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Catastrophic Events

Can we really plan for them?

The past two months have seen four major disasters in the United States, several of which could be classified as catastrophic because of the severe effect on a large number of victims.

The problem is we don't always distinguish between disasters and catastrophes. There is a subtle difference that may not always be apparent but failing to recognize this difference can affect our response.

Disaster vs. Catastrophe

In most disasters, communities are affected unevenly and there are usually some resources that can be applied to the disaster victims. Local government is still in place to provide direction and mutual aid resources from surrounding communities can be requested.

In his paper, *Catastrophes Are Different from Disasters: Some Implications for Crisis Planning and Managing Drawn from Katrina*, Dr. E.L. Quarantelli suggests is that the normal systems on which we rely in disasters, e.g. command and control, mutual aid, local resources, are no longer available as an event increases in complexity. Quarantelli identifies four organizational differences between disaster and catastrophe:

1. Increased number of converging agencies, many of whom may be unfamiliar.
2. Adjustments for loss of autonomy and freedom of action.
3. Different performance standards.
4. Closer public/private sector interface.

Quarantelli further identifies six general differences:

1. Heavy impact on community-built structure.
2. Local officials unable to perform their roles.
3. Normal mutual aid is not available.
4. Most or all community functions interrupted.
5. More and longer coverage by the news media.
6. Political arena becomes more important and must move beyond mere symbolism.

This suggests a need for a fundamental shift in our response to catastrophes. We normally recognize the autonomy of local government and react to requests for assistance. There are several good reasons for this system. Social science research has shown that one of the problems faced by local jurisdiction involved in disaster is the inability to scale up operations to manage a large influx of resources.

It makes sense, therefore, for the local jurisdiction to control the flow of resources into the affected area

Our current system assumes that local government is able to assess the situation and determine needed resources. If the local government is incapable of doing this, the system collapses and there is a need to switch to a push rather than a pull system. This means that decisions about resources may need to be made outside the affected area and without local input.

Unfortunately, it's not quite so clean cut. While it's generally agreed that Hurricane Katrina was a catastrophe, the local government in New Orleans was still very much in existence, although its capacity to assess damage and manage resources was severely diminished. The same can be said of the government in Puerto Rico. Nevertheless, in both cases the local government retained control of the relief operations.

So long as we argue over who is in charge, we are doomed to continue to make mistakes in resource allocation. What we need is a single system that can react quickly to change. We don't need to distinguish between disaster and catastrophe per se but we do need to be able to react when local government cannot provide sufficient direction to relief operations.

Planning for Catastrophe

Response to catastrophe means making some fundamental shifts to our traditional planning.

1. **Use Scenario-based Planning:** We use all-hazards planning to prepare for a wide range of hazards. However, when planning for catastrophes, it makes sense to consider a scenario-based planning. The number of

potential catastrophic events is finite and we can accumulate sufficient data on which to base our planning assumptions.

2. **Adopt an External Perspective:** There really is no such thing as a "local catastrophic response plan". Catastrophes are regional events that require regional planning solutions. This means that at the local level, a catastrophic plan must look externally rather than internally. That is, we should be planning not for local community response but rather for how we can support a region affected by a complex event. Our planning should consider not only resources that can be deployed to the affected area but also the fact that the local community itself might become a potential resource.
3. **Reconstitute Local Government:** Another issue that we have yet to address is how we deal with an incapacitated local government. In my book, [Emergency Management: Concepts and Strategies for Effective Programs](#), I discuss the use of an Incident Management Team in Jackson County, Mississippi during Hurricane Katrina to provide assistance to local government. This method of shoring up or rapidly reconstituting local government is in many ways more attractive than the idea of shifting control from the local government to a Federal Unified Command.

Planning for catastrophe requires that we rethink our traditional way of providing relief. We need to recognize that catastrophes are part of a spectrum of increased complexity to which we must be able to adapt. As the complexity of an event increases we must be able to adapt to a more external base system that pushes resources that include those needed to reconstitute local capabilities. 