Chapter V

GROUP AND ORGANIZATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS IN EMERGENCY SITUATIONS

General

Because of the disruption or widespread destruction experienced in virtually every aspect of life, disasters create situations in which a multitude of tasks must be completed immediately and simultaneously. Meeting both survival and recovery needs is dependent upon the constructive involvement of the entire community. In this respect, as was discussed in chapter IV, social science studies have shown that persons and groups customarily respond in a constructive way to a disaster.

Pre-disaster planning, in addition to accurately anticipating the needs and responses of individuals in a disaster-affected area, must carefully examine assumptions about group responses and the problems likely to confront relief organizations. This chapter examines certain myths, reviews actions most likely to be taken by groups or organizations in a disaster situation, identifies several common organizational problems, and discusses the resulting programme and policy implications.

Popular images

Relief assistance, particularly from outside the affected community, has often been based on certain popular assumptions about the response of local organizations and departments and their effectiveness in meeting the needs generated by a disaster situation. A post-disaster scenario based on popular assumption might be described as follows:

It is assumed that, after a disaster with widespread damage, often described by the media as total destruction, public services cease or are ineffective.

The basis for this assumption includes expectations about the effects of the disaster staff who are themselves victims, the fact that the magnitude of the destruction is beyond the local capacity to cope in a routine fashion.

Pleas for assistance spread nationally, or internationally, after the initial survey. Local consultation is often considered unnecessary or not expedient. Relief officials may believe that the safest course of action is to take it for granted that everything has been destroyed and, on this basis (without wasting time on assessment), to send into the stricken area all imaginable goods, services, personnel and equipment on the assumption that they will be needed or useful. Volunteers and outside (private) organizations may go into the affected area convinced that they are needed to provide services which the local organizations are unable to supply.

Due to the disruption of local services, the disorganization of local leadership and the general confusion that is likely to reign, strong outside leadership — a military official, for example — is needed to bring order and direct the emergency and recovery efforts. Centralized decision making is seen as vital, even if it was not the pattern in the pre-impact period.

A closer examination of many disasters suggests that the assumptions made above are often incorrect and may have important negative consequences in meeting disaster needs and managing relief and recovery operations.

Example

On 23 November 1978 a cyclone struck the east coast of Sri Lanka, creating a path of destruction approximately 60 kilometres wide. A storm surge calculated at 1.8 metres added to the damage along the coast, and the heavy rains accompanying the cyclone left large areas flooded and some communities stranded.[1]

Private homes, commercial premises, industrial plant and public offices and buildings suffered varying degrees of damage. Private domestic water sources over a wide area were contaminated by flood waters. Also damaged were the area hospital, food warehouses, electricity and telecommunications utilities. Water mains were broken by trees being uprooted, and 242 school buildings were destroyed or damaged. The extensive flooding and massive uprooting of trees blocked all roads in the affected area for at least two days, and in some remote areas for as much as seven days. In spite of the fact that the effects of the cyclone had not been anticipated either by the public or the authorities, immediate efforts, as summarized below, were initiated within the affected area.

The day after the cyclone, in a heavy downpour, most of the affected people were involved in search and rescue activities in their immediate area, attempting to assess the damage near them, taking care of family and protecting personal property. In addition to efforts by local police, various *ad hoc* groups were reportedly formed to carry out more systematic local search and rescue efforts.

While the staff of various government departments were not generally available on the first day after the cyclone, they were mobilized by the second day, by which time large

[1] *Sri Lanka Cyclone Handbook*, Sri Lanka Cyclone Study Technical Report No. 7, United Nations Development Programme, Office of Project Execution, SRL/79/001 (Washington, D.C., Paedo, Inc., 1979).

numbers of additional labourers had been hired to supplement regular personnel. For example, the roads were cleared by the regular maintenance crews, supplemented by over 100 workers hired on the second day in the most severely affected area, with a major role being played by local village groups working with a "community spirit". These spontaneous efforts were carried out within the affected area, while at the same time the highway department, supplemented by heavy military equipment, worked from outside the affected area inward.

At each administrative level, senior personnel took the initiative for co-ordinating agencies and activities within their sphere of responsibility. In addition to the *ad hoc* co-ordination that took place between many groups and services, formal co-ordination groups were established on at least five administrative levels — village, area, district, national and international.

