



THE EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE: A PERSPECTIVE BASED ON JAFFNA DISTRICT

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Abstract

There have been many emergency conditions for people living in the Jaffna District and most of them have resulted in internal and external displacement. A significant number of displaced people tended to remain with friends and relatives and to shelter under roofless buildings and trees in communal areas such as schools, churches, community centers. Generally, in Sri Lanka, as people seek refuge, welfare devices are triggered by the actors involved. The preparedness tools available are, however, open to discussion and the views of the parties participating in the emergency preparedness and response programmes remain unfocused. Therefore, the key purpose of this research is to analyze respondents' expectations of the efficacy of current emergency preparedness and response systems. This study explores the different aspects in which emergency preparedness and response are applied in the Jaffna district and how effective they are. For this reason, the opinion of the respondents on the emergency preparedness processes established by governmental and non-governmental actors is specifically scrutinized. In order to create a more detailed idea about the phenomenon, the role of administrative, political, social and environmental elements would be discussed.

Key words: *emergency preparedness, effectiveness, challenges, Jaffna District.*

Introduction

By being prepared, the safest way to ensure a successful emergency response is. Among developed countries, the mechanism of emergency preparedness and response is very common, but less so in developing countries. Emergency preparedness may be characterized as preparing and taking steps to ensure that the appropriate resources are available to address unforeseen emergency needs in a timely manner and that the resource utilization capability is in place. The scope of emergency preparedness is vast and the operations at that point should be carried out at the global, regional and national level (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] 2007). The UN manages a number of stand-by emergency management services centrally at the global level (determined by past experience in emergencies). These provide funding for workers, human and economic capital, products of organizational support, facilities and a centrally controlled disaster stockpile (Bryan, 2006).

Theoretical background to disaster preparedness and response

From several different viewpoints, emergency awareness and preparedness can be measured. Some of these viewpoints are discussed in the literature and include advice about the need to plan for various forms of disasters, such as terrorist threats, natural disasters, and house fires. In their risk evaluation, Pielke et al (2005) stressed the value of disaster preparedness. "From the point of view of providing relevant information to the process of reducing the vulnerability of a specific community, it is important... Vulnerability Assessment is also essential to the process of effective allocation of scarce resources in this area". The effective protection of communities hit by population growth disasters, mainly new homes that have not lived through such storms may underestimate the value of planning and/or fail to comply with evacuation orders. Furthermore, population growth creates traffic congestion that delays evacuation efforts, thus negating the benefits of improved forecasts of storm routes. Others understand the need for disaster preparedness and emphasize the need to plan for disaster preparedness and to create awareness. Despite the fact that much of the literature deals with preparedness, it should not be forgotten that knowledge has to come first (Spence, Patric, Kenneth & Jennifer, 2011).

A consistent inadequacy of household preparedness for predictable and frequently occurring hazards was found in a study of floods and tropical cyclones in relation to emergency preparedness. Many individuals were discovered to be new to the region and ignorant of the severity of natural hazards. Although most community members had an understanding of the seriousness, showing that public awareness efforts had been effective, there were several misconceptions about proper planning. The study concluded that specific and tailored education could help prepare a community for such predictable threats, thus reducing the loss of life and property. From the standpoint of public-nonprofit corporate collaborations, Kapucu (2006) takes a specific viewpoint on preparedness. In order to provide better service to the communities they represent during an emergency situation, Kapucu researched collaboration between public and charitable organizations and what these organizations can do to be more effective. Kapucu concludes that the responsibility for disaster response and preparedness is not the sole duty of the government, but that everyone must participate and establish a plan for efficient response and preparedness through the networking of several different types of organizations (McEntire, 2002). Local public service and non-profit agencies have a closer and vested interest in the neighborhood they represent, because they have a sense of the local community's pulse, in the case of an emergency, these local organizations may offer valuable intelligent assistance to larger organizations to handle the community with a culture of quick and targeted preparedness that makes the difference. Each society has its own distinctive demographic composition and numerous vulnerabilities that must be resolved first when a catastrophe occurs.

