring a rights-based approach to disaster management

Megan Kroluk, Emergency Management Queensland, takes an historical view of disaster management and considers two of its developmental changes.®

ABSTRACT

The protection of human rights is an integral part of the disaster management process. However is there a need for a 'rights-based approach to disaster management'? Is it necessary? What would it look like? This paper takes an historical perspective of disaster management, including the use of the military's 'command and control' model, and explores two significant changes in its development that challenge current ideology. The paper also considers the use of Web 2.0 technology in the disaster management process as one pathway to achieving a participatory, rights-based approach to disaster management.

Introduction

Despite the vast amount of research conducted in the field of disaster management and in the integration of a rights-based approach to community development, little has been written about a rights-based approach to disaster management within international humanitarian response and national disaster management systems. The idea that rights such as shelter, food and security should be met and protected during a disaster event is now a familiar concept for many disaster management practitioners. Further, the idea that disaster management professionals should also value community participation in the disaster management process is also gaining attention.

While human rights should be the foundation of any aid or development interaction, they are often overlooked due to expediency, ignorance or self-interest (IASC 2011, p.1). This is particularly pertinent in the field of disaster management despite the fact disaster-affected communities are often those where rights are most in danger of not being met.

Two significant changes that have shaped an evolving community development and disaster management field are the move to a human rights-based framework and the recognition within the disaster management

sector itself of the critical role that community members play in the disaster management process. In addition, the use of Web 2.0 platforms engender a greater integration of a rights-based, participatory model in the disaster management process and encourages disaster practitioners to consider the value of participation as a means of promoting and protecting human rights in disaster-affected communities.

Historical perspective

The disaster management discipline has not traditionally been seen as a participatory space. With its roots in the Civil Defence era of the mid-twentieth century, modern disaster management is 'derived from the military centralised command and control model, (which) assumes and treats the affected population as helpless victims, without the ability to help themselves, let alone other human beings' (Gunawan *et al.* 2011, p. 309). As the Cold War era ended and disaster management became a fully-fledged sector in its own right, many military personnel transferred to disaster management organisations, bringing with them not only their valuable operational skills and experience, but also their entrenched military assumptions and ideologies (Auf der Heide 2004, p. 358, Dynes 1994, p. 142, Orlando 2010, Pearce 2003, p. 211).

This grounding in military practice means that many of the systems in use in contemporary disaster management are directly sourced from, or influenced by, military operations and a strict adherence to military tradition and hierarchy is often observed (Orlando 2010, Pearce 2003, p. 211). The 'command and control' model, which comprises a 'centralised response with a few select experts issuing orders down the line to responders, employees or the public' (Orlando 2010), has historically been the standard when providing support to communities (Auf der Heide 2004, Dynes 1994, Orlando 2010). According to Orlando (2010), this model 'assumes the response needs to be placed in the hands of trained experts who will direct and care for the untrained masses to keep them out of harm's way'. Orlando's analysis positions the general population as helpless and separate from the real 'professionals' whose job it is to save the 'powerless victims'.

The 'command and control' model is evident throughout the co-ordination of disaster management operations, particularly through the use of co-ordinating mechanisms such as incident management systems and emergency operating centres. These systems employ a strict reporting hierarchy and are often controlled by small groups of experts generally consisting of police and military personnel (Coppola 2007, pp. 280–282). While there is no doubt that successful disaster management requires strong co-ordinating mechanisms, it is useful to recognise that co-ordination has traditionally taken place in isolation, away from the impacted communities. While this is changing, particularly at a community or local government level, disaster management professionals in these operational environments, unencumbered by community consultation, make critical decisions about a community of which they often have little or no firsthand knowledge.

Two significant changes have occurred in the last 20 years that challenge this centralised, top-down paradigm. These are:

- the move within the international development sector towards a community development, or human rights-based framework, which seeks to empower communities to play an active role in shaping the development of their communities, and
- that the disaster management sector itself has started to recognise and value the role of community-based responders in the disaster management process.

A rights-based approach

A rights-based approach to development is one that positions the human rights of a community as central to the development of that community. This is in stark contrast to previous 'charity' or 'needs' frameworks, which positioned community members as passive receivers of goods and services (Boesen & Martin 2007, p. 10, UNICEF 2003).

A rights-based approach shifts the emphasis from impact and influence on communities to protection and fulfilment of the community's rights. Within this framework, governments, development agencies and other stakeholders have legal obligations to provide not only assistance, but to promote and protect the rights of citizens. At the same time a rights-based approach acknowledges the rights and responsibilities of community members and encourages and empowers them to play an active part in claiming those rights (Boesen & Martin 2007, p. 10, Gosling & Edwards 2007, p. 9). The principles of a rights-based approach include empowerment, inclusiveness, sustainability and local ownership (Boesen & Martin 2007, p. 15, Gosling & Edwards 2007, pp. 8–9, UNICEF 2003, pp. 92–93). There is also a particular focus on participation within the rights-based framework, which encourages community members to be actively involved in analysing their own situation and developing solutions based on needs and desires identified by community. This stems from the

knowledge that community members understand their own needs better than others and are able to address issues in a manner that is practical and sustainable for that community (Kingsbury *et al.* 2004, p. 222).