The above narrative describes only a fraction of the many actions taken by persons working individually and in groups to meet the needs of the situation. The self-initiated and resourceful response of organizations described above is not unique. It is likely to be the response in most disaster-affected communities around the world. The identification of the community actions taken does not imply that all local actions were adequate to meet the needs. Many essential goods and services were provided from outside the affected area. However, this example illustrates the fact that local agencies are not likely to be rendered ineffective by a natural disaster. Of course, if they were very ineffective before the disaster they will remain so, but not because of the disaster.

Myths

Study of disaster situations has confirmed that there are at least two important assumptions about the characteristic response of organizations in emergencies which are not valid as planning principles, and have therefore been labelled "myths".

1. THE MYTH OF WORK/FAMILY CONFLICT. *Important officials and key personnel in a disaster-affected area are not likely to perform their responsibilities because of concern for or need to attend to their victimized families.*

Research has shown that important officials and key personnel are not likely to abandon their work responsibilities because of family preoccupations, although they are naturally concerned over the well-being of their family and will need time to deal with extreme situations. While this is particularly true of persons in senior positions and persons responsible for relevant emergency services, it may also be more generally valid. For example, the day-labourers hired immediately after the Sri Lanka cyclone chose to begin working very early in the morning and stop by early afternoon to afford time for family concerns and repair of personal property.

Experience has shown that officials can be expected to carry out their tasks even where there may be a conflict between employment and family responsibilities.

Special administrative support and a humane employment policy enabling officials and others to take time off from work to attend to personal matters are likely to be greatly appreciated, and may reduce anxieties over a possible conflict between work and family responsibilities. However, assistance which is directed at unnecessarily relieving a person of his responsibilities, on the assumption that he will be incapacitated by the conflict between work and family, is likely to be resented and detrimental to the person and possibly the work.

2. THE MYTH OF OVERWHELMING IMPACT ON LOCAL AGENCIES. *Local organizations in a disaster-affected community are likely to be overwhelmed by a disaster and rendered ineffective, lacking both leadership and personnel. Therefore, in addition to the need for significant numbers of persons from outside the community to help fill the personnel gaps, there will be a need for the imposition of strong leadership by some unaffected outside person to cope with the confusion that is likely to exist.*

The assumption that local agencies will be overwhelmed has not been proved accurate. The primary needs generated by a disaster are already familiar to established organizations and form part of their responsibilities. The role and responsibilities of respective agencies and departments are not eliminated by a disaster : the fire department continues to concern itself with fires, the central pharmacy with the distribution of drugs, the highway department with road repair, the water department with water supply, etc. Of course if local agencies are very weak in normal times they will be weak at disaster times. While the tasks are likely to be similar, the magnitude of the problems faced by each organization is likely to be quite different from routine activities, but the skills required will remain basically the same. Problems are likely to arise over new tasks which the disaster may create.

Another basis for the erroneous assumption that local agencies will be overwhelmed is the over-estimation of disaster damage. The immediate visual images of collapsed buildings, streets full of rubble and widespread destruction as seen from the air or even during casual visits to the site are often misleading. What was initially assumed to be total destruction in reality is often only partial destruction, with some buildings and areas more affected than others. The unaffected or marginally affected persons, and the remaining resources that exist within an affected community are often not calculated. Immediate post-disaster descriptions and statistics seldom, if ever, provide an overall picture with damage being set off against remaining resources, but instead focus only on the damage. Remaining food stocks are often underestimated and the need for emergency drugs is frequently overestimated.

Local agencies are not usually incapacitated by the effects of a disaster on their own personnel or by a lack of additional personnel needed to carry out the sudden increase in essential tasks. The increased personnel needs can be met by diverting staff from non-essential responsibilities, using off-duty staff, hiring additional persons as needed, and enlisting volunteers. However, good use of volunteers usually requires good pre-impact planning, especially for volunteers from outside the community. The type of support the Sri Lanka experience confirmed to be needed included special authorizations and access to cash to pay workers, technical personnel and in some cases senior policy-making staff, as well as equipment. In that experience, rather than local departments being overwhelmed to the point of ineffectiveness, each mobilized extensive numbers of additional employees from within the affected population.

