

# The age of accountability?: future community involvement in disaster reduction

## Introduction

The importance of community involvement and community-based approaches in disaster reduction is generally acknowledged—in the fields both of disaster preparedness and mitigation, and of disaster relief.

In the Yokohama Message delivered by the United Nations International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR) conference in Yokohama, Japan, in May 1994 the international aid and disaster community affirmed that:

*'Community involvement and their [sic] active participation should be encouraged in order to gain greater insight into the individual and collective perception of development and risk, and to have a clear understanding of the cultural and organisational characteristics of each society as well as of its behaviour and interactions with the physical and natural environment. This knowledge is of the utmost importance to determine those things which favour and hinder prevention and mitigation or encourage or limit the preservation of the environment for the development of future generations, and in order to find effective and efficient means to reduce the impact of disasters.'* (IDNDR 1994).

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee, in its *Guidelines for Aid Agencies on Disaster Mitigation*, observes:

*'Community-based organisations, whether in rural or urban contexts, have a key role to play in disaster mitigation efforts. Such organisations can raise awareness of the hazard risks at the local level and mobilise the community or groups within it to take steps to reduce their vulnerability either through local structural measures, and by pressing for central government involvement in larger structural measures or through the development and introduction of adaptive or preparedness measures.'* (OECD-DAC 1994).

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The Code of Conduct drawn up by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, which many relief agencies have signed up to, states among its principles that:

*'Disaster response assistance should never be imposed upon the beneficiaries. Effective relief and lasting rehabilitation can best be achieved where the intended beneficiaries are involved in the design, management and implementation of the assistance programme. We will strive to achieve full community participation in our relief and rehabilitation programmes.'* (IFRC 1994).

## Rationale

The rationale for community involvement or community-based activities is now well rehearsed and runs roughly as follows.

- Because community-based activities (and community-based organisations) are deeply rooted in the society and culture of an area, they enable people to express their real needs and priorities, allowing problems to be defined correctly and responsive measures to be designed and implemented.
- The existence of community-based organisations allows people to respond to emergencies rapidly, efficiently and fairly; resources are used economically.
- The principal resource available for mitigating or responding to disasters is people themselves and their local knowledge and expertise.
- Community-based activities tend to be multisectoral, combining different activities, hazards and disaster phases.

- They reinforce local organisation, building up consciousness, awareness and critical appraisal. In this way they increase people's potential for reducing their vulnerability.

By contrast, it is said, 'top-down' programmes in which communities are not involved tend not to reach those worst affected by disaster, may even make them more vulnerable, can be manipulated by political interests, are often inefficient, usually take a unisectoral approach and do not respond to people's real needs (Maskrey 1989)<sup>1</sup>.

Experience demonstrates that programmes involving the community can be very successful<sup>2</sup>. One example is the case of the Alto Mayo district of northeast Peru, struck by an earthquake in May 1990 that destroyed more than 3,000 houses. National agencies knew little about the region and their response was sometimes inappropriate: it included bringing rice into an area where the farmers had a rice surplus. Informal community organisations were quick to respond but were often ignored by official relief agencies. However, a community-based reconstruction plan to build earthquake-resistant homes using a modified version of a traditional building technology did take root, with some 2,000 houses built in the first two years after the earthquake (Schilderman 1993).

Different issues appear in developing and developed countries. In developing countries, where the capacity of the state to protect its citizens may be limited, communities have to rely on their own knowledge and coping mechanisms to mitigate against disasters, as they have done for generations. Customary support structures can also play a significant role in disaster response and recovery. Communities in developing countries are active in disaster reduction, even in the most hostile environments, for instance

## Notes

1. Berke and Beatley 1997 is a recent detailed study that reinforces this view.
2. For a selection of other, earlier, examples see Maskrey 1989.

in the *chars* (silt islands) in the Jamuna River in Bangladesh, where people have developed a variety of structural and non-structural measures to mitigate the impact of floods (Schmuck-Widmann 1996).

In developed countries, traditional community systems have been abandoned for more individual lifestyles and forms of association. This has been accompanied by a massive extension of the role and functions of the state. One consequence of these developments is that people rely heavily on the state to support and protect them; their capacity for independent action may be limited. This may leave them more vulnerable to hazards when formal protective systems prove to be inadequate<sup>3</sup>.

