

Disasters: Lessons Learned?

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Editorial

It is very common to find publications with 'lessons learned' in their titles. We all know that events are capable of teaching us, and experience can be valuable if we heed what it has to say to us. But do we really learn things? In conferences, workshops and symposia we gather together to talk about progress, but is it really happening? In times of recession, I would suggest that 'retrogress' is as likely as progress: budgets are cut, workers are "let go", initiatives are ended. Because financial conservatism takes over, it is often the most innovative and adventurous programs that are abolished or downsized.

The study and management of disasters should involve a mixture of theory and experience. We learn the former in the classroom and the latter in the field. Lack of either perspective is unhelpful or downright dangerous. Theory is the roadmap that enables us to deal with disasters, and experience needs it to be able to make sense of complex and chaotic realities. The field of disasters is unusual, in that the test of theory is its ability to help solve pressing, practical problems right away, not in 50 years' time.

So are we going forwards or backwards in disaster risk reduction (DRR)? To begin with, there are many positive developments. Over the last five years the concept of resilience, or disaster risk reduction, has emerged into public debate, and it is a sign that at long last people in authority are taking seriously the idea of preparing for adverse events, not merely reacting to them. In short, DRR is being mainstreamed. This is hardly surprising, as reports are coming out at the rate of at least one a week on the probable future effects of climate change and the need to make strong socio-economic and cultural adaptations to it. Disasters threaten lives, livelihoods and human and ecological security in such complex and multiple ways that something will have to be done. Moreover, the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami of March 2011 in Japan caused the world to wake up to the threat of cascading events, where one disaster leads to another, in this case a 'na-tech', or natural-technological catastrophe.

Yet the evolution is all in the policy debate, which evidently lags behind the reality of situations by a considerable margin. Decades ago voices were raised about the need to shift the emphasis from emergency action to disaster prevention and mitigation. There are several reasons why not much was done. To begin with, human beings are risk-takers and not given to be very prudent. Secondly, disaster reduction suffers from the "no votes in sewage" syndrome--the idea that although the community may need a new waste-water treatment plant, the people are not going to vote for a politician who bases his or her platform on promising such an innovation. Disasters are too negative to be vote-winners. Even safety and security are not positive enough to induce the sceptic to cast a vote a particular way in the next ballot. Thirdly, disaster victims are electors too, and awarding them "forgiveness money" to rebuild riskily has been an electoral winner, even though it has done nothing for resilience. In this context, note that the number of U.S. presidential declarations of disaster or emergency has risen from 22 in 1980 to 75-100 in recent years, and it is not all because disasters

are worse now than they were 30 years ago, but rather because it is expedient to liberate more federal funds.

So many reports, articles and books in the disaster risk reduction field talk about 'lessons learned'. Yet remarkably few of them include any methodology or actions which demonstrate that lessons have indeed been learned. The first task is obviously to identify a lesson, an aspect of experience and education that points to the need for better organisation or practice. After that, many lessons are archived, forgotten, or wilfully ignored. There is a range of common excuses: "it would cost too much, it's too complex, it's not my responsibility to do something about it", and so on. The recent shipwreck of the *Costa Concordia* cruise liner on the coast of the Tuscan Island of Giglio in Italy was symptomatic of the problem. This, potentially the most costly shipwreck in history, was a disaster waiting to happen. Risky behaviour in the face of natural obstacles to navigation combined with a cavalier attitude to evacuation procedures to create a sort of "Titanic syndrome", almost exactly one hundred years after the most famous shipwreck in history occurred in the mid-Atlantic Ocean. And the beaching of the *Costa Concordia* was only a hair's breadth from being "Europe's 9-11" with a death toll in the thousands, as the heavily listing ship could very easily have sunk rapidly in much deeper water. After a century of contemplating the lessons of overconfidence in the safety of luxury liners, lessons had not been learned.

Whether we are dealing with natural, technological, social or intentional (i.e. terroristic) disasters, or some combination of the categories, it is possible to learn lessons and assess the process of doing so. The measure of a 'lesson learned' is that it contributes to the improvement of practice, which in this case means greater safety and security. The most common model of this is that disaster leads to scandal, rhetoric, heated debate, a cooling down and the passage and adoption of appropriate legislation. A better model is that we actively seek lessons by evaluating experience systematically. We can use organisational learning theory and tools such as industrial accident evaluation to make our assessments. And then we need to study the ways that lessons can be accepted by people engaged in risk taking. These processes are already common in civil aviation, where there is a very high demand for safety. But civil aviation involves high-reliability systems, and these are too expensive and involve too much redundancy to be justifiable or affordable in other sectors of risk.

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Nevertheless, it would be a good idea to be more systematic in how we learn lessons about disaster and disaster risk, preferably before we have to learn the lessons “the hard way” by experiencing the next catastrophe. Both FEMA in the USA and the European Union have mechanisms for capturing the lessons and putting them to use, but the

practice needs to be much more widespread and much more readily accepted by many more constituencies of disaster risk management. We owe it to the populations that we have to protect; and they owe it to themselves to join in with the process.