

Community Engagement and Healing in Times of Disaster

Retrieving the Wisdom of Those in Need

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This collection of blogs and annotated list of resources was prepared for a discussion being convened by the [Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars](#) and the [Fetzer Institute](#). The paper has been written in the format of a web page if for no other reason than this is how I am most fond of writing these days. I apologize in advance to those for who this is a distraction. This research is best read on an electronic device connected to the internet.

The nature of this research is not to answer the questions posed but to provide context and background to support the reader's own inquiry. The focus is on three broad areas of inquiry: Peaceful Society, Technology and Community Engagement, and Community Participation and Governance in times of disaster. These three areas provide the technical aspect of the inquiry. Further to this is the broader inquiry implied in the title, *Retrieving the Wisdom of Those in Need*, which speaks to the sense that there is an intuitive wisdom, an innate energy and talent that can be accessed through community engagement.

This document has five sections:

- I. Background
- II. Peaceful Society
- III. Technology and Community Engagement
- IV. Community Participation and Governance
- V. Conclusions

I. BACKGROUND

By engaging people (*retrieving the wisdom of those in need*) and preparing communities for disaster, we can make a huge difference in mitigating the loss of human life during an event, helping to stabilize the region during the critical days after the event, and preparing the human capital needed to rebuild the infrastructure and spirit of an area (*healing*). Thus moderating the longer-term effects of a disaster.

Blog 1

1000 Buses Waiting to Help

– By Paul Born

In August of 2005, a Hurricane struck New Orleans. This disaster captured our hearts and evoked a massive empathy in the world for the plight of those in need. But it was a single picture – that of 1,000 buses parked in neat rows – published as the flooding receded, that turned staff of the Tamarack Institute from passive observers to passionate and engaged researchers/writers contemplating how we might use community engagement strategies in times of disaster. These buses represented to us everything that was wrong with the formal response in the critical hours of the disaster and the days that followed. Trained and committed people are great assets during times of disaster. To not engage them is akin to forgetting to add the cement to the sand and gravel when building the foundation of a house.

Further Reading:

[Complimentary research](#) conducted by the World Bank

The [Tamarack Institute page](#) on emergency preparedness.



When people are not engaged?

"In New Orleans 150,000 people were not evacuated - These buses could have saved an estimated 20,000 people if they had been used for emergency evacuations."

Blog 2

Hurricane Katrina: [The Tamarack Story](#).

– By Paul Born

Prior to, during, and immediately after Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans in August, 2005, staff at the Tamarack office focused on the community engagement aspects related to community preparedness for the storm. We monitored news reports of the disaster and were mesmerized.

Rows of yellow buses

Several days after the storm a picture appeared in the news of a sea of buses that had been completely submerged in the flood. As the waters receded, a thousand bright

roofs of school buses, like rows of yellow dominoes, appeared above the surface. At Tamarack, we looked at this picture in disbelief, asking each other how a thousand school buses could be left in place when so many people had trouble evacuating the city? We wondered who had made the decision to leave them there and not use them in the evacuation?

Our questions prompted us to read the New Orleans Emergency Preparedness Plan for answers, and to see if there were other communities in the world with preparedness plans that might have deployed those buses.

The Questions we asked during our inquiry

Over the next several days, these questions emerged for our team:

- If people were engaged – had a role to play, knew what to do, were part of a team – would this have made a difference? Would those buses have been deployed to help people?
- Who “owned” the Emergency Preparedness Plan? Who’s job was it to see it implemented?
- What preparations were made? Were citizens engaged? What about the bus drivers?
- How prepared are *we*? What’s my emergency preparedness plan?
- How much can government do alone? What do citizens do?
- Why do citizens become criminals?
- What role do factors like demographic makeup of the population/geographic layout play in emergency preparedness?
- Are some countries more effective than others at emergency preparedness?
- What role does formal/informal leadership play?
- Are there models/stories/resources we can share?

Blog 3

Why this really matters

– By Paul Born

An Oxfam report released in 2007 states that the number of weather related disasters have quadrupled in the last 25 years. The number of people affected by disasters has risen by 68 percent, from an average of 174 million a year between 1985 and 1994, to 254 million a year between 1995 and 2004. Many scientists are predicting that such disasters will become ever more prevalent. These natural disasters will be most devastating in larger urban centers (especially in coastal cities) where many people have arrived from rural areas, often due to famine or war, to cities that are ill equipped to welcome them. This mass migration has resulted in millions of people living without

family support in sub standard housing and deep poverty in cities unable to support them. This combination makes them especially vulnerable in times of disaster.

