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Both the local authorities and central government have roles and responsibilities in responding to crises and disaster situations. However, several catastrophic crises and disaster events over the past decades have casted doubts on the effectiveness of central governments in responding to crises and disaster situations. As such, some scholars and practitioners seem to be suggesting that the central governments should surrender the tasks of responding to crises and disasters to the local authorities. This essay will argue that while local authorities might be in a better position to respond to small and medium scale crises and disaster events, effective response to mega crises and disaster events requires coordination and collaboration among different stakeholders at local and central government levels.

The essay will analyze two case studies: The 2005 Hurricane Katrina in the USA and the 1995 Kobe Earthquake in Japan and demonstrate that while local authorities and central government have limitations to respond to highly catastrophic disaster situations, They both have unique role to play during disaster situations. As such effective response to highly catastrophic disasters requires better coordination and collaboration between different levels of government. To explore this topic more concretely, the essay will be divided in four sections as follows: Introduction; definition of key terminologies and concepts; the analytical section and the conclusion.

Definition of terminologies

The important terms and concepts in this essay that need to be defined include: ‘ crises’ and ‘ disasters’, response, local authorities and central government. The liturgy of crises and disaster is either not defined adequately or even distinguished from each other (Borodzicz [2005] cited in Module 1, unit 2: 2. 5). It is suggested that a failure to distinguish between crises and disasters raises questions about the validity of any synthesis between theory and practice (Module 1, unit 2). Some theorists have therefore attempted to define crisis by distinguishing it from a disaster. Heinzen [1996] and Goemans [1992] cited in module 1, unit 2 offered an argument that while crises are ill-structured situations both in terms of technical, social and cultural contexts, disasters are the irreversible and typically overwhelming result of ill handling of emergencies and crises (Module1 unit 2: 2-11). In line with the foregoing argument, crisis could be seen as an ‘ actual accident’, or a ‘ scare’ which has shaken public confidence. Therefore, crisis may present either a possibility of failure or success (Module 6, unit 4: 4-3). However, in this essay, the terms ‘ crisis’ and ‘ disaster’ are going to be used synonymously.

In a review of crisis management literature, twenty-eight different definitions of crisis can be found (Module 1, Unit 2: 2. 5). Rosenthal in 1989 defined crisis as a serious threat to the basic structure or the funder mental values and norms of a system, which under time pressure and highly uncertain circumstances necessitates making critical decisions (Rosenthal, Boin and Comfort, 2001: 6).

The above definition underscore four important characteristics of crisis: first, crisis are typically defined in terms of severe threat; secondly, crisis are characterized by a high degree of uncertainty; thirdly crisis induce a sense of urgency; and lastly crisis are culturally and politically defined events that contain level of conflict and arouse strong emotional response.

Quarentelli, one of the most prominent scholars in disaster sociology once admitted that he has struggled with how to define and conceptualize the term “ disaster” for more than four decades (Rosenthal, 1998). In his book, “ What is a disaster?” Quarantelli asked five researchers with different social science background (Gilbert, Dombrowsky, Kreps, Porfiriev and Horlick-Jones) to define the term disaster. Unsurprisingly, all the scholars defined disasters differently (Rosenthal, 1998). For instance, Kreps defined disasters as: “ non-routine events in societies or their larger subsystems (e. g. regions, communities) that involve social disruption or physical harm” (Kreps, 1998: 34).

A classical definition of disaster was coined in 1961 by a U. S pioneer of disaster research, Fritz:

Actual or threatened accidental or uncontrollable events that are concentrated in time and space, in which a society, or a relatively self-sufficient sub-division of a society undergoes severe danger, and incurs such losses to its members and physical appurtenances that the social structure is disrupted and the fulfillment of all or some of the essential functions of the society, or its sub-division is prevented

Fritz [1961: 655] quoted in Fischer, 1989: 2-3).

According to some scholars, Fritz’s definition of disaster has stood the test of time very well (Kreps 1988).