But both in developed and developing countries, at times of emergency there probably will be a variety of ad hoc, largely informal responses by loosely knit groups from within communities before formal organisations are able to mobilise. These 'emergent' groups can play an important role in disaster response and are an important factor in any disaster scenario (Raphael 1986).

### A growing problem

Practice generally lags behind theory. In much disaster and emergency management work communities are still not involved; the 'top-down' approach remains common. Literature on disasters can conceal this, especially where it is produced by those involved in activities. After the earthquake in Maharashtra, India, in 1993, it seemed that nearly every agency involved in reconstruction claimed that local communities were participants in the reconstruction programmes but some of the people working there challenged this off the record. In general, critical analysis of long-term recovery and disaster mitigation projects is lacking, though analysis of disaster response is better, at least in some locations, thanks largely to North American social scientists' interest in this area.

Getting our approach right is an important and increasingly urgent task. Nobody would now dispute the fact that more and more people throughout the world are becoming vulnerable to hazards as the result of demographic, social, economic, environmental and other factors (Blaikie et al. 1994). Even some of the hazards themselves may be getting more numerous or at least less predictable. It has long been argued (though it is still disputed in certain contexts) that environmental degradation helps to cause floods and drought (Blaikie et al. 1994, Smith 1996). There is speculation

that the construction of dams can sometimes increase the likelihood of earthquakes (e.g. Seeber 1994). It now appears likely that global warming will lead to an increase in floods and droughts, and in some places windstorms (Saunders 1998)<sup>4</sup>.

### Community involvement and its problems

Some would say the explanation of the failure to involve communities can be found by looking at attitudes within some of the key actors in disaster mitigation and response—that is, multilateral agencies, government departments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other disaster professionals—who are liable to be bureaucratic in their structures and systems, inflexible in their thinking and actions, and still wedded to obsolete theories of command-and-control and blueprint planning. This is a powerful argument<sup>5</sup> that can be reinforced by case studies of events around the world. The response to the earthquake in Peru, mentioned above, is one such case. Studies of responses to cyclones in different parts of the world have demonstrated the persistence of top-down responses among government organisations and NGOs alike (Berke and Beatley 1997, Intermediate Technology 1994).

We can see one dimension of this in the relationship between official organisations and 'emergent' groups after a disaster. In all disasters emergent groups appear, carrying out such activities as search and rescue, damage assessment, handling the dead, distributing relief supplies and presenting survivors' grievances. For example, during the first three days after the Mexico City earthquake in 1985, 'the organisational response was dominated by a substantial amount of independent actions' (Quarantelli 1993) while 10 years later in Kobe, Japan, a strong contingent of volunteers emerged to assist in response to another earthquake even though there was little tradition of voluntary organisation or community self-help in the city (Comfort 1996). Such improvisation is valuable as well as ubiquitous, yet it may bother disaster managers because it is outside their plans, systems and, above all, control (Quarantelli 1997).

There can be little doubt that this is one of the main reasons for the lack of community participation in disaster reduction initiatives. But there are dangers in relying too heavily on this as an explanation. It is too easy to fall into the trap of simply blaming somebody else—government or other agencies—for

the problem. There are other causes too.

One of the most important, and least recognised, of these causes is that successful—that is, equitable and sustainable—community participation is inherently difficult to achieve. One reason for this is that although the phrase 'the community' or 'the village' may invoke an image of a defined, homogeneous group of people, in reality communities are a dynamic mix of different groups, forces and attitudes, often characterised by internal conflict<sup>6</sup>.

Another is that 'community' activity does not take place in a vacuum. For one thing, there are no neat boundaries between one community and another. For another, community activities take place in relation to other actors—such as government, the private sector and civil society organisations—who must also be considered as stakeholders in this matter. The relationship between the different actors is also a dynamic one, changing as a result of new knowledge and shifts in attitudes, resources and political power.