There are special needs for populations vulnerable prior to a disaster that must be met immediately following a disaster. In the response cycle, previous experience produces higher levels of preparedness and more productive results, primarily because it contributes to greater understanding of the effects of disasters and the demands that disasters create. Adaptation and preparation are evidently carried out as a result of participation in emergency situations, so that risks are taken more seriously and the tasks and procedures required are carried out more efficiently in subsequent crises. Many studies have shown that familiarity with actual accidents has a generally positive effect on the ability to plan for future disasters at the individual and household level (Mileti, 1999). The literature indicates that the more exposed a person, household, and organization has been exposed to disasters, the more preparedness they appear to be, preparedness has a direct connection to the degree of experience. The disparities between ethnic minorities and how preparedness is viewed are also discussed by Mileti (1999), and the fact that they are looking for information in different places than the general population. Racial and ethnic disparities affect how information about danger information is accessed by minority groups. Minority groups often tend to interpret knowledge with a degree of skepticism, as well as to engage with various community-based organizations that contribute to different information.

The reality / Ground view in the study area

Many avoidable catastrophic accidents arise during an emergency because of the lack of availability of a back-up plan on board. A crisis situation has continued in Sri Lanka for more than three decades; multiple conflict crises and natural disaster conditions have been faced, resulting in major internal displacements and emergency reactions. In fact, such emergency scenarios put immense pressure on stakeholders to manage the response. There have been several violence emergencies in the Jaffna area, resulting in deaths and casualties that would have been prevented if a proper emergency preparedness and response plan had been in effect. In several situations, there has been a lack of preparation for appropriate emergency response throughout the world. The majority of people in Jaffna usually accept that the scope for change is very urgent (Sivarajah, 2007).

How do people in Jaffna cope when an emergency occurs?

A massive displacement took place and 500,000 people were evicted from Valikamam in 1995 due to a military operation called "Sun Shine"; 50% of the people stayed with host families and the rest in the temporary accommodation centres. On 26th of December, 2004, the Tsunami disaster also created an emergency situation all over the county and people resorted to temples, churches, schools, community centres, host families, empty lands and trees. On 11th

of August, 2006, a conflict situation in Jaffna caused internal displacement of 100,000 people and they were hosted in schools, as the students were on vacation (Regional Director of Health Service office [RDHS] 2008).

Presently, in Jaffna district there is no system for preparedness in place but the government machinery is usually activated all over suddenly and many responses are organized after a disaster has occurred. Generally, people affected by conflict and other disasters become vulnerable to the situation. Especially, the issues of landowners were very serious in some places which do not allow displaced populations to set up a temporary place to stay in or agencies to provide their support to the affected people and the non-displaced community often wanted to reopen the schools (Paramsothy, 2009). About 30% of the population of Internally Displaced Persons of Jaffna still remain in the welfare camps; refugee life in the IDPs camps is appearing often and occurs continuously (Jaffna District Secretariat, 2008).

The problem statement and main objective of the study

Emergency preparedness is meant to ensure that the required services are ready in order to address unforeseen emergency needs and that the resource utilization capability is in place (The Sphere Project, 2004). In order to determine whether or not an effective emergency response is actually in place, studying the status of emergency preparedness and response in Jaffna is essential. In October 2007, the Ministry of Resettlement and Disaster Relief Services published Circular No NDRSC/2007/10 which provides some basic ideas on Sri Lankan emergency preparedness and response. The circular under the heading 'Disaster Response and Recovery Activities Provision of Relief' specifies the activities to be performed (Ministry of Resettlement and Disaster Relief Services, 2007). However, no documents indicate that the government has a contingency plan in place that could be implemented/ exercised promptly during an emergency. This study would, therefore, reveal the actual disaster management situation in the Jaffna District.

Method and materials

The study was a qualitative one using in-depth interviews conducted with different stakeholders working at the community level. Participants in the study included relevant government officials, public health providers, and experts from the non-governmental sector and selected key individuals/volunteers who usually play a central role in disaster situations in the Jaffna District. The aim of this study was to investigate the emergency preparedness and response to flood events at all levels in the Jaffna District, as well as their overall disaster preparedness.

The bulk of this paper is based on empirical material collected during a series of interviews, in addition to a brief literature review. A total of 30 participants were interviewed in Tamil, which is their mother language, for this reason.

Therefore, an equal number of male and female participants were selected through snowball sampling and a gender balance was considered. For the study, free-willed participants were recruited without any preconditions or compulsion (Link, Albert, Siegel & Barry, 2017). The questions posed to interviewees were open-ended in order to collect a full range of viewpoints, rich in subtleties. Questions were framed around the following major themes:

- a. The key issues faced during different disasters such as political influence and local issues
- b. Views on the role of state actors and non-state actors' contribution/support
- c. Opinions on challenges in incorporating indigenous knowledge of women
- d. Opinions on the recognition/appreciation they enjoy for their contributions
- e. Opinion on the expertise and training
- f. Potential recommendations