Nonetheless, whatever the classic definition of crises and disaster, they are bound to vary substantially in the foreign dictionaries reflecting for the particular country and the specifics of the culture and the language of each nation (Porfiriev, 1998). However, for the purposes of convenience, the terms ‘ crisis’ and ‘ disaster’ are going to be used synonymously throughout this essay.

Researchers divide disaster agents into two categories: Technological or human-made disasters and natural disasters (Fischer, 1998). Traditionally, while technological disasters included accidents involving hazardous materials, nuclear power plant accidents, mass transportation accidents (involving air planes & rails) and conflagrations, six types of natural disaster agents are identifiable. These include earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, volcanoes and tsunamis (Fischer, 1998). Some scholars categorize disasters into two: ‘ big’ and ‘ small’ disasters (Sylves and Waugh, 1996). For instance, Sylves (1996: 26-45) argue that part of the political dynamics of disaster involves whether an event is a ‘ catastrophic’ scale affecting a wide area with massive devastation or is more of limited magnitude. In the UK, the Civil Contingency Act sub-divided disasters into three levels that warrant central intervention: Level 1 – significant emergencies; level 2 – serious emergencies; and level 3 – catastrophic emergencies (Walker and Broderick, 2004: 238). This essay will be based on case studies of catastrophic disasters of natural origin.

What is Crises/disaster Response?

According to The Disaster Handbook (1998), response involves mobilizing and positioning emergency equipments; getting people out of danger; providing needed food; shelter and medical services; and bringing damaged services and system back on line. However, according to McLuckie (1975), disaster response is much broader concept which may be divided into three time periods: Pre-impact; emergency and post-emergency. The pre-impact stage is defined as that period before the disaster agent strikes the community or region. The emergency stage is the time of greatest disruption of the societal system when certain essential functions are not being fulfilled. It occurs immediately following impact and may continue for varying periods of time. The post-emergency period is that in which most essential services have been restored (McLuckie, 1975). Rosenthal, Boin and Comfort (2001) described disaster response as a complex undertaking:

In the ideal world, crisis response would be a one-step, smooth process of decision making and implementation […] where crisis managers would be evaluated on the promptness and success of their efforts to deal with unpleasant threats to social and political order […]. However, in the real world of crisis management, there are no easy answers or simple techniques.

(Rosenthal, Boin and Comfort, 2001: 15)

This description seems to be in agreement with the McLuckie’s conception of disaster response as presented above. According to McLuckie (1975), disaster response function comprise of a list of eight activities which include: warning; emergency preparedness; evacuation; inventory (assessing and mapping the situation); victim care (search and rescue, medical care and care of the dead); security; welfare; and emergency restoration of services.

Disaster researchers have observed various conditions under which response organisations are more likely to respond effectively to a disaster event. According to Fischer (1998), the effectiveness of disaster response is determined by the effectiveness of inter-organisational communication, functionality of emergency operation centre (EOC), the level of authority and availability of financial, material and human resources, level of effectiveness of coordination with outside private as well as with state and federal organisations and also the level of cooperation between response organisation and the mass media.

‘ Local’ Authority versus ‘ Central’ Government

The term ‘ local’ authority encompasses urban and rural communities of different size and levels which includes regional, provincial, metropolitan, city, municipality, township and village councils (Malalgoda, Amaratunga and Pathirage, 2010). However, the duties, structure, composition and the terminology of local governments may vary across the world. In United Kingdom, the local government is organized, depending on the location, which includes country and district councils, unitary authorities including borough council, city council, county council or district council and town and parish councils (Malalgoda, Amaratunga and Pathirage, 2010). In the United States, states are sovereign jurisdictions with specific and reserved responsibilities established in the United States constitution and the functions of sub state levels of government depends entirely on each state’s constitution with responsibilities differing among states (Col, 2007). In contrast Japan has two levels of governments below the national governmental level namely; Prefectures and the Municipal (Module 5, unit 6).