Community participation requires some shared understanding between community members and the specialists from outside—in this case, disaster professionals—who aim to assist them. Gaining this mutual understanding involves dialogue with the community. Dialogue is not the same as education or awareness raising, which are among the most common forms of engagement between disaster specialists and communities at present. Education and awareness-raising activities are one-way communications. They transmit the expertise of the specialist outsiders to those at risk but do not transmit understanding of the lives and behaviour of those people back to the professionals. This can have significant consequences, for example in the field of early warnings where a great deal of effort has gone into public education programmes without corresponding effort to understand the many extraneous factors that may affect people's readiness to respond to warnings (Twigg 1998). Yet dialogue is a messy business. It involves discussion, debate, and argument between many different

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3. This dependence may lie behind the level of dissatisfaction with the public warning and response systems expressed by victims of the Easter floods in England in 1998 (Bye and Horner 1998).

4. We do not know the likely long-term risks of industrial and technological accidents, especially in developing countries and countries in transition: such accidents are relatively few but on occasion, as at Bhopal and Chernobyl, the impact can be huge (Smith 1996, 314-340).

stakeholders. Consensus cannot be guaranteed. Dialogue is also time consuming, and therefore resource consuming.

Even where there is dialogue, outsiders find it very difficult to understand the community's environment, needs and points of view. To be sure, some of this can be blamed on the attitudes and approaches of the outsiders themselves, which is the product of their education, institutional culture and so on (Chambers 1983, 1997). But there is a more fundamental factor here, too: the impossibility of ever being able to put oneself fully into somebody else's position and see things through their eyes. We all try to fit others' views into our own frameworks of understanding, filtering the knowledge gained and reshaping it. Unfortunately, this has the effect of imposing a kind of conceptual uniformity on the diversity of people and their experiences (Bhatt MR 1998).

Getting all of the community involved can have 'political' dimensions where it threatens vested interests by challenging the status quo. It may also require outside, supporting agencies to take a lead 'political' role. For example, an Oxfam relief and rehabilitation project after severe floods in Pakistan in 1992 took steps to address women's needs, in a country where women face a number of cultural and economic obstacles to their full participation in society. The steps ranged from the relatively neutral (employment of women relief workers) to radical social innovations (introducing the concept of joint ownership of houses by man and wife) and more 'political' acts (setting up separate village organisations for women in parallel to the traditional fora run by men). Needless to say, this was not without local opposition (Bari 1997).

On a more practical level, successful community involvement takes a lot of time and effort, particularly in building trust between communities and outsiders. In the case of the post-earthquake reconstruction plan in Peru mentioned above, six months were spent in discussions with communities and other organisations to reach a broad consensus

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5. It has been stated with particular force and cogency in the context of sustainable development professionals (Chambers 1983, 1997).

6. For discussions of some of these issues see Mitchell 1997, Stirrat 1996.

7. The humanitarian aid field is an exception, but the debate here has revolved around issues pertaining to 'complex emergencies' and internal conflict, especially in Africa.

on the building technology to be deployed before work began on building houses (Schilderman 1993).

Finally, we should not forget one very important factor: disaster professionals have to meet many different demands and often have to work under considerable pressure, especially during emergencies. Even where community participation is genuinely desired, it may not be possible to effect it.

### Understanding players and their roles

The IDNDR's Yokohama statement observed: 'Preventive measures are most effective when they involve participation at all levels, from the local community through the national government to the regional and international level' (IDNDR 1994 p 10). The same point could be made about disaster response. It goes without saying that the different levels and actors should be integrated.

This leads us into a much bigger but vital question: what are the respective roles of communities, the state, civil society (in all its manifestations) and business—and what should their roles be? In the context of global and national social and political development, this has been one of the hot topics of debate in the past two decades. It has also, during the 1990s, increasingly preoccupied academics and policy makers involved in Third World development programmes, especially in non-governmental organisations (e.g. Clayton 1996, Smillie 1995). However, there seems to have been relatively little discussion of this issue in the context of disaster management<sup>7</sup>.

Community involvement will only become widespread if these questions are posed and answers are found. At a policy level, this is arguably one of the most important tasks facing the world's disaster 'community'.

### Towards a new agenda

With these factors in mind, let us ask the questions: will communities become more involved in disaster reduction in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and how will this come about? Some recent developments may offer pointers to future trends. The remainder of this paper notes a few of these developments and comments on their significance.