Further Reading:

[City's Balance Undone in Many Ways](#): This *New York Times* article describes the events in New Orleans immediately after the hurricane and what went wrong during emergency operations in a city of nearly 500,000 people. At one point in the article, Brian Wolshon, an LSU civil engineering professor, states that New Orleans relied almost exclusively on a "Good Samaritan" plan, where citizens check on elderly and disabled neighbors and assist them in evacuation if necessary. [Download the pdf.](#)

[Charter for Community Engagement](#): This document, created by the *Queensland Government Department of Emergency Services* (Brisbane, Australia, describes the role community engagement principles play in emergency preparedness. It is one of the best and easiest to use guides to community engagement and emergency preparedness that exists on the web. The document argues that better solutions result when communities and government are engaged in information sharing and discusses this theme in the context of the Queensland Government's Department of Emergency Services Community Engagement Unit. [Download the pdf.](#)

II. PEACEFUL SOCIETY

The potential for violence and violation of human dignity in times of disaster are high. Survival is a key focus for those in need. For those in authority, the need to protect the safety of the majority of people causes a kind of "triage" mentality in which the dignity and rights of people can quickly be overlooked. However, in times of disaster, many people are prone to want to help not only themselves but also their neighbors. Amazing stories of people rising above their own fears and saving the lives of others arise from nearly every disaster.

Questions to Consider:

- How can we respond to disaster with dignity and act in accordance with the lived experience of others?
- How can individuals and communities sustain a vision and practice of peace and resilience in the midst of crisis and disaster?
- How can best practices and lessons learned be shared?

Blog 4
Community in Times of Disaster
– By Paul Born

It seems to me that places where people know and care for one another will be more resilient than places where this is not true. I suggest that place and connection cause reciprocal action. And I further suggest that collective knowing in a place would provide one of the best chances of survival, if this is acted upon. How might one build such places or prepare such places of resilience?

In his book Bowling Alone, Robert Putnam from Harvard University provides unique evidence that in American life a sense of community and the reciprocal relationships that are bonded through time and mutual interest are in decline. His work provides evidence that when people do not know each other their ability to care and be cared for diminishes.

For this reason alone, the best form of emergency preparedness is building a caring society. Not only a society of good citizens but also one of good neighbors, where people know and help each other and live together peacefully and personally in physical place.

Blog 5
Investing in People Capacity
– By Paul Born

There are many technical ways to mitigate the effects of disaster. Good infrastructure and building codes can go a long way to reduce physical damage and save lives. The effects of disaster on low-income under-served parts of New Orleans vs. well-supported and protected sections (i.e. the French quarter) demonstrate this result. The better the infrastructure the less damage incurred, the less damage incurred the less loss of human capital, and thus the quicker the recovery.

In addition to technical or infrastructure investments I believe we can mitigate damages through investment in human or social capital. Where people have relationships that are important to them and when they are engaged in their communities, they will be more resilient in times of natural and human-made disaster. If these people have been prepared to work together and given a sense of responsibility beyond their immediate situation they can become a highly effective resource to make a community more resilient in times of disaster. We can rely on the goodness of individuals and, if enabled, the collective altruism of groups for safety and support.

I further suggest that disasters be they human (wars, fires) or natural (hurricanes, floods) by their very nature are chaotic and cannot be mitigated through simple policies

that promote control and order. Therefore no bureaucracy can effectively mitigate the effects of a disaster through specific emergency preparedness plans unless they build into such plans an engaged and altruist citizenry. Only through the power of collective altruism (community action) can communities effectively respond to the chaotic and highly unpredictable circumstances enabled by a disaster.

Further Reading:

[Empowering the Community to Adapt to Climate Change](#): This is a short paper that shares the efforts in Bangladesh to work with the citizens most vulnerable to changing weather patterns. The program aims to establish a strong community-led disaster risk reduction system and strategies to reduce flood risks. As rightly believed, steps taken to mitigate existing risks can help adapt to new or emerging ones that are posed by extreme weather conditions. [Download the pdf.](#)

[Phillipines Community Based Disaster Management](#): This paper, written by Lorna P. Victoria, director of the *Centre for Disaster Preparedness*, describes various aspects of community based disaster management (CBDM) by highlighting best practices in the Philippine Disaster Management Forum. [Download the paper.](#)