Programme implications

In pre-disaster planning and in consideration of relief assistance, organized community structures and local organizations can be expected to function after a disaster, and are not likely to be overwhelmed by the situation or the increased demands. This does not imply that weak administrators will suddenly become good administrators, or that ineffective services will suddenly be effective, as both strengths and weaknesses will be carried over from the pre-disaster situation to the post-disaster actions.

Two suggested guidelines for pre-disaster planning and relief assistance arise from the observed fact that pre-disaster social structures are likely to exist and that existing organizations are likely to function after an emergency.

(i) Careful consideration should be given to ensure that the emergency assistance does not duplicate or disrupt services already being provided. When possible, such assistance should be channelled through existing local agencies, which are likely to use it more effectively.

(ii) Every effort should be made to ensure that the staff of local organizations have received proper training, the authority to act, the necessary emergency authorizations required, and that they are acquainted with the appropriate administrative/financial guidelines and procedures. Special benefits should exist to assist staff in such difficult situations.

Planning assumptions

In a disaster special organizational planning and preparedness are likely to be important in at least three aspects :

1. MULTIPLE-LEVEL RESPONSE. *Disaster-related tasks, in every phase from preparedness to reconstruction, are situated at all administrative levels from village council to national policy (in some cases even international policy).*

All too frequently disaster preparedness and response is narrowly perceived as a function of one particular agency or specialized department, or a particular administrative level. Agencies or departments often have a very narrow understanding of disaster preparedness and response, perceiving it only from the standpoint of their own particular work or area of responsibility. However an effective disaster response system requires that all administrative levels play significant roles, each with their respective responsibilities and in support of the work and responsibilities of others.

Programme implications

Understanding the particular roles and responsibilities to be assigned to each administrative level (and between each different agency and party involved) is one of the essential components of effective disaster response. An effective disaster preparedness and response system is one in which the actions of individuals, *ad hoc* groups, formal organizations, persons working on different administrative levels, and agencies from inside and outside the affected area, assume mutually supportive roles. While this may seem self-evident, in practice it proves to be a difficult task. For example, while co-ordination at a particular level, such as within a village, between department heads, or at the ministry level, may be quite good, co-ordination between these different levels may be difficult. This is a very common problem and one which is difficult to resolve. Such problems are best dealt with before rather than during or after disasters.

2. CONVERGENCE. *A wide variety of personnel, communications and material convergence occurs at the scene of most disasters and at selected points of organizational activity. This convergence is motivated by a concern for victims, a desire to help, simple curiosity, and the search for information.*[2]

Convergence, characterized by the spontaneous movement of large numbers of people and large amounts of material towards the zone of impact, is a common phenomenon in all emergencies. In large-scale emergencies, convergence may include both domestic and international movement of people and material. The convergence of people to the affected area is likely to include a wide range of persons with skills and roles varying from useful and desired to undesired and disruptive. Materials are likely to range from essential to useless. This sudden convergence commonly contributes to administrative problems and inefficiency, in spite of altruism.

[2] Gary A. Kreps, *Assumptions about Individual and Social Effects of Peacetime and Wartime Nuclear Disasters*, in press, NCRP (Williamsburg, Virginia, College of William and Mary, April 1981), point 7.

Programme implications

Convergence causes many logistic and administrative problems. While such factors as adequate planning, dissemination of reliable information and co-ordination are likely to minimize the confusion caused, it remains largely a contextual problem which cannot be avoided.

Convergence is also, in part, a necessary and positive aspect of every disaster situation. As noted above in the discussion of family considerations after disaster, victims are likely to seek assistance first from family members, and these are likely to provide invaluable support and services. Family members mobilized in support of victims are likely to comprise an essential and positive group among those converging on an impact area.

Another category of persons likely to converge on a disaster area is essential support personnel. In addition to the human and material resources that will be mobilized within affected communities, certain additional assistance from outside the affected area is both useful and necessary. Local institutions, organizations and businesses, as well as the public administrative and service departments (i.e., highways, electricity, irrigation, etc.) often find it useful or necessary to have the assistance of a top-ranking officer to help assess the damage, make plans and resolve exceptional problems. Furthermore, virtually all organizations, agencies and services are likely to require materials from outside the area (including, for example, new telephone lines, rails, building materials, replacements for damaged equipment, etc).