Ethical concerns of the study

Participants who signed a consent form obtained official permission for the study. In the Tamil language, a plain language declaration was prepared and read for them. The parameters, the purpose of the analysis, were specifically spelled out by the participants, and the author assured that confidentiality would be preserved and that data gathered from them would be kept confidential. They also received an explanation that it was appropriate for them to cancel their participation in the research at any point without any detrimental repercussions (Vanclay, Baines, & Taylor, 2013). The author guaranteed that the autonomy and anonymity of the participants would be upheld. Before and after the data collection period, the scientist was continuously vigilant about whether or not the research procedures are likely to cause any damage to the subjects. Via data collection, review and distribution of the results process, ethical guidelines were prepared to govern professional conduct to ensure this (Walker, 2007).

Discussion on identified challenges

Political influence and its implications for the disaster response

It would be understandable that: Failure to consider the diverse needs of disadvantaged groups and their challenges to fair access to sufficient resources and support to contribute to more marginalization or even denial of critical assistance. There is no provision of information to disaster-affected communities about their entitlement to assistance and the means of receiving said assistance. These two major obstacles were viewed as problems in obtaining assistance and resources offered to families impacted by the disaster.

The willingness of GOs and NGOs to meet minimum expectations depends on a number of factors, some of which are outside their influence, while others are beyond their limits, such as political and security factors. For political purposes, government departments operating in the Northern Provinces are deprived of

financial and material supplies from the central government. During and after the distribution of facilities, the respondents were highly worried about excessive regulatory and political interventions.

Government is unable to guarantee that after crises, the prompt influx of relief supplies and services into the country continues purely for the purpose of alleviating human distress, not for economic advantage or benefit. Such materials are not usually permitted to travel easily and without limitation and are subject to the provisions of consular certificates of origin or invoices, as well as to taxes. Sri Lanka is well known for the misuse of authority during and in the wake of disasters by politically controlled and corporate communities for their personal benefit. Political considerations can often play a key role in welcoming and providing the affected areas with foreign relief resources.

The receiving host government should promote the temporary importation of essential relief supplies, including vehicles and telecommunications equipment, but this responsibility rests much of the time with the aid agencies. There is no system in place for the import into Sri Lanka of instruments used for correspondence purposes. This might also contribute to needless delays in securing the needed planning and rescue supplies. Governors and the Army Chiefs of their regions are expected to receive official permission from the organizations that deal with affected communities. While the aid agencies are mandated by the ministries involved, it is assumed that the governor and the army chief in charge of the respective areas will receive formal approval. This process results in unprecedented delays in emergency operations.

Implications of the caste in the affected communities

When people belonging to different castes stay together in a common place, it creates additional problems among the affected communities. The people representing higher castes like cultivators and fishermen (Vellala & Karaiyaar) in Jaffna peninsula used their caste to demand more privileges while they were in camps. Quarrels and confrontations have erupted between ordinary (underprivileged) people and families / relatives of higher officials and politicians. These disputes also resulted in tense situations between different castes or politicians representing those sectors even after they went back to their place of origin.

Involvement of non-ruling party members in rescue and relief activities creates a tense situation between the service providers and their commanding chiefs. For instance, if members of non-ruling parties or opposition intend to extend any material or physical support, the affected communities would be pressured to rebuff it. Otherwise, they would not intentionally accept any form of support provided by non-ruling party members due to fear of reprisal.

Overlooked women's indigenous knowledge

The crucial role played by women in disaster-prone communities is not recognized and supported, and is diminished by the aid programmes. It is widely accepted that Jaffnese women are more prudent and trained in preventing their households from starving. They are well-informed about food preservation and keep their households prepared to face any adverse situation during natural or man-made phenomena like floods, dry weather, spreading diseases or displacements. Their home-grown knowledge on preservation of food subsidiary, indigenous medicines, preparing attires for different seasons, livestock protection, safety of drinking water, and prevention of the spread of diseases are simply ignored and unfamiliar techniques are introduced and imposed by the aiding agencies. Very basic facilities like toilets and bathing places were not located to cater to the needs of all sections of affected communities. Toilets were designed in such a way that they cannot be used by all sections; women and girls, especially, faced difficulties in using toilets. They are sited in such a way as to maximize threats to users. Providing women with the necessary privacy for washing and drying sanitary protection cloths throughout the day and night is a challenge.