[Community Disaster Education](#): This American Red Cross article describes the benefits of community disaster education, including steps individuals can take to ensure they are prepared to meet the challenges of unforeseen disasters. Also included is a plan entitled “Together We Prepare” containing steps like making a plan, building a kit, getting trained, volunteering, and giving blood. [Download the article.](#)

[Citizens’ Participation Toward Safer Communities](#): This case study, by Zenaida G. Delica, describes how community planning and preparedness in the Philippines saved many lives when an overflow of volcanic debris and molten lava destroyed the village of Talba. [Access the case study.](#)

[Community-based disaster risk management and Poverty Reduction](#): This paper looks at the relationship between poverty and vulnerability in times of disaster. It looks to share ideas to help poor communities to be more resilient. The paper advocates not only for the involvement of communities and local people in decision-making but also application and adaptation of indigenous risk-coping wisdom and knowledge into risk reduction. [Download the pdf.](#)

For the resource geek: Go to the [resources page](#) of the Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre for a treasure trove of ideas and papers related to community based emergency preparedness issues.

III. TECHNOLOGY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Everyday technologies like smart phones and radio provide unique opportunities for people to engage and learn together. Communities and regions affected by disaster can communicate to support one another. Even when formal communication systems break down, communities using dispersed technologies are better able to communicate and support relief efforts.

Questions to Consider:

- How can we give voice to communities, fostering engagement and resilience in daily life in preparation for and response to disaster?
- How can technologies support this?
- What can be built-in or developed organically to benefit poor communities in a long-term, sustainable way?

Blog 6

Technology

– By Paul Born

New technologies have provided us with a treasure trove of easy ways to network with and connect people. The rise of cell phones and simple community radios has provided unique opportunity to inexpensively and effectively provide useful and timely information to people, which is the cornerstone of all good community engagement.

Blog 7

Resilience and “Technology”

– By Paul Born

Can skills be considered a technology? In other words, can a way of thinking or acting be considered a “technology”? If so, a technology of resilience during times of disaster would include people knowing how to care for themselves and those in their care before, during and after such an event. In other words, during a difficult hurricane they would know to have the food, water and supplies for several days should the power go out; know how to board up their windows to avoid damage and injury; and know how and where to evacuate during the worst events.

Questions to Consider:

- If groups had a technology of resilience to be used during times of disaster how might we expect them to use such technology?

- What roles would empathy play in this technology?
- How about altruism, mutual aid, sharing, faith, hope, diversity?

Further Reading:

[Community Disaster Information System:](#) A database of resources helps communities to prepare for and respond to emergencies. Community organizations with available resources for emergencies have an efficient and structured means of maintaining data about the products and services they offer. Red Cross executives and workers report that the Community Disaster Information System improves service coverage and efficiency, increases information on available resources, helps monitor and provide for quality referrals, encourages community collaboration and networking, and assists with recruitment, training, and retention of Red Cross volunteers. [Learn more.](#)

[Guidebook on technologies for disaster preparedness and mitigation:](#) A fascinating, everything you want to know and more, guide to technologies available in disaster management. The author states, “Rapid advancement of technology in all these sectors could be deployed in efficiently tackling the challenges emerging from disasters, minimizing the impact of disasters in terms of reducing the magnitude of death and casualties. Traditionally, disaster management makes use of indigenous and locally developed appropriate technologies to a great extent. People in disaster-prone areas have developed, over generations, traditional technologies as efficient solutions to many of their disaster-related problems. [Read the full report.](#)

[The Boy Who Cried “Wolf!” or Why a Community-Based Alert System is a Good Idea:](#)

The moral of this fable is that even when liars tell the truth, no one believes them. In tsunami disaster management, this fable is useful for understanding the tendency to disbelieve tsunami alerts as more alerts are raised but no tsunami comes. Disbelief is a big problem for tsunami disaster management because tsunami prediction for the Indian Ocean is still under development. The consequence for not acting appropriately after getting a tsunami alert can be death. How can we assure that an alert is always given credibility by those who receive it? [Download this interesting paper.](#)

IV. COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION AND GOVERNANCE: Who’s Listening To Whom?

At the heart of an effective Emergency Preparedness Plan are active and engaged citizens. The ability of governments to provide leadership and support to concerned citizens is critical in preparing for and responding to disaster. The work of preparation for disaster goes beyond training of citizens for action. Engaged citizens are not only active during times of disaster but are active and engaged in their communities’ daily

life. A belief in the value of collective action and collective altruism are central for both government and citizens.