Established administrative structures and formal relief organizations are virtually never the only organizations from which relief assistance is likely to come. Disaster convergence typically includes a multitude of spontaneous and informal relief efforts from within the affected area, and a large influx of persons and goods from outside the affected area. One of the causes of the convergence is the popular belief that the most effective means of providing assistance is direct distribution from the donor, or his agent, to the recipient, a point which is often disputed by the official relief authorities.

Other donors may act less altruistically, making contributions for such reasons as tax breaks, monetary gain or political influence. While motive is not the issue here, such donors may be less concerned with the usefulness of the item than with the credit received from whatever is given. Certainly, many anecdotes exist about the donation of such items as out-of-date drugs, inappropriate clothes, unacceptable food and piles of relief items which are simply not useful. The convergence of such items can only compound the problems faced by local administrators, and reduces the quality of assistance received.

Volunteers from outside the affected area comprise another important group of people arriving in a disaster area. Volunteers arriving as an organized group are probably better than individual volunteers. The usefulness of volunteers is dependent upon such variables as the adaptability of the individual and his ability to deal with others, the need for the technical skills a particular person may

have, the availability of an organizational framework to channel, direct and supervise the work of volunteers, and the benefits brought by volunteers as measured against the cost of the necessary logistical support, food, housing, transportation, etc. In most disasters some outside volunteers make important contributions, but it is common to hear persons experienced in disasters warn of the limited benefits of voluntary assistance.

While uncontrolled convergence of relief goods and persons is likely to create many problems, the opposite extreme of preventing any convergence of relief goods or persons (and producing a more orderly situation), would probably not serve the public interest. The most realistic programme approach is likely to be somewhere between these two extremes, and includes such common policies as establishing criteria for the admission of people into an affected area (and preventing others such as those motivated by curiosity from entering); avoiding public requests for relief items without substantitated need and appropriate distribution capabilities; reserving the right to decline relief shipments or insisting that goods donated meet certain specifications; establishing general principles for the distribution of relief to ensure fairness; requesting that items donated should be properly labelled; and helping define appropriate roles for assisting individuals from outside the affected area. As convergence is likely to occur after every disaster, it requires careful consideration in order to enhance the usefulness of the donations and minimize the administrative and logistical difficulties. Disaster-experienced officials are increasingly tightening up so as to ensure that material goods and personnel from outside the affected area are appropriate and useful.

Special note on "outsiders" : In discussion of disaster assistance, it is often assumed that most of the inappropriate assistance provided can be attributed to "cultural insensitivity". However, cross-cultural examination of disaster assistance suggests that "cultural insensitivity" is a less important factor than the invalid assumptions made by most donors about most recipients. The assumptions made and the problems encountered in the provision of assistance by persons from outside the community are similar whether persons come from a different part of the state, nation, or world. Also, it should be noted that inappropriate or useless donations are a problem faced in virtually all major disasters in all countries, developed and developing. Due to the common nature of donor assumptions and the resulting problems, "outsiders" in this publication refers to any individual or group not residing within the immediate disaster impact area.

3. ORGANIZATIONAL RESPONSE IN EMERGENCIES. *A disaster is likely to create new challenges and problems for every agency involved, requiring modification of organizational structures and routines.*

In pre-disaster planning, disaster-related agencies often consider the tasks to be accomplished in an emergency, but give insufficient thought to organizational matters related to implementation. Research suggests that most

of the post-disaster problems encountered in relief and reconstruction activities are not technical in nature, but derive from human and organizational problems, including human error; bad judgement; lack of knowledge; inadequate training; poor preparedness; inadequate communication; confusion over responsibilities; and the failure to recognize the consequences of a decision. In avoiding many of these problems agencies, departments or groups likely to be involved in an emergency may find it beneficial to consider issues related to the types of groups likely to exist in an emergency situation, how an emergency situation is likely to affect the functioning of organizations, and common problems that organizations typically encounter in providing emergency-related services.