### The 'disaster-resistant' community

In November 1997 Deerfield Beach in Florida, USA, was designated the first pilot 'disaster resistant' community as part of 'Project Impact', a new initiative of the Federal Emergency Management Agency

(FEMA). Up to \$1 million of seed money was to be provided to support activities that would protect the community against hazards (*Disaster Research* 1997). Project Impact is very important to FEMA, as even a brief glance at the agency's website shows, and by April 1999 it was claiming that, in addition to the original seven pilot communities, 118 communities and over 600 businesses were linked to the project (FEMA 1999a).

FEMA claims that with Project Impact it is 'changing the way America deals with disasters'. The project is founded on three main principles:

1. that preventive actions must be decided at local level
2. that private sector participation is vital
3. that long-term efforts and investment in prevention are essential (FEMA 1999a)

Recent progress reports on activities under the project in several states reveal not only considerable activity but also a great variety of structural and non-structural activities, great and small, including hazard and risk mapping and assessment, public information and education, preparedness drills, improvements to early warning systems, flood proofing measures and retrofitting of buildings. Many local organisations—official, community and commercial—are involved, and this mix of organisational types is one of the most significant features of the project (Colorado 1999, Montana 1999, North Dakota 1999, South Dakota 1999, Utah 1999, Wyoming 1999).

It is still too early to assess the impact of the project. Nevertheless, FEMA's big shift in emphasis away from emergency response and towards disaster preparedness and mitigation is significant not only for the USA but also for other countries which may seek to emulate the American model. It is likely that many similar programmes will start up elsewhere in the next few years in developed countries at least as the results of Project Impact become apparent—and it will be interesting to see where such programmes take off. The pioneers are likely to be those countries that, like the USA, already have strong traditions of decentralised government and citizen activism, or where the prevailing political mood favours rolling back the frontiers of the state. Project Impact itself may be a reflection of a wider trend in the USA (notably in California) towards greater involvement of community organisations in disaster activities and greater inclusion of community organisations in government plans (Wallrich 1996, Benini 1998).

## A voice for victims

Disaster victims lose out if their voices are not heard because their needs are not recognised—as happened, for example, with elderly victims of the Kobe earthquake in Japan in 1995 who were marginalised by their reticence (Tanida 1996). A first-hand account of a disaster has an immediacy and power not found in official descriptions and offers all sorts of insight. Listening to disaster victims goes to the heart of the problem of finding the human and the social in risk and disaster. It, alone, provides a means to obtain adequate witness to the conditions of danger, just who and what has been hurt, and their needs (Hewitt 1998).

It is an essential step towards letting such people take part in and exercise some control over ‘the impersonal processes and citadels of expertise that tend to dominate the disaster community’ (*ibid.*). Yet the voices of disaster victims and those at risk are not often listened to, valued or understood. The rare published accounts of disasters by their victims<sup>8</sup> are therefore of particular value in educating all of us, but these are merely one-off, individual accounts.

A number of innovative techniques are now being used to give more disaster victims a voice and as a result to help disaster agencies make their interventions more appropriate. One of these is the ‘Participatory Evaluation Writing’ method adopted by the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) in the State of Gujarat in India. This process, which involved women from urban and rural districts in focus group discussions, writing and then discussing texts, allowed the women to present their own viewpoints concerning their vulnerability to natural and man-made hazards (Bhatt E 1998). In the same state the Disaster Mitigation Institute helps victims of disasters to write their own life stories, which set the disaster event in context as well as revealing their vulnerability and capacities (Bhatt MR 1998)<sup>9</sup>. Such perspectives can also provide a counter to prevailing media treatment of hazards and disasters and may be used by the media. For example, the ‘Living with

disaster’ videos produced by Television Trust for the Environment in association with Intermediate Technology, which let those affected by disasters and vulnerability present their own points of view, were shown on BBC World TV in 1997 (TVE 1996).