There are increasing efforts within the international humanitarian space to incorporate a rights-based, participatory approach to disaster and humanitarian response. Two significant international bodies, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) and the Sphere Project, have developed humanitarian guidelines that incorporate a rights-based approach to the management process.

The IASC is an inter-agency forum for co-ordination, policy development and decision-making involving key United Nations (UN) and non-UN humanitarian partners. The organisation's guidelines, *The IASC Operational Guidelines on the Protection of Persons in Situations of Natural Disasters* help 'international and non-governmental humanitarian organisations and members of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee to ensure that disaster relief and recovery efforts are conducted within a framework that protects and furthers human rights of affected persons' (IASC 2008, p. 7). The document identifies key principles and activities which should guide humanitarian action in situations of natural disasters. The focus is on four core groups:

- life, security and physical integrity and family ties
- food, health, shelter and education
- housing, land and property, livelihoods and secondary and higher education, and
- documentation, movement, expression and opinions and elections. (IASC 2008, pp. 15, 29, 39, 45).

The guidelines state that affected persons 'should be informed and consulted on measures taken on their behalf and given the opportunity to take charge of their own affairs to the maximum extent and as early as possible' (IASC 2008, p. 11). The guidelines also maintain that disaster-affected communities must be involved in all stages of the disaster management process, particularly those that are 'traditionally marginalised from participation in decision-making' (IASC 2008, p. 11).

Similarly, *The Sphere Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response* (The Sphere Project 2011, pp. 21–23) places the right to life with dignity, humanitarian assistance, protection and security and to asylum and sanctuary, as fundamental to the response process. Its Humanitarian Charter is an internationally recognised set of common principles and universal minimum standards in humanitarian response. It also includes that 'People Centred Humanitarian Response' is one of its core standards (The Sphere Project 2011, pp. 55–56). In this core standard, the use of local capacity, the participation of local groups, local feedback and a respect for traditional practices, are advocated as minimum criteria for a rights-based humanitarian response. Other core standards advocated by the Charter include effective



Image: Michael Warston © The State of Queensland

Community members work together during flooding in south west Queensland.

co-ordination and an understanding that the needs and concerns of the affected population must be identified and prioritised (The Sphere Project 2011, p. 58, 61).

Community-led disaster management

Other challenges to the centralised, top-down approach in disaster management are the growing empirical evidence revealing how people and organisations react when faced with a disaster event. Despite a long-held belief that ‘victims’ of disasters will respond with helplessness, panic and anti-social behaviours such as looting, social researchers have shown that the opposite is true (Auf der Heide 2004, p. 357, Drabek & McEntire 2003, p. 99, Dynes 1994, p. 146). Members of communities impacted by a disaster event are often the first on the scene and the first to provide assistance and they will continue to self-organise throughout the response and recovery phases. According to Drabek and McEntire (2003, p. 99), ‘individuals and organisations typically become more cohesive and unified during situations of collective stress’, and cite ‘search and rescue, operations, coordination, the collection of relief supplies, provision of shelter and emotional support’ as just some of the ways communities respond to disaster events. Auf der Heide (2004, p. 342–343, 355) discusses the role of individuals in disaster response settings and provides examples of incident co-ordination and evacuation assistance following significant disaster events such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York, the Sioux City air

crash in 1989 and the 1995 sarin gas attack in Tokyo. In Auf der Heide’s examples, only a small percent of victims were transported by emergency services—the rest either self-evacuated or were transported by the community members who were first on the scene. Similarly, Kendra & Watchendorf (2007, p. 324) discuss the spontaneous evacuation of Manhattan by commuter ferries and other harbour traffic during the 9/11 terrorist attacks and suggest this as an example of community innovation in the face of disaster.

These examples highlight that the first responder role is often carried out by the community members, at odds with the assumption of a helpless, disorganised group of ‘victims’ needed to sustain the ‘command and control’ paradigm. By playing a role in the disaster management process, community members are actively accessing their right to participation, empowerment and inclusiveness. One practical example of how communities are achieving this is through the use of new and innovative online communication models—collectively known as Web 2.0.

Rights-based disaster management in action

Web 2.0 refers to interactive technology that allows users to create, share, contribute to and access information, effectively making them both producers and consumers of information and communication practices (Keim & Noji 2012). Web 2.0 includes communication platforms such as Facebook and

Myspace (online communities), Twitter (micro-blogging), YouTube (video sharing), Flickr (photo sharing) and mobile phone technology (including phone and tablet 'applications'), as well as crowd-sourced interactive mapping (Goldfine 2011, p. 11, Yates & Paquette 2010, p. 6). Although most of these platforms are more commonly known as sources of entertainment and general communication, they are increasingly becoming integral tools in the disaster management field (Goldfine 2011, pp. 17–18).