In anticipating the potential demands of a disaster on community organizations and their ability to respond, it is useful to examine both the types of organizations that are likely to operate in an emergency and the unique situation in which the organization must function.

Types of organizations likely to operate in an emergency

Understanding the types of organizations that are likely to operate in an emergency is important because many of the tasks to be performed will require active collaboration between some or all of these entities. Methods of communication with and between such organizations will be required, and can be planned in advance.

Disaster-related actions can be categorized as *routine tasks* (e.g., fighting fires) which an existing organization would perform as part of its normal responsibilities and *new or unusual tasks* (e.g., burying the dead). There are four ways a community meets the emergency needs generated by a disaster situation : (1) through existing organizations performing their regular tasks; (2) through existing organizations performing their regular tasks but on an expanded scale, (3) through existing organizations assuming new tasks, and therefore becoming in some ways new organizations; and (4) through new organizations created specifically to cope with the situation, a common phenomenon often not anticipated but an important part of the community response to disaster.

Although the matter will not be elaborated upon in this publication, the above four types of organization are each likely to have different ways of working and different organizational structures, and to have unique personnel and management requirements.

Unique situations in which organizations must function

Even as far as routine tasks are concerned, a disaster is likely to create a radically new environment in which every agency must work. Listed below are five conditions and some of the resulting consequences.

1. CONDITIONS OF GREAT UNCERTAINTY

The immediate response required by most agencies must be made without a sound basis, since the extent of damage is often unknown. The official policy of the organization in a particular situation may not yet have been defined, and the limits of the organizational resources and personnel available are not known, etc. Such uncertainty may lead to delays in effective programme implementation or, conversely, to hasty commitments which may later be beyond the ability of the organization to fulfil. Organizational changes also may arise from this uncertainty, including new organizational roles, changes in patterns of authority, as well as communication and co-ordination problems.

2. CONDITIONS OF URGENCY

The conditions of urgency in which most organizations must perform are likely to result in various organizational changes, *inter alia* in established patterns of working, reporting and consulting. There is also likely to be greater autonomy for individual staff members and greater scope for them to take initiatives in decision-making. The urgency factor must be taken into account in emergency administrative systems. The more an organization insists on routine maintenance of administrative tasks, the more difficulty it will have functioning during a disaster relief operation.

3. ADAPTABILITY IN EMERGENCIES

Agencies must adapt to disaster-relevant tasks. This may require new procedures, new functions and new expertise. Agencies which may routinely provide a particular service (e.g., agriculture extension services, health training, etc.) may find it necessary to participate in new activities to meet needs suddenly created by a disaster (e.g., credit extension or reconstruction.)

4. LOSS OF AUTONOMY

The collaboration necessary in a post-disaster situation will require organizations to work within a community context, establish new working relationships and possibly work within defined guidelines. Independent agencies, or particular levels within an organization, often believe that total autonomy is best, while those in co-ordination or administrative positions may discourage autonomy. The most constructive balance must evolve from the characteristics of the particular situation. A complete lack of autonomy for particular operative levels of an organization, as seen in highly centralized administrative structures, is likely to limit effectiveness. Conversely, total autonomy for all often results in excessive competition, duplication and confusion. In response to the problems encountered after the cyclone of 1977, the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh redrafted its legislation to define more clearly the roles and limitations of agencies working in a disaster situation.

5. Basis for participation

Another change that is likely to occur in an emergency is the basis for participation by staff. All too frequently this change is made without adequate structure or support, and newly recruited staff are not provided with job descriptions, contracts or adequate instructions. Participation is likely to be based on need, resulting in changes in communications and in the structure of authority.

Common organizational problems

1. Communications

An effective disaster response is dependent upon the accurate and timely transfer of information, an obvious point but a constant problem. Communication problems arise partly from the destruction or disruption of communications equipment and public systems. Persons working in disaster-affected areas often mention the need for emergency communications equipment, portable radios, etc. While such equipment is usually helpful, the communications problems that often affect disaster preparedness, disaster relief and reconstruction programmes are less related to equipment than to what is or is not communicated, to whom the information has been sent, and who has failed to receive information that he should have acquired.

