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**PROMOTING AND DEVELOPING INDIVIDUAL AND
COMMUNITY EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS AS
RESOURCES OF INCREASING RESPONSE
EFFECTIVENESS**

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Abstract:

It is a known fact that disasters create large humanitarian and development challenges this is why working to help individuals and communities prepare for natural disasters is a necessity to build safer and more resilient communities.

Preparing for emergency reduction should become a key part of public policy regarding disaster management by introducing programs that would ensure both individuals and communities can understand the possible causes and consequences of disasters and know the best way to act when disasters take place so that they become part of the solution rather than a part of the problem.

Key words: emergency preparedness, disaster response, disaster relief, emergency management, individual preparedness

1. Introduction

For most of known history the force of nature was the main cause of disasters from storms, to earthquakes, to floods, to wildfires, to volcanic eruptions the fury of nature spread and afflicted great suffering on human societies.

Later as human civilization evolved risks brought upon with the advent of technology brought new meanings to disasters from modern warfare, to nuclear fallout, nuclear accidents, industrial accidents, air crashes, naval accidents, to wars.

In our modern industrialized world artificial disasters are more common than in the centuries of the past and this while natural disasters have increased themselves as we are facing the effects of climatic changes.

We are also being faced today by a new form of disaster that threatens human civilization, disasters caused by terrorism that is real threat to the well-being of social and community development.

Disasters are one of the major challenges that society must learn to prepare for, to prevent and deal with swiftly and efficiently as disasters can affect each and every single one of us any time, anyhow and anywhere no matter how safe we think we are.

2. The challenges we face

The survival instinct is one of the most powerful that humans have and it made it possible for humanity to survive, reproduce and evolve. Each time disaster occur the people that are most affected are responding to the event before outside trained help from the government, NGO's or private companies arrive.

The way people in the affected community respond to crises and disasters can make a considerable difference in the relief efforts. They can either become part of the solution

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or part of the problem by acting the wrong way. Because good intentions without proper knowledge and skills are not enough.

There are also other people that want to get involved in the relief efforts but what most don't realize is that unprepared volunteers without proper training can end up by doing more harm to the relief effort than good.[1] During the 2012 massive snowfall Romanian authorities have found that aid was still coming, one month after the snowfall, to the affected communities while stockpiles of previously sent aid were still being held in improvised spaces [2]

This kind of logistical errors come to show that good intentions are not enough to really help those in need and that efficient relief measures can only be realized if there is a proper communication system that allows local communities to receive exactly the help and aid that is truly needed. Another problem that was observed by the Romanian media was that allegedly aid was given preferentially by the authorities to the victims of the disaster and if true this kind of actions can increase population frustration and distrust.[3]

This kind of problems can arise because the use of aid can be seen as an opportunity to increase the chances for reelection into public office or getting support for other political objectives by some of the people in the decision process. In their study about, *Flirting with Disaster the Inherent Problems with FEMA*, Russel S. Sobel and Peter T. Leeson claim that usually states represented on the congressional oversight committees for FEMA receive more money for disasters than the states not represented on those committees.[4]

As we can see there are challenges that have to be addressed in order to increase the effectiveness of disaster response. Encouraging the participation of communities by increasing the awareness and individual preparedness can become an important part of solving those challenges.

In past years we have seen a growing recognition of the need to involve the community more in the prevention efforts and even a growing number of situations in which volunteers were involved in the relief efforts. This involvement is possible because of reforms and the improvement of Romanian economy that allowed citizens and companies to donate more and thus we have seen a growing number of NGO's some of which have as their main objective disaster prevention and relief. Having more funds allows NGO's to equip, organize courses, training's, promote themselves so that others might join or sponsor, organize simulations for their teams and become involved in some relief efforts.

Although we can see certain improvements because of the existence of organizations that put effort, time and resources into preparing their volunteer teams there are still a lot to do when it comes to public awareness and preparedness.

Romania needs to take urgent steps when it comes to prevention for disasters but also when it comes to health issues. This urgency comes in a large extent from the massive exodus of health care providers to countries where they are better paid and equipped.

According to statistics in the last eighteen years over seventeen thousand health care providers left the country, about nine thousand doctors and eight thousand nurses. What makes things worse is that according to statistics from 2012 that means one doctor for every five hundred patients.[5]

This means that in the case of a major disaster the authorities will have to be able to move qualified medical personal quickly to the affected area. This is possible only if the population from the affected area don't block the roads and cause civil disturbance and the populations from the areas from which the medical personnel is being moved shows understanding and solidarity.

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Another problem is that level of individual preparedness in Romania is not known so we can't be sure of how well individuals will be able to handle a major disaster. What we do know is that according to research made in the US people who believe themselves "prepared" for disasters often aren't as prepared as they think. [6]

Private companies can play a major role in helping communities to cope disasters by taking necessary precautions to protect their operations in order to get back to business as fast as possible after a disaster.

Community engagement is extremely hard since there is a real need for active and efficiently organizing all the members be it professionals or volunteers. It is difficult to organize groups of people and make sure that those people can work together in a proper manner.

This is why companies can help in relief effort because they already have structure and it should be a lot easier for them to interact and work with other organizations both governmental and private then for normal individuals to start organizing themselves in the first phases of disasters.

Other major contributions that companies can have in the relief effort is bringing their unique expertise, logistics and creative way of approaching problems and thus increasing the adaptability of relief efforts.

Individual citizens could also help their community if there are mechanism that could facilitate their involvement and use them in the places where their abilities are most needed.

3. Conclusion

Because the main objective of relief work is to help the greatest number of people in the most effective way as possible stakeholders should try to involve as many resources as possible into the process in an organized well prepared fashion.

This is why preparing for emergency reduction should become a key part of public policy regarding disaster management by introducing programs that would ensure both individuals and communities can understand the possible causes and consequences of disasters and know the best way to act when disasters take place so that they become part of the solution rather than a part of the problem.

Preparation of the public therefore has a vital role in preparing communities and ensuring safer lives and more resilient societies. Emergency management programs should have a pragmatic approach centered around community and shared responsibility in which the role of the public must be increased and they should have a seat at the decision table.

The state organizations that are in charge of emergency management and the general public must plan not for what they are capable of responding to, but rather for what can really happen.

People must be encouraged to be able to take care of themselves and their communities and thus to increase the number of lives that can be saved and the reduction of negative socioeconomic effects.

This is why the number of partnerships between state institutions and private actors should be increased as well the number of public campaigns for informing and preparing the public to deal with disasters.

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Emergency management preparedness policies must change from a government-centric approach to a citizen-centric approach in which individuals, companies and communities are more involved and become part of the relief effort and overall solution.

This is why emergency management organizations must increase preparedness policies and direct them to a more inclusive approach in which both individuals and communities are more involved in the preparation and relief effort.

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