## PLA

Giving victims a voice moves them away from the status of objects or target groups and towards that of subjects or participants in the process of disaster management. ‘Participation’ has become a fashionable word, especially among those working on long-term sustainable development. As we have seen above, community participation is very difficult to achieve. However, it can be achieved if appropriate methods are adopted. Such methods are now becoming available. During the next few years much more is going to be heard in disaster circles about PLA. The acronym stands for ‘participatory learning and action’ and it is used to cover an increasingly large basket of approaches and methods that enable local people to analyse and share their knowledge of their lives and actions, and from this to plan and implement projects to overcome the problems they face. In developed countries, manifestations of PLA include such forms as ‘action planning’ and ‘planning for real’, some of which have their origins several decades ago; in developing countries it embraces the PRA (participatory rural appraisal) movement, which has spread like wildfire since the late 1980s<sup>10</sup>.

PLA does not only provide the outsiders, the professionals, with much better information on people’s environment, lives and behaviour; it also—if practised properly—allows communities to be much more involved in planning and carrying out activities<sup>11</sup>. It works particularly well in long-term development programmes which can allow more time for the participatory process to unfold and to resolve conflicting views within communities but it is used in disaster contexts. PLA methods enabled Bhutanese refugees in Nepal to articulate their views and built up their confidence to

speak out; it also brought to light problems that were not apparent to refugee camp managers (Hinton 1995). PLA was used in a village in Maharashtra affected by the 1993 earthquake to involve people in the process of planning the reconstruction of relocated villages (official designs for village layout and houses having failed to address the villagers’ needs). Even though the process exposed different viewpoints within different groups in the village<sup>12</sup>, it did arrive at a commonly agreed solution—and took only three days (Shah 1996).

More systematic work is now beginning to deploy PLA in disaster settings. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and Oxfam have published a PLA training manual for those who work with communities at risk in Southern Africa, focusing on drought (von Kotze and Holloway 1996). A project is currently under way to test and adapt PLA methods for use by communities in analysing their vulnerability to disasters and capacity to protect themselves against them. It is being managed by Dr Nicolas Hall of South Bank University in London with funding from the European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO). The results of this work should be widely available during the next year or so. One of the techniques tried out by the project during an earlier pilot phase was a simulation exercise with villagers in the Philippines to find out how they had coped with a major cyclone, Typhoon Ruping. The villagers re-enacted what they had done before and during the event. The simulation provided valuable insights into how they had learnt about the impending typhoon, their subsequent actions to protect property and assets, and their evacuation plans (Bellers 1996).

## The victim as consumer

One novel approach, related to the above, is to treat the disaster victim as a kind of consumer of goods and services. The example identified, which may well be unique, is the ‘Flood Aid Fair’ held in Raciborz in Poland after the severe 1997 floods. The fair was part of a larger assistance and reconstruction programme funded by the United States Agency for International Development. It was planned in response to problems arising during the reconstruction period when aid was being distributed in an inequitable and inefficient manner because victims of the floods did not have access to information about sources of aid (supplied by donors, the government and commercial firms). The fair’s aims were to stimulate an intensive exchange

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8. For example, the Chinese dissident Li Lu’s account of the 1976 Tangshan earthquake and its aftermath (Li Lu 1990: 45-59).

9. Examples are printed in Fernando and Fernando 1997: 45-54.

10. Wates 1999 is a useful practical digest of participatory planning methods used (mostly) in developed countries; Chambers 1997 outlines PRA and its evolution in developing countries.

11. Inevitably, there has been some reaction against the uncritical embrace of PLA/PRA and the hype that has surrounded it. For a conceptual critique, see Stirrat 1996. In some – perhaps many – cases, projects have been ‘participatory’ on paper rather than in practice.

12. Women and men identified different issues as being important, and the grid layout favoured by officials and by the younger, literate men was opposed by the women, older men and younger non-literate men.

of information between donors and victims, and to promote market response to the demand for goods and services created by the flood.

The fair was modelled on commercial trade fairs. There were 146 exhibitors: food aid organisations, government institutions, municipal associations, consulting firms, building materials firms, new technology firms, financial institutions and others. The event lasted only eight hours but was attended by more than 4,000 people: homeowners and representatives of NGOs, municipalities, regional development agencies, commercial firms and government. The exchange of information appears to have resulted in additional resources becoming available for flood victims—resources such as product discounts, information about credit and access to technologies. It also exposed gaps in available resources, helped to build capacity among indigenous organisations and strengthen relationships between different actors involved in the reconstruction effort, and led to the creation of a multimedia flood aid information system (Mikelsons and Chmura 1998).

