

CIVIL RESPONSE: APPRAISAL AND EXPECTATIONS

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Abstract

During and immediately after disasters the public are not only victims, but they also take action to limit the consequences of the disaster for themselves and for one another. Most victims are rescued, looked after and cared for in case of disasters by ordinary members of the public and not by the professional emergency services. This is found in case histories at home and abroad. 'Traditional' professional disaster control does however seem to take little account of this. In observations, plans and exercises the independent action of the public ('civil response') is hardly mentioned and where the deployment of capacity is involved, there is usually no thought that the public themselves already take a lot of initiative. The result is that the coaches and reception centres arranged by the government remain virtually empty.

By paying more attention to the fact that the public very often take the initiative themselves, the government's sparse resources of personnel and equipment could perhaps be used more effectively. At the same time there are disadvantages associated with civil response; disadvantages in the area of safety, responsibility and liability. In this article we shall discuss the question of how 'professionals' view the phenomenon of civil response.

Introduction

In the last few years the (national) government has placed more emphasis on 'own responsibility'. The government states it cannot and does not want to look after everything and encourages the public themselves to look for solutions for problems instead of falling back on the government. This is also the case for disaster preparedness. The public are addressed about the fact that the possibilities of the government are limited in case of a disaster, and that they have their own responsibility to help themselves, their housemates and their neighbours during and immediately after a disaster. The public must, in other words, be more 'independent'. This message is among other things communicated in the 'Denk vooruit' (Think ahead) campaign of the Dutch Ministry of the Interior.

In the light of the subject of 'own responsibility', the Netherlands Institute for Safety (NIFV) in cooperation with the Fire Service of Amsterdam, has investigated how far there is or can be independent action by the public during disasters. This was done primarily on the basis of a study of literature. This study showed among other things that civil response often occurs in case of disasters, that the public take many initiatives to help themselves and one another (Oberijé 2007).

It is interesting to look at whether this finding also affects professional incident control. How do people involved professionally in incident control (such as emergency services² and

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² Note: in this article 'professional emergency services' means emergency services provided in an organised context, embodied in the formal disaster control structure, by staff who are trained and

policymakers) look at civil response? Do expectations correspond with the facts in practice? Do they take this into account in the preparedness or during the actual incident control and if so: in what way? In what areas and in what types of disasters do they expect civil response? Is their attitude to this phenomenon positive or do they see mainly disadvantages of civil response. This article will give answers to these questions.

Occurrence of civil response

As stated it was found in a literature study that civil response in case of disasters occurs on a large scale (Cf. Quarantelli & Dynes 1985; Drabek 1986; Dynes & Vierney 1994; Pearce 2003). For anyone familiar with the reality of disaster control, that will be no surprise: the public turn primarily to one another for help immediately after a disaster, since it is not possible in a short time for the government to get enough personnel and equipment resources on site to meet the total demand for help. And anyone with any historical understanding (or who has an international focus), knows that acute government aid in case of (serious) incidents in no way goes without saying. Professional emergency response to deal with fires, accidents and disasters is a relatively recent phenomenon of a modern, industrialised society. The oldest professionally organised fire service brigades in the Netherlands are less than 150 years old and until well into the twentieth century there was no system for emergency medical response; for this one was usually dependent on the chance availability of the local doctor. Only for very big incidents was there any 'professional' emergency response in the form of the army, but it took a couple of days before this emergency response was operational and this form of emergency response was usually limited to clearing up the rubble. In other words: public help was the norm, professional emergency response was (where it occurred at all) a supplement.

In the second half of the twentieth century emergency response in case of disasters, fires and accidents was further professionalised, at the same time as the arrival of the 'welfare state'. This professionalization went so far that it could easily be forgotten that in case of disasters as well as being victims, the public could also provide an 'emergency response'. The image of government and public with respect to disaster control became increasingly black and white: the distraught and senseless member of the public as fully dependent on the 'rescuing' government.