Lack of recognition to NGOs

NGOs do not usually have the mandate to provide the overall coordinating framework for disasters, which requires an international response (they are not given the due respect but are expected to work with government officials). The NGOs are obliged to be submissive to the government officials and politicians. While services are rendered, political interference and the personal agenda of politicians are preferred. Disaster-affected communities are not encouraged to actively participate in the assessment, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of programmes. The officials and some of the helping entities are merely interested in implementing programmes which would satisfy the mandates of donors.

Inattentiveness of stakeholders

Removal and disposal of human waste was not carried out in a timely manner and it caused many health issues. Solid waste often blocks drainage channels and leads to environmental health problems associated with stagnated and polluted surface water. Vector-borne diseases (by houseflies and mosquitoes) are the major causes of sickness and death in many disaster situations in the northern region. Vector-borne diseases like diarrheal disease, jaundice and dengue hemorrhagic fever are commonly found in camps and 600 deaths were reported in 2009 during the Eelam war (Sivaraja. 2007) .

The design of the shelter is not acceptable and sufficient thermal comfort, fresh air and protection from the climate to ensure their dignity, health, safety and

well-being are not in place. People have no access to a combination of blankets, bedding or sleeping mats to provide thermal comfort and to enable separate sleeping arrangements as required. Access to at least one full set of clothing in the correct size, appropriate to the culture, season and climate. Women often find difficulties in getting dresses with under-garments in appropriate size and shape.

Lack of training and expertise

Humanitarian agencies face challenges in ensuring that their staff are qualified and prepared, before assigning them to an emergency situation. During the tsunami, it was found that most of the employees deployed in psychological first aid were untrained and culturally insensitive. This led to aggravation of existing psychological pain. A gender balance among staff and volunteers is not maintained. Employees are not made aware of the extent to which crimes of violence, including sexual violence and other forms of brutality against women, girls and boys, can increase during times of crisis / emergency.

The knowledge, practice and resources of hygiene promotion of people and agencies are not intermingled to avoid risky hygiene behaviors. Safe and equitable access to a sufficient quantity of water for drinking, cooking and personal and domestic hygiene is not ensured. In most cases, the main health problems are caused by poor hygiene due to insufficient water and by the consumption of contaminated water.

Mechanisms for practical preparedness and response

The following suggestions are made on the basis of the aforementioned discussions in favor of Sri Lanka's preparedness and rescue services and initiatives:

- a) Incorporation of emergency preparedness at the household level: each and every household should be considered as a programme is being planned. Indigenous cultural awareness, in particular local women's knowledge of food security, disease prevention or management, pest control and cleanliness of the environment, should be integrated.
- b) Sector cooperation: coordination should take place between sectors responsible for various activities, including health provision, water supply, sewage, irrigation, accommodation and recreational facilities.
- c) Divisional level and district level cooperation: coordination between divisional and district level agencies should be encouraged in order to make programmes of preparedness and rescue more successful. Respondents have indicated that meetings to exchange expertise and experience between these two tiers of departments should be held on a regular basis.

- d) Information building: workers at the grassroots and administrative level should be given chances to develop their knowledge and management ability to carry out their duties more effectively.
- e) Budgetary provisions: appropriate funds should be provided from the annual budget to upgrade the quality of emergency services. For educational and capacity-building projects, this allocation may be used. Participant selection for educational and refresher courses should be made on the basis of the organization's objectives and political influence or nepotism should be prevented.
- f) Emergency item pre-positioning: Stakeholders should be able to ensure that the required items are secured and easily accessible for emergency purposes. The appropriate officials should take the required measures to coordinate with the parties involved to ensure that the delivery of materials is uninterrupted. It is important to foster a favorable external, internal and systemic environment: it is essential that both the ruling and opposition parties retain a respectable political culture. This would be beneficial to develop the services for help. To mitigate unrest between party representatives and the electorate, mere co-operation between political parties will be necessary.
- g) Regulation development: appropriate measures to ensure that an effective and robust emergency response programme is in place should be formulated. During policy development, technical assistance and expertise can be integrated into policy making aspects.

Conclusion

Communities overwhelmed by different kinds of disasters in Jaffna typically require national or international long-term assistance in order to recover and restore their normal lives. It will build their capacity to cope with future disasters by exposing the disaster-prone population to realistic disaster preparedness activities. This can be achieved by reviewing prior experiences, performing risk assessments and establishing strategies for disaster preparedness. A well-organized group can also help improve the consistency of external assistance and prevent common challenges, such as inadequate assistance due to a lack of knowledge on the external resources necessary. For a long time, maybe even a lifetime, the emotional damage from disasters can continue. Returning to normal life, however, as it allows individuals to work better as soon as possible than if the recovery were protracted.

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