### Accountability

A key principle lies at the heart of genuine participation and community involvement. This is accountability.

The great beauty of accountability is its universality. It can be applied to everyone, from village elders right up to the United Nations. It applies to state institutions that are expected to be accountable through the democratic process, and to private sector and non-profit organisations which are not subject to democratic control. Although a universal principle, it allows for plenty of variation in method, from simple transparency at one end to democracy at the other.

### Accountability by proxy

At the moment, disaster agencies are not directly accountable to disaster victims or potential victims. Although in the case of government agencies a degree of accountability can be achieved indirectly through the democratic process, the vulnerable and powerless—who make up the bulk of disaster victims in much of the world—are not strong enough to call such agencies to account. They have to rely on others with more power and influence to speak out on their behalf: this can be called ‘accountability by proxy’.

One of the main proxies at present is the media. Sometimes they can play a beneficial role, as in the Armenia earthquake in Colombia in January 1999 when

press coverage highlighted the failure of official relief services to reach some of the poorest districts (*Guardian* 1999). But it is well known that the media tend to take a stereotyped view of disasters and are often influenced by other agendas: their own and those of other interest groups<sup>13</sup>. The journalist John Pilger has characterised the international press as ‘capricious by nature’ (Pilger 1986). They are unreliable allies. There has been much talk about educating the media to cover disasters in a more balanced and responsible manner, but the commercial pressures of international news-gathering are so great that such moves can only make slow headway.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) may take it upon themselves to speak up on behalf of disaster victims. This is a role that they have been encouraged to adopt (Maskrey 1989) but the nature and extent of their involvement in advocacy of this kind has not been studied<sup>14</sup>. Community associations and similar membership-based organisations can speak with some legitimacy. The role of NGOs from outside is more ambiguous. They may see themselves as genuine partners of the local community and its organisations, speaking with one voice, but in many cases that view is not shared by the people themselves for whom the relationship with outside agencies is an unequal one (Buchanan 1996). To date, the extensive discussion about NGO accountability to those they wish to help<sup>15</sup> has provided questions rather than answers.

### Standards, charters and codes of conduct

An encouraging trend is the development of codes of conduct and sets of common standards. Several have emerged during the 1990s, mainly among NGOs working in emergency relief and stimulated largely by problems arising from the proliferation of internal conflicts and associated complex emergencies. The best known are the Red Cross/NGO Code of Conduct (1994, a broad statement of principles), the People in Aid Code (1997, covering best practice in the management and support of aid personnel) and the Sphere

Project (1998, setting out minimum standards in disaster response); others address practice in particular emergencies (Leader 1999; IFRC 1998).

By laying down common standards and regulatory frameworks, the codes and standards are intended to make their signatories more accountable<sup>16</sup>. However, accountability is not straightforward, for agencies are accountable in many different ways: to the people they aim to help, to donors, to their own mandates and the legislative frameworks in which they operate. Most of these codes are still in their infancy and there are still practical obstacles to overcome concerning implementation and compliance (Leader 1999). Nevertheless, they do represent an important step forward and within 20 years most agencies working in disaster management—in all its aspects, from mitigation and preparedness through to response and reconstruction—will probably be working to codes and standards of this kind.

A parallel but related initiative is the Active Learning Network on Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Assistance (ALNAP), set up in 1997 by donor agencies, United Nations agencies, and NGOs of different kinds. Its aims are, first, to identify, share and uphold best practices in monitoring, reporting and evaluating humanitarian assistance projects, and, second, to move towards a common understanding of ‘accountability’ in this context. It is beginning to play an influential role by disseminating information and as a forum for discussion (ALNAP 1999).

### Enforcing accountability

The sets of standards and codes of conduct are voluntary agreements; those who subscribe to them are anxious to make themselves more accountable. But what happens when key actors in disaster management are not interested in accountability or even dialogue? In such circumstances, more forceful or even confrontational approaches may be adopted and it is very likely that we shall see more of such attempts to provoke accountability in the future. Some examples follow. Many are from South Asia, a region where this

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13. For perspectives on this in different disaster contexts, see e.g. Ploughman 1997; Pilger 1989: 323-329; Gill 1986: 91-102.

