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Understanding the Dynamic Ecosystem of Disaster Response, an NGO Perspective

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Introduction

September 11, 2001 redefined the world we live in. On December 26, 2004, the Tsunami on the rim of the Indian Ocean left the world to face a catastrophic disaster never before seen in modern times.

On December 17, 2003, the Homeland Security Presidential Directive/Hspd-8 was released. The Directive's purpose was the following:

(1) This directive establishes policies to strengthen the preparedness of the United States to prevent and respond to threatened or actual domestic terrorist attacks, major disasters, and other emergencies by requiring a national domestic all-hazards preparedness goal, establishing mechanisms for improved delivery of Federal preparedness assistance to State and local governments, and outlining actions to strengthen preparedness capabilities of Federal, State, and local entities.

Citizen participation and public communication were outlined as priorities in sections 22 and 23, respectively, which state:

The Secretary shall work with other appropriate Federal departments and agencies as well as State and local governments and the private sector to encourage active citizen participation and involvement in preparedness efforts. The Secretary shall periodically review and identify the best community practices for integrating private citizen capabilities into local preparedness efforts.

The Secretary, in consultation with other Federal departments and agencies, State and local governments, and non-governmental organizations, shall develop a comprehensive plan to provide accurate and timely preparedness information to public citizens, first responders, units of government, the private sector, and other interested parties and mechanisms for coordination at all levels of government.

On August 29, 2005, Katrina and Rita had our nation's responders once again reliving the mistakes of the past.

A Georgetown University study completed in 2005¹ showed that responders have for centuries been documenting the issues that surround the ineffective management and lack of integration of spontaneous unaffiliated community volunteers (SUCV's) that emerge to assist during disaster. Despite the repeated documentation of this problem, no comprehensive plan exists to manage the powerful resource that SUCV's represent.

Our world, starting with our nation must proactively create and implement a dynamic system of response that utilizes our best technology, our best equipment and our best people. This approach must include all humanitarian resources large and small, building their capacity to be better prepared to respond together.

Problem Statement

The increasing frequency of catastrophic natural and manmade disasters combined with population growth, have added to the significant impact these disaster can have on existing resources and traditional response practices.

Terrorism, including the possibility of biological threats and pandemics, raises new issues that our society has never dealt with in history.

Our military has been called upon to refocus its war-fighting strategies to include "Humanitarian Roles in Insecure Environments." One recent study found that the military finds itself expected to perform humanitarian and reconstruction activities that it is unprepared for and it would rather pass on to other organizations.²

The threats are vast but so are the resources we have available to deal with them. Identifying potential resources, understanding their value and the challenges to be faced in utilizing them is the first step toward creating a comprehensive disaster prevention, mitigation and response strategy.

"One implication is that our officials need to trust us, need to see the public as part of the solution rather than as a problem to be managed. Money, training, all need to be pushed downward."

Dr. Lee Clark

¹ L. Fernandez, Volunteer Management System and Design and analysis for disaster response and Recovery (Dissertation Proposal), George Washington University, 2005.

² "Humanitarian Roles in Insecure Environments," The Center for Stabilization and Reconstruction Studies, naval Postgraduate School 2005.

Assumption:

Our military and government may not need a system to directly access all of the communities of interest, down to the level of CBO's and faith based groups, however, the NGO's that they depend on will. Larger NGO's, in turn, will use this tool to access the balance of the communities of interest. Therefore the need for a tool that encompasses and addresses all capabilities remains a priority.

The first step toward addressing these issues and creating solutions is to identify, engage and empower all available human resources. To that end, this whitepaper seeks to shed light onto the ecosystem of communities of interest in disaster response from a local perspective that may enable the development of a global framework.

Professor Dirk Salomons, Director of the Humanitarian Affairs Program at the School of International Public Affairs of Columbia University described the situation and World Cares initiatives as follows: "The issues and challenges addressed through the World Cares Center's programs may have a national context, but they reflect broader concerns that resonate worldwide, as neither terrorism nor natural disasters acknowledge borders."

The ecosystem of disaster responders

In coming to terms with the broad and diverse groups of disaster responders, it can seem at first to be overwhelming and too difficult to effectively manage. Described below are some of the key groups of responders that World Cares' system of disaster responses and utilizes.

Ordinary Folks, Good Samaritans and Local Assets**Spontaneous Unaffiliated Community Volunteers**

(SUCV's) are individuals who come out of their homes to help neighbors. These individuals may or may not have disaster response training, but have proved to be an invaluable resource time and time again and are often able to arrive first at the scene because of their proximity to the site. It is essential that we do more to engage and empower this first tier community of interest.

"The biggest myth is that firefighters and the police are first responders. They are official responders. *The real first* responders are ordinary folks. If an earthquake happens under us right now and this building starts to crumble, you and I are first responders. "In the United States, one implication is that our officials need to trust us, need to see the public as part of the solution rather than as a problem to be managed. Money, training, all need to be pushed downward. There needs to be devolution of authority: that's the key implication for policy.³

SUCV's may first emerge as individuals but will quickly and efficiently form into ad-hoc networks using local relationships and assets to form effective working groups. These groups may be associated with local leaders or leaders may emerge spontaneously, in either case, offering a point of contact for responding officials.