Centralisation Vs Decentralisation of disaster response

The term ‘ decentralization’ is mainly associated with the local government (Malalgoda, Amaratunga and Pathirage, 2010). According to the World Bank as cited in Malalgoda, Amaratunga and Pathirage (2010), decentralization includes the transfer of authority and responsibility of public functions from the central government to subordinate or quasi-independent government organizations and/or the private sector which is a complex multifaceted concept. In most countries, the central government retains authority over disaster management programs with centralized decision making and resources, which often focus on developing response capabilities rather than proactive mitigation, and the local government action for disaster management is often given a lower priority (Malalgoda, Amaratunga and Pathirage, 2010). Therefore, according to Blaikie, after a major disaster, decision making tends to be a centralized process, possibly due to media pressure or the inevitable high political profile of such events (Malalgoda, Amaratunga and Pathirage, 2010). This, according to ADPC has to be viewed as a hindrance for achieving the disaster resilience at ccommunity and local levels (Malalgoda, Amaratunga and Pathirage, 2010).

It is argued that, while on the one hand centralized patterns of decision making lead to delays in response and less flexibility in decision making (McLuckie, 1975), decentralization on the other hand enhance disaster response (Malalgoda, Amaratunga and Pathirage, 2010). It should be noted that even though the central government should hold the ultimate responsibility of disaster response within the country, the importance of delegating the responsibility of disaster response to local governments cannot be overlooked as they are rooted at the local level where disasters occur and are more close to the local community which will enable them to involve local community in the risk reduction initiatives.

Roles of local authorities and central government in disaster response

The occurrence of major disasters across the world has highlighted the practical difficulties of mounting a central government response to sudden crises (Hennessy [2001: 554] cited in Module 5, unit 2). Some local governments have also reasoned that many cases of disaster especially in developing countries illustrate the extreme costs and inefficiency of central decision making (Kasumasari, Alam and Siddiqui, 2010). Owing to the shortcoming of the central government to effectively respond to disaster situations, some scholars argue that there is a shift in central government towards decentralization of power and authority to local government for dealing with disaster activities (Kasumasari, Alam and Siddiqui, 2010; O’Brien and Paul Read [2005] cited in Module 5, unit 2: Reading). For instance, in Japan, the response to a disaster starts at the local level; any decision on calling for outside assistance (i. e. to prefectural level) is a matter for the Mayor and the Municipal Disaster Prevention Council (MDPC). Higher level actions can only be initiated upon request from the local authorities (Module 5, unit 6). Similarly, in the United States, the ‘ bottom up’ system, where the responsibility for disaster response rests with local authorities has for decades been considered the ‘ normal’ model (Howitt and Leonard, 2006).

One of the main strength of the bottom up approach is that, because local authorities are proximate to disaster sites and have at least some emergency capacity, they can respond quickly to initial alerts (Howitt and Leonard, 2006). Secondly, they have detailed knowledge of local conditions, and in many cases have agreements for mutual aid to secure additional help rapidly from nearby jurisdictions (Howitt and Leonard, 2006).

Additionally, APDC cited in Malalgoda, Amaratunga and Pathirage (2010) also highlighted several strengths of local authorities in disaster response. These includes but not limited to the followings: creative use of cost effective local resources; an inclusive participatory institutional system; mediating with national agencies; establish a system to respond to highly localized but locally devastating disasters which national level institutions ignore.

However, there are also internal and external circumstances that can reduce the effectiveness of local authorities to respond to disaster. One of the limiting factors is the lack of disaster management capability. According to Kasumasari, Alam and Siddiqui (2010), local authorities in developing countries lack vital capabilities required in disaster mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery. For instance, during response, local authorities may lack capabilities in the areas of need assessment, coordination, and information exchange and logistics management.

In other instances, large disaster events may render the response of local authorities ineffective. For instance, the 1995 Sakhalin Earthquake disaster in the Far East of Russia did not only destroyed completely one of its communities and disrupted communication lines including ‘ command and communication posts’, but it also killed nearly two thirds of police officers and medical personnel while many others were injured (Porfiriev [1996] cited in Module 5, unit 6: Reading). Consequently, there was inevitable delay in providing important information about the disaster as well as late notification of the respective authorities, emergency organisations and the public. Inevitably, such magnitude of a disaster drastically reduces the effectiveness of both local and central government effectively respond to the disaster.