14. The author is currently engaged in a study of NGO activity in disaster mitigation and preparedness that aims to address this among other subjects.

15. Edwards and Hulme 1995 ranges across the current debate among development NGOs. The ALNAP network (see section 7.2 of this paper) is the relief NGOs’

mechanism for addressing the issue.

16. The Red Cross Code of Conduct states: ‘We hold ourselves accountable to both those we seek to assist and those from whom we accept resources’ (IFRC 1994). The Sphere Project states that it reflects ‘the determination of agencies to improve both the effectiveness of their assistance and accountability to their stakeholders’ (Sphere Project 1998). In the People in Aid Code, accountability is to agency staff.

is starting to be seen as an important issue (Duryog Nivaran 1996, Bhatt 1994), but doubtless similar instances could be cited from elsewhere.

One method that is currently being discussed is that of having an ombudsman for humanitarian aid to provide a mechanism by which the concerns of people affected by disasters and conflict could be raised and addressed within the international humanitarian aid community. At the World Disasters Forum in London in June 1997 British NGOs launched a study, co-ordinated by the British Red Cross, to investigate the feasibility of such an ombudsman. The study concluded that it was possible to develop an ombudsman system, drawing on the experiences of such systems in other contexts, but this would need to be tested thoroughly to establish how it might work in practice. With this in mind, the project is now consulting more widely among humanitarian agencies (Ombudsman Project 1998, 1999).

Having an ombudsman will not in itself solve the problem of poor accountability in the international humanitarian system and runs the risk of adding another bureaucratic dimension to an increasingly bureaucratic business (Peppiatt 1997). The scheme also suffers from the same weakness as the codes of conduct described earlier: it can encourage greater accountability but it cannot enforce it; it can work only if agencies are willing to be bound by the ombudsman's recommendations<sup>17</sup>. Given the political complexities of many recent (and current) humanitarian crises, it would be extremely difficult for an ombudsman to maintain the 'legitimacy and respect' (Ombudsman Project 1998) that it needs to function effectively. The practical problems are formidable, but the ombudsman idea does attempt to deal with a real need: that of providing an impartial and independent voice for victims of disasters. As long as that need remains unmet, schemes of this kind will remain high on the international disaster response agenda.

The idea of getting people to fill out 'report cards' on the quality of public

infrastructure and services has been used in the cities of Bangalore and Ahmedabad in India. It has also been piloted in relief operations, where disaster victims evaluate the performance of the agencies that come to help them (Patel 1997). Another idea now being explored in India is that of scrutinising government relief budgets, bringing issues of cost effectiveness and accountability into the open. It is based upon the success of one NGO's efforts to scrutinise state development budgets, exposing gaps between plans and practice (Bhatt 1995).

More direct action to bring government officials and victims together has been attempted on occasion. Following sea floods at Dhandhuka on the coast of the Indian State of Gujarat in 1993, local NGOs launched a community-based process to plan more effective disaster mitigation; this involved a series of planning sessions in the affected villages. Officials from several state government departments took part in the meetings. They included the Minister of Health, who came to several meetings—an unusual action for someone of that rank. Although the officials took part in the debates, they did not exercise any control over the process which appears to have been harmonious and collaborative, and led to government commitments to carry out a range of recovery and mitigation measures (Bhatt 1996). By contrast, Japanese government officials on a national television programme after the Kobe earthquake in January 1995 had to face a chorus of complaints from the disaster's victims that they were not doing enough to provide food, emergency shelter, medicine and money for reconstruction. The Governor of Hyogo prefecture, of which Kobe is the capital, was obliged to admit that the authorities had been slow and lacked co-ordination (*Guardian* 1995).

### Litigation

Following the Loma Prieta earthquake in the San Francisco/Oakland area of California in 1989, several community-based organisations got together to complain that disaster recovery plans did not take account of the special problems faced by poor and vulnerable communities in the Bay Area. A variety of methods were used to force reconsideration of those plans. One of these was to invoke the law. When it was learned that the American Red Cross intended to transfer unspent contributions for the disaster to its national disaster fund, a lawsuit was threatened. In the face of this,

and the loss of community trust, the Red Cross revised its plan and created a substantial fund for planning, community organising and training (Wallrich 1996).

