

RESPONDING TO DISASTER DURING CONFLICT: NEED FOR CHANGES IN DISASTER MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES

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ABSTRACT

Responding to conflict disasters is different from dealing with non-conflict emergencies. Getting to the scene of a conflict to assess needs and manage assistance can be impractical. Response efforts may encounter active opposition from those pursuing the conflict. The paper summarizes the current concepts of disaster management, reviews the nature of conflict disasters and identifies what distinguishes conflict from non-conflict disaster management. The paper concludes that the objectives and tasks of a disaster management organization make it part of a conflict situation. The paper proposes that assuring security, securing access and resource control are core strategies in conflict disaster management. Humanitarian assistance may contribute to prolonging a conflict. In the extreme, an agency devoted to helping disaster victims must ask itself whether it can hasten an end to hostilities and to the conflict-related disaster by withdrawing, rather than continuing to provide assistance.

INTRODUCTION

"Conflict disasters" are absorbing an increasingly large part of international disaster assistance efforts (1, 2). These disasters differ from non-conflict disasters because of the threatened or actual violence arising from the conflict. This violence makes conflict disaster management efforts more

difficult and hazardous than non-conflict disasters. Providing humanitarian assistance despite the threat of violence requires changes in the way in which disaster response is managed.

DISASTER MANAGEMENT CONCEPTS

Cuny defines disaster management as "... activities designed to maintain control over disaster and emergency situations and to provide a framework for helping at-risk persons to avoid or recover from the impact of the disaster . . ." (3). Effective disaster management occurs in a continuum covering response, recovery, prevention, mitigation, preparedness and warning periods (4). Disaster response operations focus on a quick return to a status quo ante. A disaster also provides opportunities to foster the development of an affected population and reduce vulnerability through preparedness and mitigation activities (5).

Operationally, disaster management focuses on four sets of activities: 1) Assessing who is affected, to what degree and where they are located; 2) Defining response requirements and plans; 3) Acquiring and delivering resources; and, 4) Supporting use of the resources provided.

Disaster management is time sensitive. Actions must take place within a specific time to minimize negative consequences. To be timely,

appear to be greater than in the past.

Ways of causing disaster during a conflict range from indirect (e.g., blockades) to direct (e.g., bombing). Where one side cannot secure immediate victory, a strategy to weaken the opposition through indirect or low intensity military actions can develop. This strategy uses less directly confrontational actions to create disaster conditions in an opponent's area of influence over a longer term. Core to this strategy is the denial of supplies required to sustain normal society by a restriction of commercial and relief activities, and the destruction of food supplies and infrastructure. In cases such as a besieged city or region, a selective denial of supplies may be used by those holding the city to maintain a state of disaster among potentially hostile inhabitants of the city (18).

The effects of a strategy of denial are not immediate. Targeted populations do not often live day-to-day and they have residual supplies to use in coping with shortages resulting from the conflict. As a result, conflict disasters can develop slowly as supplies are depleted, reaching a stage where dramatic events occur, such as a severe worsening of health and welfare and mass migrations.

Many conflicts occur in areas with limited in resources such as food, logistics, health care, or funds. In these areas, non-combatants can become willing or unwilling sources of resources to support a conflict. This taking of resources can also further the objective of creating disaster conditions. Assistance organizations with significant resources in a conflict area become targets for the

taking of resources.

Distinguishing the conflict and non-conflict causes of a disaster may be difficult. Conditions that constitute a disaster in times of peace may improve the effectiveness of efforts to create a disaster during a conflict. As a result, there is no real difference between dealing with conflict disasters and non-conflict disasters that may occur in an area affected by a conflict.

Anderson proposes that solving conflict disasters lies in establishing peace (19). However, establishing lasting peace is a political process that can require lengthy negotiations. Conceivably, the longer and more severe a disaster is, the better one party's negotiating position becomes. Efforts to make disaster conditions worse may increase during peace negotiations while possibilities for providing assistance become more limited.

Disaster Management During Conflict

Disaster management attempts to avoid disasters. In a conflict, at least one party tries to create disaster conditions. Despite this conflict of purpose, disaster management efforts do occur during conflicts through three mechanisms:

- 1) by consent of the conflicting parties, but only when parties expect no advantage to the opposition from the provision of assistance (20);
- 2) by force, through the use of armed forces to neutralize opposing parties; or,
- 3) as partisan support for one party in a conflict.

Ideally, providing assistance

approaches to assuring security can be considered:

1) Establish a position of force greater than the opposed parties through external or locally recruited armed personnel. This, of course, has the risk of making the assistance providers an active party to the conflict.

2) Aligning with one party in the conflict, thus making use of their security capacity for protection, however with an increased risk of violence from the opposition.

3) Operating a transparent operation where plans and decisions are approved by all parties to a conflict. This provides for a continual confirmation of unhindered assistance. However, this approach neither permits quick action nor avoids manipulation by the opposed parties by withholding approval for specific activities (31).

Choosing the best approach depends on the specific circumstances of a conflict and the willingness of those financing assistance to underwrite costs. In choosing to provide assistance, an organization may need to change its humanitarian and administrative policies to allow field personnel flexibility and latitude in delivering assistance in the most effective and least risky manner appropriate.

Securing Access

Those financing disaster response often place a particular emphasis on access to affected areas to assess needs and oversee and evaluate assistance. Access is key in verifying that aid is fairly distributed and victims are not alienated from management of the disaster continuum. Access is also key to securing financing and

popular support for assistance through visits by media and decision makers.

As the denial of access is one of the basic means of creating a conflict disaster, providing access to a conflict area poses risks for those responsible for these efforts. Thus, the strongest efforts may be made to prevent access to areas where need is greatest.

Securing adequate access to conflict areas requires the same approaches to assuring security discussed above, with the same associated problems and risks. Where direct access is not feasible, technology may provide some ability to assess needs and deliver assistance. For instance, remote sensing can provide data to assess disaster impact, aircraft can deliver limited supplies and radio broadcasts can provide information on the use and availability of relief, although at a higher cost than direct access.

However, disaster management technologies cannot replace all requirements for direct access. Using technology to overcome access problems may also be seen as giving an advantage to one side of the conflict and subject assistance providers to sanctions. Effectively dealing with access problems may require changes in an organization's policies to permit tradeoffs between accountability and the delivery of assistance to inaccessible areas suspected of requiring assistance.

Control of Resources

In resource poor areas, assistance providers can be better endowed with communications, vehicles, food, medical supplies, fuel and other resources than the other parties to the conflict. These resources may provide a means

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