Potential information problems always exist within the following framework:[3]

(a) Within organizations

The uniqueness and suddenness of an emergency, the unusual tasks that may have to be performed, the changes likely to occur within an organization, the sudden addition of new staff, and the conflict between the need for systematic information collection and the pressing need to engage in emergency activities, all contribute to the likelihood of certain information problems occurring within organizations involved in an emergency

(b) Between organizations

Disasters create situations in which some collaboration between organizations is essential. Establishing effective communications between organizations which do not routinely work together requires time and considerable effort. Moreover, there is the added complication of the many newly formed groups both within and outside the affected area with which effective communications must be established Established agencies often err in refusing to acknowledge the existence of such groups, perceiving them as competitors encroaching on their own disaster roles New or outside agencies often err by assuming that local agencies are not likely to exist or be effective, and that their work justifies operating independently. This commonly results in a lack of communication, fragmentation and competition.

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[3] E. L. Quarantelli. *Human Resources and Organizational Behaviors in Community Disasters and their Relationship to Planning*, Preliminary Paper No 76, Ohio State Disaster Research Center (Columbus, Ohio State University, 1982) p. 11.

Experience and research have shown that one way of enhancing communications is to establish working relationships between disaster-relevant organizations and departments prior to an emergency. Forums in which all participating bodies, formal and *ad hoc*, can exchange information have also proved to be useful.

(c) From organizations to the public

Organizations involved in disaster-related work often seriously underestimate the importance of communicating with the public they are attempting to serve. Where there is a lack of accurate information, rumour and speculation fill the void. After the Sri Lanka cyclone already referred to, district officers found it very helpful to visit villages in order to discuss and explain the relief and reconstruction efforts under way. Not particularly helpful, and often resented, are public statements made only for an organizational purpose and in order to publicize relief activities.

(d) Public to organizations

The most effective programmes are likely to be those carried out "with" the affected population, rather than "for" people. Working "with" the public requires two-way communication, which is essential in preparedness, warning, assessment, and the establishment of assistance programmes. Organizations must anticipate the information required by the public. For example, before a cyclone, meteorological offices are often inundated with requests for information. In the cited example of the Sri Lanka cyclone, the calls seriously hampered the information dissemination process. After a disaster, local officials are frequently besieged with information requests from the public

Another type of communication from the public to organizations which has important organizational consequences is non-routine requests for information, special assistance, etc. The flexibility to meet the needs presented without violating the organizational mandate is particularly important.

(e) Organizational systems

Quite commonly the communication process that causes the greatest difficulties is contact between different levels of an organization or administrative structure. Senior officials may feel free to make significant decisions without consulting lower-level staff, causing great problems and misunderstandings. Also, one group of agencies may not recognize the need for information by another group

2. The exercise of authority

Due to the fact that so many self-initiated activities must occur simultaneously, often with comparative independence, the leadership in a disaster situation is likely to be very complex Nevertheless, there is need for some agencies and persons to make decisions and assume overall responsibility. As described above, it may be expected that the exercise of authority before and after a disaster may not be radically different, that lines of authority may change but are not likely to break down, that officials will continue to carry out their normal responsibilities, and

Figure 6

(Credit WFP/FAO photo by C. Sanchez)

Disaster management activities, from preparedness to reconstruction, require a participatory process. This photo shows the people of the village of Cajamarquilla in discussion with Peruvian officials about reconstruction after the earthquake of 1970, an earthquake which left some 44,000 dead.

that, in the absence of senior-level people, subordinates will assume responsibility. In spite of these positive aspects there are at least four problems which frequently occur in regard to the exercise of authority:[4]

(i) Loss of top-echelon personnel because of overwork and the lack of shared responsibilities;

(ii) Conflict over authority for new or unusual disaster-related tasks;

(iii) Clashes between established organizations and new (or emergent) organizations, or over who has responsibility between different administrative levels, such as provincial versus national; and

(iv) Organizational jurisdictional differences, such as between two adjoining provinces.

While some of these potential problems are not easily solved, constructive actions can be taken to minimize their occurrence and effects.