With this statement we come to what some researchers call the 'myths' about the alleged behaviour of the public. The research of Starmans and Oberijé shows that the way in which one often talks about the (alleged) behaviour of the public in case of disasters, does not correspond to the facts. These myths are: 'people get into a panic, people are apathetic and adopt a dependent attitude and looting takes place' (p. 4). These are called myths because they are persistent stories repeated like a mantra every time a disaster occurs. And time and again these stories are found to have no foundation in the truth. The great majority of people do not panic, do not adopt a dependent attitude and do not go looting. In fact during and immediately after a disaster people behave extraordinarily rationally and socially.

Based on the literature study it is found that there is a discrepancy between the way in which people talk and write about the (alleged) behaviour of the public and the way in which the public actually behave. The literature study and the study into case history did not however answer the question of whether this discrepancy also applies for professionals and what that means for the preparedness and the practice of disaster control. To be able to answer the questions that relate to this a follow-up survey was carried out .

Method

In order to find out how professionals look at civil response, the NIFV conducted an Internet survey and a series of interviews. The survey consisted of an extensive questionnaire that respondents could fill in on-line. The questionnaire contained some 40 multiple-choice

instructed for this. This does of course include the voluntary (or 'part-time') fire service. The Red Cross too in fact, although the Red Cross falls outside the scope of this survey.

questions. Depending on the respondents' background they were asked to fill in the questionnaire in full or in part. The questions arose from the survey questions formulated in the introduction and were about expectations with regard to civil response, about any experience with civil response, about ideas of how you could deploy and direct the responding public and about the positive or negative evaluation of civil response.³ The questions were drawn up in conjunction with a group of content experts and experts in the field of setting up on-line surveys. Some 600 municipalities, fire service brigades, police forces, regional medical officers, water boards, provinces and Ministries were approached in writing in the summer of 2007 with the request to complete the survey on the Internet. In response to this mailing some 330 respondents completed the survey. The respondents were evenly divided between the different relevant parties.

The answers received were statistically analysed. Interviews were held with 15 respondents after the survey to ask a few deeper questions and to check that the respondents had understood the questions as they were intended. Based on the analysis of the survey results and based on these interviews a number of conclusions were drawn about how emergency services, planners and policy makers look at civil response. These conclusions will be discussed further below.

Evaluation and expectations

For adequate incident control it is important that parties that play a part in the incident control or in the preparedness for it have a realistic picture of a (possible) incident and of the possible problems and points for attention that go with the control of the consequences of that incident. Only with a realistic picture can a realistic estimate be made of where the (by definition scarce) capacity can best be deployed. Risk and crisis communication from the government must also be carried out on the basis of realistic pictures: we expect that this or that may happen, and we expect that we can do this or that to limit the consequences. And at the same time: we expect the public will do this or that. Good crisis management stands or falls with realistic expectations.

As stated it seems that to date civil response has hardly formed part of these expectations. Or at least: the subject has hardly come up in the different training courses and publications relating to crisis management. The curriculum of the training as a fire service officer, for example, pays no attention to it and in disaster exercises ordinary members of the public play hardly any significant role, or only as helpless victims, who usually behave in accordance with the (one-sided) stereotype picture: apathetic, dependent and sometimes present in an inconvenient way. The fact that there are also many members of the public who constructively put their shoulder to the wheel (and often long before the professional emergency services comes on the scene), is virtually never seen in these 'realistic' exercises. But that is in fact the reality.

Based on the fact that training and exercises create a picture of the behaviour of the public during and just after a disaster that is not very realistic, it cannot be concluded that professionals *therefore* have a massively unrealistic picture of civil response or that they view civil response in a negative light. Presumably these professionals will base their understanding on more things than those that they learn in exercises and training. The survey conducted does in fact show that the respondents overwhelmingly value civil response positively. As many as 87% of the respondents stated they are positive about the phenomenon of civil response. Only 2% stated here that they were negative about this and 11% had a neutral attitude with regard to the phenomenon. At the same time many respondents (79%) stated they expected civil response to happen frequently. Based on the previously mentioned case and literature studies such a high evaluation and high expectation was not anticipated.

In follow-up questions in the survey and in-depth interviews with 15 respondents the question was examined of why they have a positive, neutral or negative view of civil response. In particular it emerged from the interviews that many respondents had never before been so

³ The survey report will be available in the near future on the website of the NIFV: www.nifv.nl.

consciously involved in this subject and that the survey and the interview was the first incentive for them to think consciously about this subject.