Local Faith-based Organizations (FBOs) and secular nongovernmental organizations (NGO's) provide a network of both pre-established, pre-trained responders and pre-established untrained groups that are capable of responding in times of need to serve their community.

The significant support that can be obtained by engaging local resources is discussed in the post Katrina final report entitled "Heralding Unheard Voices, the Role of Faith based and Non-Governmental Organizations during Disaster." This report did not include governmental responses or the efforts of the American Red Cross, but focused exclusively on locally-led efforts and reported the following:

1. FBO's and NGO's had a significant beneficial impact during and after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita
2. FBO's and NGO's provided services in at least ten distinct service areas:
 - a. Shelter
 - b. Food services
 - c. Medical services
 - d. Personal hygiene services
 - e. Mental health and spiritual support
 - f. Physical reconstruction
 - g. Logistics Management and services

³ A CONVERSATION WITH/Lee Clarke; Living One Disaster After Another, And Then Sharing the Experience , Claudia Dreifus May 20,2003, The New York Times.

- h. Transportation Management and services
- i. Children's services
- j. Case management and related services

This study's findings were consistent with data gathered from previous disaster response efforts: in very case. FBO's and secular NGO's or community groups faced significant challenges because our official systems did not allow for the integration of the local resources. Yet time and again, these local groups emerged, evolved and became an effective force through specialization in their fields of expertise, cultural intimacy and the ability to partner effectively.

Often times, differing terminology is encountered describing the same players. Along with FBO's and NGO's, alternative terms frequently used are "independent sector," "volunteer sector," "civil society," "grassroots organizations," "private voluntary organizations," "self help organizations" and "non-state actors."

Generally, these groups have a community focus and address a variety of issues ranging from religious issues, emergency aide and humanitarian affairs to the problems of homelessness and disease prevention.

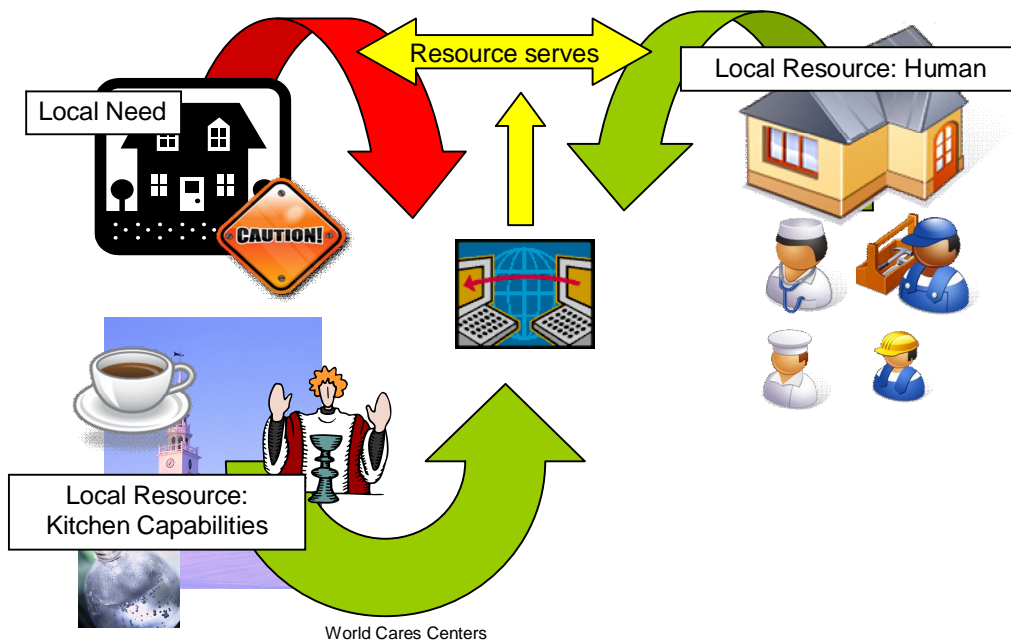
To omit the inclusion of secondary and tertiary NGO's and community lead groups leaves the picture of resources and players incomplete.

Local organizations such as Food Banks, Social Clubs, Youth Groups and others represent another component that can serve as a useful resource depending on how they are cultivated. These groups may or may not have a mission to respond but when faced with the opportunity to serve in their community, they will become spontaneous responders and responding groups.

Because these groups mobilize the community they operate in through volunteerism, donations and providing services; they have strong links within those communities. These relationships are developed over time through groundwork and consistent presence in the community that cannot be developed by outside organizations or governments.

These groups are thus the resources that hold the key to receiving and distributing trusted information, gaining the essential "buy in" of the community and accessing community resources.

Below is an outline of how an effective system can help these groups share information amongst themselves, thereby reducing the burden on responding agencies:



National NGO's with local branches are distinguished because these organizations may have a national network and support structure but decisions are made independently from a central control. Foundation policies and fundraising may be carried out or supported on a national or international level, yet programming and decision making authority rests in the local chapters, therefore, cultural sensitivity is required.