We do not know the extent to which the law has been invoked at other times and in other places to enforce accountability and raise standards<sup>18</sup>. Further research in this area would be valuable. Clearly, the law is a potentially formidable tool and it is probable that the next few years will see an increase in the number of lawsuits by disaster victims and those who feel that they are being exposed to hazard by the actions of others. This has very serious implications for disaster managers and agencies. Work has already been undertaken to develop a manual on 'public interest litigation' for disaster mitigation in South Asia, which draws on laws and legal precedents in five countries in the region to suggest ways in which communities and their representatives might use the law to ensure greater security against hazards or obtain better redress after disasters have occurred (Siwakoti and Pant 1997).

### Conclusion

The theme of the TIEMS '99 conference is 'Defining the Agenda for the Third Millennium'. The trends noted above—the disaster-resistant community, voices for victims, participatory methodologies, victims as consumers and the several drives towards greater accountability—are all likely to feature on that agenda at its outset, over the next decade or two. How prominently each will feature remains to be seen, but it is very likely that emergency and disaster management is now entering an 'age of accountability'.

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### Notes

17. One of the background discussion papers to the project highlights the difficulty in setting a balance between facilitation and enforcement (Christoplos 1998).

18. It is noteworthy that US law, in the form of the 1988 Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (the Stafford Act), forbids discrimination on the basis of race, colour, religion, nationality, sex, age and economic status in all disaster assistance projects – those of both government and private agencies (FEMA 1999). Has this led to lawsuits?

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## New Books



### Disaster Policy and Emergency Management in Russia

by Boris Porfiriev

New York, Nova Science Publishers 1998, English, 226 pages.

The peace initiatives to solve the Kosovo-crisis have clearly shown that Russia is still indispensable for building a Post-Cold-War-World-Order as well as a new, unified Europe that does not end any longer at Poland's eastern border or the Ural Mountains. Russia has become not only the pivotal-power between West and East, but also the barrier against the pre- and anti-modernism's of fundamentalist streams inside Russia and along its peripheral states, particularly in the Kaukasian regions. Boris Porfiriev's book "Disaster Policy and Emergency Management in Russia" has as its intellectual starting point: the threats to security and safety of modern societies and social life are increasing worldwide.

Modern societies become more and more vulnerable against interruptions, disturbances and disorder, while the globalizing networking of finances, goods, services and information demands stability and durable functioning. Never again are single, isolated regional events capable of harming the whole world - the earthquakes of Kobe and Taiwan were an example of this. Both destabilised the worldwide supply with car and computer parts and thus made us aware what strategic dependency is about amidst global markets and international division of Labor.

It is this dependency of stability, reliance and continuity that makes modern societies vulnerable to attack. It is to Porfiriev's merit that he presents this wider perspective. It is not that the threats have changed. We still face natural hazards, technological risks, terrorism, sabotage, organised crime and armed conflicts in a broader range than ever, from civil wars over tribal/clan conflicts to gang wars. However, the functioning of modern societies has changed drastically. Modern societies evolve toward conditions, which need to proceed undisturbed. Thus, modernisation pacifies. On the other hand, the potential for disruption becomes increasingly dangerous because as the more sophisticated societies proceed and interact, the ruder interferences will suffice for interruption or terror. Porfiriev has carefully analysed the pre-conditions and underlying causes of emergencies, disaster and catastrophes.

Conscience of the constraints and contradictions of his own society he knows about the collisions of yesterday and tomorrow, of persistence and change, of conversation and progress.

But he also knows about other factors: of insufficient preparedness, lack of warning, relief and mitigation work, ill placed loyalties, poor design, construction and management. Three major case analysis, a Siberian Chemical Plant Accident, a major fire at the Kaminski Car Plant and the earthquake at Neftegorsk not only demonstrate the authorities competence but also the societal implications of 'events' which are no longer singularities.

The quality of Porfiriev's book, thus, is the broader, integral perspective of what modern society challenges, positively and negatively. This is all worth to reflect upon. The book has another important advantage: one learns how the Russian society after the breakdown of communism has (re)organised for coping with emergencies including marshal law. It helps us to understand the political transition of a political power which will belong to the top players in international pacification and a development which the United Nations has called the need for sustainability.

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