Expectations and practice

The survey did not only go into the question of *whether* respondents expect civil response to frequently occur, but also in what situations or during what activities they take civil response into account. Some respondents stated they themselves had practical experience with civil response. We asked these respondents to state in what situations that was and what actions the public had taken in them. For the classification of situations (disaster types) and activities (disaster control processes) use was made of the classification that has been used in the last few years for the planned preparedness for disasters and serious incidents and which is described in the *Disaster Control Preparedness Manual (Handboek voorbereiding rampenbestrijding)* that is published by the Ministry of the Interior (BZK 2003).

We compared respondents' expectations with what respondents report from their own experience. We then looked at what the differences and agreements are with what we have found literature. A few things are striking in this comparison.

First of all respondents seem to expect civil response more frequently for certain types of disaster than for other types of disaster. The disaster types 'flooding' and 'extreme weather conditions' are linked appreciably more often with civil response than other disaster types. The expectation that civil response will occur most for these two disaster types is supported by data on respondents' experiences and the case histories examined. But the practical figures at the same time give a more nuanced picture: in virtually all disaster types civil response is reported. The only disaster type for which we found no reports of civil response is the 'nuclear accidents' disaster type, but that may be to do with the small number of (recent) cases in the Netherlands relating to this disaster type.

We found a similar picture for the question of relating civil response to the 25 disaster control processes from the *Disaster Control Preparedness Manual*. The question was asked here 'for what disaster control process do you expect civil response?'. The respondents could state for each disaster control process whether they expect no, little or a lot of civil response (see Table 1). The expectations – just like the disaster types – were not evenly distributed. The processes 'reception and care' and 'providing primary necessities of life' stood out head and shoulders above the rest. This was also found to correspond with practice: these processes do in fact seem to be processes where a lot of civil response occurs. But the practical data also show that civil response also occurs within other processes. It appears from the respondents' experience, but also from the case histories studied, that civil response occurs for *all the* processes, including processes that perhaps are less obvious such as the 'criminal investigation' process. The following table shows for each disaster control process what percentage of the respondents state they expect no or hardly any civil response in that process (column 2) and what percentage of the respondents expect some, a lot or quite a lot⁴ of civil response in that process (column 3)⁵. Some respondents stated that in case of actual incidents they themselves had been involved with the participating public. We asked these respondents to classify the actions of the responding public in the disaster control processes. The far right column shows the number of times that these 'experienced experts' came across civil response in the relevant process.

⁴ For clarity purposes in the Table here the categories 'some', 'a lot' and 'quite a lot' have been added together and not shown separately.

⁵ Note that the percentages added together do not total 100 %. This is because respondents also had the option to answer 'don't know'.

process	expectation (%)		number of experiences respondents
	no/hardly any	some / quite a lot	
Fire fighting and emission of hazardous substances	85	9	12
Rescue and technical assistance	57	36	17
Decontamination of people and animals	73	19	3
Decontamination of vehicles and infrastructure	76	16	4
Observation and measurement	81	11	5
Warning the population	44	51	15
Providing access and clearing up	29	66	25
Medical assistance somatic	65	27	7
Preventive public healthcare (including collection of contaminated goods)	76	17	4
Medical assistance psychosocial	62	31	11
Clearing and evacuating	31	65	35
Fencing off and protecting	50	45	27
Controlling traffic	48	47	23
Maintaining public order	79	15	6
Identifying victims	75	19	3
Guiding	45	50	15
Criminal investigation	90	3	1
Advising and informing	64	30	11
Reception and care	13	83	61
Funeral arrangements	67	26	1
Registering victims	67	19	9
Providing primary necessities of life	16	80	17
Registering and handling claims	62	32	4
Environmental protection	78	14	1
Aftercare	40	54	19

Table 1: expectations and practical experience per process

Handling civil response

Although respondents in the majority stated that they see civil response as something positive, and although the respondents also expect that civil response will occur a lot, civil response is not a subject that receives a lot of attention in incident preparedness. Only slightly more than half of the respondents state that this is discussed 'in a general sense'. Only 12% stated that civil response was a subject that is explicitly mentioned in plans and policy documents. A quarter of the respondents state that this subject did come up a number of times and more than half state that the subject did not come up at all in their organisation in plans and policy documents.