National and International NGO's

The American Red Cross is in a category of its own and is often referred to as a pseudo-governmental agency due to

its congressional charter, size and ability to respond. The Red Cross volunteer is typically focused on Red Cross initiatives; i.e., volunteers from many different area chapters may be called in to respond to an emergency in an area that may or may not be their local community.

Organizations such as the Salvation Army and Doctors without Borders fall into the category of “Operational” or “Relief Oriented,” while World Vision would be considered “development oriented.”

Businesses:

Although not a NGO or FBO, businesses from the local grocer to international corporations have community-based programs that take advantage of the added resource of existing business structures, distribution management, database management and a pool of local human resources.

Businesses welcome collaboration based on respect and teamwork to leverage their assets, such as supplies, locations and senior business executives that can help enhance the nation’s security.

One such coordination effort is the Business Emergency Operations Center being established in the Greater New York area, with memorandums of understanding already in place. The purpose of this initiative is to better coordinate the relationships between NGO’s and Business and Business to Government during disaster response.

Government Led Community Initiatives:

Looking back at our history, we have seen previous examples of the use of community empowerment in the area of the civil defense. During the Cold War, many people lived in constant anxiety over the possibility of nuclear war. In an attempt to protect and reassure American civilians, a civil defense campaign emphasizing the use of fallout shelters commenced.

In response to the Soviet Union’s first atomic explosion and the advent of the Korean War, the Federal Civil Defense Administration was established in 1951. After the administration of President Kennedy abruptly ended, civil defense was once again regarded as unimportant or

wasteful and was thus not funded adequately by our government.

Renewed interest in Community-based initiatives in the 21st century resulted in the creation of the Citizen Corps in 2002 to help coordinate volunteer activities to help make our communities safer, stronger and better prepared to respond to any emergency situation. Some of these initiatives include Citizen Corp Councils, CERT teams and MERT teams.

Sharing Information with People

What we do before a disaster occurs is key. It is critical to address information sharing, develop technology in a way that's intuitive, easy to use and accessible and cultivate all of these resources and bring them onto the same page before they must be used in situations where the ability to learn is hindered.

How then do we connect the platforms, share information from the bottom up as well as from the top down?

Needs are:

- Intuitive functionality
- Interoperability: run on any machine and frequency
- Access to real-time information
- Ability to provide information that can be uploaded from other programs
- A new approach to clearance, and information sharing policies that addresses bringing information down and bring people up to platforms that can meet and share information flow up and down
- A robust plan to educate all levels of players on the use of the technology through a web-based approach, workshops, introduction and use at experiments, exercises and drills across the Nation and Globally

Solution: Train as you fight. Fight as you train.

Information-sharing solutions utilized in “response” must be utilized in everyday tasks. There exists a sector whose sole purpose is to “respond,” yet there is an increase in the demand to include all assets in the effort to improve coordination and response. What are the implications?

Problem: A large percentage of assets have a minimal budget for IT and hardware.

Solution: IT solutions must be interoperable on existing hardware and common networks.

Problem: non-traditional assets will not have the capacity or the desire to learn new technology in the middle of a response.

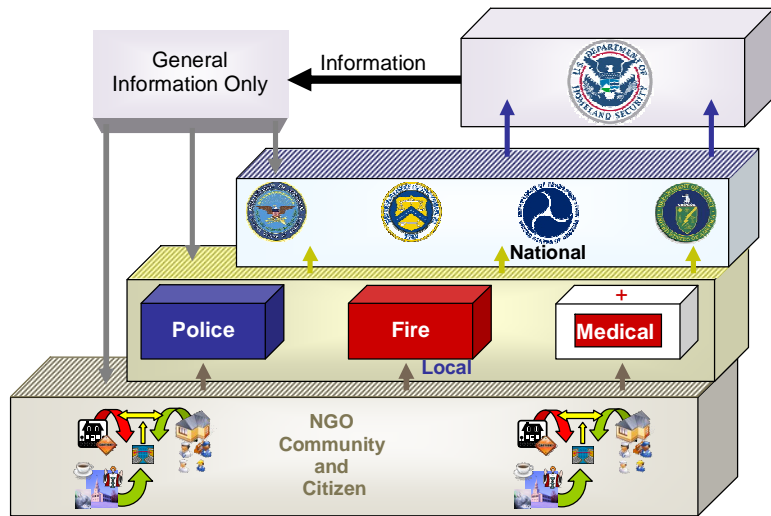
Solution: IT solutions must provide benefits to everyday operations to encourage regular use so that functions become intuitive through use.

A World Cares Center approach:

World Cares Center is building long-term, multi-sector, collaborative relationships among NGO's, citizens, businesses, academia and government. The project welcomes broad participation, and collaborative opportunities to access training, become a trainer and form a ReadyResponders team. The program is primed for the inclusion of a ReadyResponders social networking site.

The use of this technology can be woven in the program. Online registration, pre conference surveys, lesson plans and templates can introduce the site to communities of interest before they set foot into a classroom. The "site" can be used as a training tool by NGO's and local government to utilize the ReadyResponders social networking site as everyday tools.

A diagram of effective communication



World Cares Centers Perspective