Web 2.0 has already been used extensively during disaster events. Following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, blogging was used to locate missing people. Facebook and Wikipedia emerged as a vital communication link between students, responders and family during the Virginia Tech shootings, while blogs and crowd-sourced information gathering proved critical following *Hurricane Katrina*. Other examples of Web 2.0 being used in disaster management over the past 10 years include intelligence gathering using community networks and SMS during the 2007 California wildfires and real-time monitoring and information sharing by means of Twitter during the Alabama tornado outbreak (Orlando 2011, Sutton, Palen & Shklovski 2008). Other uses of social media in disaster situations include mobile telephone communications in China during the 2003 SARS epidemic, photo sharing during and after the 2005 London bombings and the use of mobile telephones as a news extension relay system following the 2006 Java earthquake (Haddow & Haddow 2008, pp. 41–43).

It was not until 2010 that the use of Web 2.0 as a disaster management tool really came into its own. Following the devastating earthquake in Haiti in 2010, volunteers from around the world worked with community members, the Haitian government and aid workers on the ground to co-ordinate a truly global response. Responders were able to gather critical information from the community, develop comprehensive maps, co-ordinate response operations and direct search and rescue efforts through the use of blogs, SMS and social media platforms (Slagh 2010, pp. 16–19). In these examples, Web 2.0 platforms were used to keep people informed, to communicate, and to play a role in the management process. Web 2.0 platforms complement the rights-based approach as it provides an interactive space for community members to connect and play a role in the disaster management process. Whereas the 'command and control' model has historically separated disaster-affected communities from the decision-making process, the use of Web 2.0 as a disaster management tool provides an increasingly egalitarian way for community members to participate in shaping the community in which they live. As evidenced during the 2013 bushfires in Tasmania, it can be used as a forum for community members to identify their own needs and issues, and enable them to access critical information and to organise collectively. The 'Tassie Fires—We Can Help' Facebook page was created spontaneously during the bushfire emergency, linking community members in need with those offering support and resources. The Facebook page rapidly became the

primary communication channel for the fire-affected communities, addressing operational issues the emergency services were unable to deal with due to the magnitude of the disaster event (ABC 2013).

The interactive nature of crowd-sourced crisis mapping provides community members with a voice to communicate information about themselves and about the environment they are in. Widespread access to participation and contribution is one of the most positive elements of the use of social media in a disaster setting (Slagh 2010, p. 47). This participation is important because it gives the disaster-affected community a sense of ownership of their circumstances. IKEN (2011) states that by sharing images, texts and tweets, 'the public is already becoming a part of the response network, rather than remaining mere bystanders or casualties'.

Meier & Monro (2010, p. 102) believe that local knowledge of the disaster-affected region, including language and geographical knowledge, can be used through crowd sourcing platforms. They argue that crisis responders do not always have all of the information about a particular place, but by tapping into local knowledge and encouraging local contribution, it is possible to create a better understanding of the disaster situation.

Local knowledge and participation play an important role in the disaster management process. After a major disaster 'community involvement ...is of incomparable importance in increasing resident trust of the emergency information and in promoting coordination between residents and responders' (Jaegar *et al.* 2007). Furthermore, Jaegar *et al.* (2007) believe that 'residents need information and coordination to self-organise and respond by helping each other when scarce centralised services are overwhelmed by an emergency'. In this case, social media becomes a valuable and accessible way to communicate and organise existing networks within a community. While Web 2.0 has definite value in other aspects of a disaster management, its contribution to mainstreaming a rights-based approach may well be social media's most significant contribution to the disaster management paradigm.

Conclusion

Despite its military background, disaster management is becoming a more participatory discipline. Changes to both the community development sector and the disaster management paradigm have foreshadowed a shift to the use of a rights-based approach in the disaster management field and the concept is becoming embedded in the guidelines and procedures of the international humanitarian sector.

The use of Web 2.0 products, by their interactive and connective nature, are valuable means of implementing a rights-based approach to disaster management. Web 2.0 technologies provide a space for community members to communicate with each other and with disaster management practitioners, as well as a space

to identify and voice their own needs. It provides a means for affected communities to realise their right to participate in the disaster management process and to share valuable local knowledge with disaster practitioners.

By incorporating a rights-based approach to disaster management, practitioners are not only ensuring that the rights of affected communities are being protected, but that the affected communities are participating in and helping to shape the disaster management activities that impact on and involve them. This participation should be recognised and valued by the disaster management community and incorporated into all phases of the disaster management cycle. Disaster management practitioners should consider the value of community participation as not just a means of promoting and protecting human rights in disaster-affected communities, but more importantly, as a way of strengthening the disaster management process.

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