The question is now then whether the mention of civil response in planning is something to be aimed for. Some respondents doubt whether civil response can be planned for, since by definition it is a fickle and intangible phenomenon. This pitfall has been called 'plan fixation' since the critical report of the National Crisis Control Consultation (Landelijk Beraad Crisisbeheersing) from 2006: you must not want to set *everything* down in plans, because you then run the risk of creating a 'paper reality'. Instead of this you must ensure that you can respond flexibly to whatever happens. Other respondents are of the opinion that in principle it is wrong for the government to shift its responsibility onto the public and that as the government you must not wildly assume that your own capacity problem will be solved by the public. But apart from the fact that some professionals have reasons for not mentioning civil response in plan formation, it is not a subject to which a lot of explicit attention is paid in organisations. In view of the importance that respondents themselves attach to the subject that is paradoxical at the very least.

We asked the respondents who themselves have had experience of civil response in their professional practice how they responded to the participating public. Virtually none of these 'practical experts' stated they had tried to prevent, curb or discourage civil response. The reasons given for allowing civil response are very diverse. Most respondents also gave several reasons (hence the separate percentages work out at more than 100 %). Many respondents gave the reason that the public were able to take pressure off the professional emergency services (69%). Another reason given was that civil response is good for the morale of the public (52%), the morale of the victims (30%) and/or the morale of the professional emergency services (15%). The public were also found to have specific knowledge or skills, which may be a reason for permitting or encouraging civil response (39%). A small proportion of the respondents (15%) stated that it simply took too much trouble (or capacity) to prevent civil response.

Finally some of the respondents are concerned about the safety of the participating public. Although the picture emerged that civil response largely occurs spontaneously, without the participating public allowing themselves to be properly directed by the (official) emergency services, a number of respondents state they still feel responsible for the safety of the participating public. It is not felt acceptable for the public to run too great a danger because of their goodwill and readiness to help. At such a time the professionals must intervene and send the public away for their own safety. Interviews showed that respondents see this as a 'moral duty'. At the same time some respondents are concerned about the legal aspects of allowing the public to participate in incident control. Who is liable if the participating public are injured or if additional damage occurs due to the action of the participating public, is a relevant but unanswered question for some respondents.

Observation

Professionals in the great majority attach high value to the fact that the public go into action in case of an incident. Furthermore they expect that the public *will* also often take action.

On the question of whether respondents' expectations with regard to civil response in practice correspond with the facts, it can be stated that this is partly the case, but that the expectations can be further nuanced. Respondents state above all that they expect civil response in the processes of 'reception and care' and 'providing primary necessities of life' and for the disaster types 'flooding' and 'extreme weather conditions'. Practical data do however show

that civil response takes many more forms than respondents think: it occurs in virtually all types of incidents and for virtually all sorts of operations ('processes).

The third survey question discussed in this article was about the extent to which professionals take into account civil response when preparing for incidents and in the actual incident control. Despite the fact that respondents value civil response highly and also have high expectations of it, very few respondents state that this is taken into account in preparing for incidents. The majority of respondents do state that they will respond positively to civil response during the actual incident control.

In addition to answers, this survey also raises new questions. These questions concern above all the practical and legal side of civil response and concern above all the question of the legal liability and the legal and moral responsibility of professionals for the participating public. These questions also concern *in what way* the incident control can take into account civil response. Rules of thumb relating to the amount of civil response that can be expected, for example, are unfortunately lacking. These rules of thumb would give professionals something to go by in the preparedness for and control of incidents. Perhaps these rules of thumb could be developed in a follow-up to this survey and some legal guidance also be given about how to deal with responsibility and liability relating to the participating public.

Finally this survey produced a recommendation. Namely: if you are convinced that civil response will often occur in case of disasters and large-scale incidents, then anticipate this in incident preparedness and pay attention to it in training and exercises. Only in this way can this preparedness be realistic.

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