3. Co-ordination

Co-ordination is a commonly discussed subject confused by the various assumptions about its meaning. To some it implies the sharing of information; to others co-ordination implies centralized decision-making. The implication is that a common understanding must exist between the parties involved. Co-ordination might be defined as "the mutually agreed linking of activities of two or more groups."[5]

The multitude of responses likely to be required in the case of a major disaster can only marginally be co-ordinated, as the needs and actions are likely to be diverse and difficult to anticipate fully. Any attempt to completely structure all community responses would be impossible, and would almost certainly be disruptive. This has been demonstrated in some situations in which the concern for rigid structure and order has resulted in martial law or the

[4] *Ibid*, p. 12.

[5] *Ibid*, p. 13.

total cordoning off of damaged areas, with detrimental effects upon the people concerned.

Some researchers have argued that co-ordination is concerned primarily with efficiency, and that the ultimate criterion for meeting post-disaster needs is not efficiency but effectiveness.[6] "Co-ordination is sometimes discussed as if it were an absolute necessity or an absolute good. That is not so; there can be relatively effective organizational responses in some disasters which do not require a high degree of co-ordination."[7]

Research has shown that co-ordination is *not* something that must necessarily be imposed. Co-ordination units, the sharing of information, and agreement on the joint management of resources and activities, have been shown to develop spontaneously in or near most disaster sites.[8]

Effectiveness and efficiency can however be enhanced by the sharing of information and mutual collaboration where this improves the quality of the work carried out.

Co-ordination guidelines

Listed below is a sample of co-ordination guidelines taken from the *Sri Lanka Cyclone Handbook*.[9]

General considerations

1. The need for co-ordination in disasters is based on the necessity for co-operative action by all involved in order to :

(*a*) Effectively and efficiently meet needs;

(*b*) Avoid waste and duplication of effort;

(*c*) Ensure that resources are distributed equitably and to areas of greatest need;

(*d*) Ensure that the methods and goals of one programme do not conflict with those of other programmes.

2. Co-ordination must not only take place at every administrative level (such as between ministries or between the different groups of people in a village) but also between administrative levels (such as between village-level and district-level administration, or between district offices and Colombo headquarters).

Elements of co-ordination

There are several common operational components involved in the establishment of a co-operative working relationship, whether it be local or national, organizational or individual ·

1 Operating guidelines — procedures for co-ordination must be defined and agreed upon by all parties.

2. Roles — the roles, responsibilities, authority and privileges under which each party will operate should be well defined, in writing.
3. Priorities — priorities must be clearly defined and agreed upon by all parties.
4. Data collection and reporting — effective co-ordination is largely dependent upon an effective data collection and reporting system.

(*a*) Information source — who is expected to provide information must be clearly defined;

(*b*) Communication methods — how information is to be transmitted must be understood by all parties;

(*c*) Definition — what information is needed must be clearly defined.

5. Time considerations — time requirements for all functions should be identified and agreed upon by all.

Factors which inhibit co-ordination

1. Disruption of communication facilities and lack of an adequate emergency system;
2. The difficulty of establishing an accurate assessment of the damage and needs;
3. The difference of opinions on what is needed, how it should be provided, and what the priorities should be;
4. The tendency for parties to relate to a particular target group or problem without viewing it from the perspective of the broader needs or the resulting implications;
5. The tendency of some groups to purposely avoid co-ordination for private gain in visibility.

Factors which improve co-ordination

1. Clearly outline and agree upon co-ordination roles, functions and contributions, etc., as part of preparedness planning.
2. Establish a physical location for the co-ordinating centre and for each functional operation, such as transport or supply depots.
3. Clearly define objectives and review frequently to monitor progress.
4. Closely monitor the effectiveness of actions, and carry out periodic reviews.
5. Establish an atmosphere of respect for the mutual sharing of goals by all parties.
6. Identify gaps or overlaps in functions.
7. Written communications will be more reliable than verbal.
8. Establish a chain of command for every operational project.
9. Remain flexible to meet diverse needs.
10. Minimize the number of co-ordination meetings.
11. Co-ordination committees should include representatives from both private and governmental sectors, including local leaders (such as village elders), religious leaders and local politicians.
12. Careful pre-planning and the development of written statements of understanding between private voluntary disaster relief agencies and the national Government will eliminate much of the potential confusion about roles and activities.

[6] *Ibid*. p 14.
[7] *Ibid*
[8] *Ibid*.
[9] See footnote 1.