Questions to Consider:

- How are communities voicing their needs and how are governments and funders listening and responding to what communities are saying, or not?
- What is the proper balance between community participation and government in fostering resilience?
- How can the space between communities and their governments be reduced?

Blog 8

Why governments need help

– By Paul Born

This fascinating story tells of citizen's response to a potentially fatal disaster. Formal communication channels were destroyed, but because citizens were engaged and trained there was no loss of life.

In 1995, a lahar overflow destroyed the village of Talba, Philippines. In this event, the government communication system was disrupted and failed to give the proper warning to the residents. It was the parallel warning system developed by the community people that warned them on time to vacate the area and avoid any loss of life. Resources of the community like privately-owned small boats, jeeps and a truck were used to move the village's population to safety. At the evacuation center, the Barangay Disaster Response Organization members augment the national government's health personnel in the delivery of services to the survivors of lahar rampage. In the new area where the affected families of Talba were finally resettled, the Barangay officials who joined them have been able to secure the needed services of water, electricity, and health assistance from the resettlement officials. The organized community were easily mobilized for action by the officials in support of requests made to the resettlement officials. The people's organization and the local authorities complemented each other in the acquisition of services, ensuring of the safety and welfare of the members of the community. *As told by Zenaida G. Delica in her paper "Citizens Participation Towards Safer Communities."*

The hope in engaging communities and in harnessing their wisdom is that if "things do not go as planned" there are people able and willing to respond. Disasters are not always predictable. When we engage the people they are able to adapt as circumstances change around them.

Further Reading:

Ideas for Community-Based Disaster Planning: This paper, prepared by the Arlington County Civic Federation, describes some possible community planning ideas for dealing with emergencies and disasters. Some sections include educating yourself, educating your civic organization, developing a disaster response plan, and much more. [Download the paper.](#)

CERT (Community Emergency Response Team): This case study describes the *Community Corps – Community Emergency Response Team (CERT)* and how they assist communities in meeting their needs in times of emergency. The study also includes a training curriculum for the program and a brief section on how begin involvement in a local *CERT* program. [Download the case study.](#)

Preparedness (SDART): This case study describes the *Seattle Disaster Aid & Response Teams (SDART)* and how they can assist communities in preparing for emergencies. The team believes that effective cooperation and communication between a City and its inhabitants is the only sure way to prepare for a disaster. [Download the case study.](#)

V. CONCLUSIONS

Blog 9

Retrieving the Wisdom of Those in Need

– By Paul Born

I conclude this inquiry by providing a summary of seven key elements described in the [Philippines Community Based Disaster Management \(CBDM\) paper](#), written by Lorna P. Victoria, Director of the Centre for Disaster Preparedness. She uses seven principles which are commonly used and which represent core approaches to mobilizing people in disaster response.

1. *People's Participation* – Community members are the main actors and propellers; while sustaining the CBDM process, they also directly share in the benefits of disaster preparedness, mitigation and development.
2. *Priority For The Most Vulnerable Groups, Families, And People In The Community* – In urban areas, the most vulnerable sectors are generally the urban poor and informal sector, while in the rural areas, these are the subsistence farmers, fisher folk and indigenous people. Also vulnerable are the elderly, the differently-abled, and children.

3. *Risk Reduction Measures Are Community-Specific* – Risk reduction measures are identified after an analysis of the community’s disaster risk (hazards, vulnerabilities and capacities and consideration of varying perceptions of disaster risk).
4. *Existing Coping Mechanisms And Capacities Are Recognized* - CBDM builds upon and strengthens existing coping strategies and capacities; most common social/organizational values and mechanism are cooperation, community/people’s organizations, and local knowledge and resources
5. *The Aim Is To Reduce Vulnerabilities By Strengthening Capacities; The Goal Is Building Disaster Resilient Communities.*
6. *Link Disaster Risk Reduction With Development.* – Address vulnerable conditions and causes of vulnerabilities.
7. *Outsiders Have Supporting And Facilitating Role* – NGOs have supporting, facilitating and catalytic role. But while NGOs should plan for phase-out, government’s role is integral to enable and institutionalize the CBDM process.

These seven principles ensure that responses are place-based and provide significant roles for those most affected. Even when viewing each point independently, it’s difficult to argue against the usefulness of any one. To see them as seven principles to be acted upon in tandem, it’s easy to see how engaging the wisdom of the people will improve emergency preparedness and mitigate the impacts of disasters.

Draft – Not for distribution