In summary, the main challenges faced by local government can be categorised under two headings namely, the internal factors and external factors. Internal factors include, lack of knowledge on disaster risk reduction initiatives, lack of interest on the subject, human resource issues, lack of financial capabilities, internal organizational and administrative weaknesses and competing priorities. The external factors include, lack of authority, multi layered governance arrangements, unstable political systems and the relationship issues with the central government (Malalgoda, Amaratunga and Pathirage, 2010).

Case studies:

Case study 1: The 1995 Kobe Earthquake in Japan

On 17, January 1995, Earthquake measured at 7. 2 on the Ritcher magnitude scale struck Kobe, in Japan and killed over 6, 000 people, seriously injured more than 35, 000, caused the collapse over 100, 000 buildings, and 310, 000 persons lost their homes. Various estimates have put the cost of the Earthquake at US$120 to 150 billion. Heavy structural damage spread more than 70 miles from the epicentre. Over 300, 000 homeless people were evacuated to more than 1, 000 refugee camps and around 1, 000, 000 people were without clean water Wisner et al., [2004: 293] cited in Module 5, unit 6). While there were reports that the Prefectural Governor and the Prime Minister’s Office reacted slowly, the Mayor of Kobe at that time, Sasayama Yukitoshi displayed decisive executive leadership that smoothed the way for the eventual recovery of Kobe (Nakamura, 2001).

Case study 2: The 2005 Hurricane Katrina in the USA

Hurricane Katrina hit the U. S. Gulf Coast, particularly the states of Louisiana and Mississippi, in August 2005. According to the White House, it was the most destructive natural disaster in U. S. history (Col, 2007). An estimated 1, 330 people died as a result of the storm. But according to Leeson and Sobel (2008), the havoc killed more than 2, 000 citizens. Additionally, more than 770, 000 people were reportedly displaced, while an estimated 300, 000 homes were either completed destroyed or made uninhabitable. Furthermore, property damage was estimated at US$96 billion (Col, 2007). During and immediately after Katrina, most discussions focused on the slow response, with the official response to the disaster labeled as a ‘ national failure’. The Federal agency FEMA was criticized for slow response, as was President George W. Bush, the Governor and the mayor of New Orleans (Bonner, 2010).

Both case studies were chosen because by any world standard, they are catastrophic disasters which overwhelmed the capacity of the local authorities and can clearly illustrate the gap in the collaboration and coordination between different levels of government.

Showcasing local government’s strengths and weaknesses

Because local authorities are proximate to disaster sites and have at least some emergency capacity, it has been argued generally that they can respond more quickly to initial alerts than the central government (Howitt and Leonard, 2006). However, this argument cannot be taken as a universal rule. In the two case studies presented above, while the local authority (The Mayor of Kobe) was praised for his decisive executive leadership displayed during the Kobe earthquake (Nakamura, 2001), the leadership of the local officials, including the New Orleans mayor and Governor Blanco were instead severely criticised for the poor handling of Hurricane Katrina (Guardian [2006] cited in Module 5, unit 9: Reading). One common feature of the disaster management system in Japan and United States is the layered bureaucracies that posses a big threat to effective disaster response.

The effectiveness of local authorities in responding to crises situation seems to be determined in part by how they can deal with such bureaucracies. In the wake of the 1995 Kobe earthquake, Kobe officials needed sum of Y320 billion (US$2. 9 billion) for street clean up, a sum absolutely beyond the city’s financial means. The city therefore decided to ask the national government to pay for the cleanup. However, in Japan, such national subsidy would require a lot of paperwork, and the money would not become available for at least a year or two (Nakamura, 2001). Convinced that without the clearance project, no community recovery could take place, the mayor of Kobe, Sasayama Yukitoshi displayed decisive executive leadership and scrapped the normal routine and he decided to dispense the money even though the city had no prospect of getting financial aid. In retrospect, the mayor’s decision smoothed the way for eventual recovery of Kobe (Nakamura, 2001: 310). Such level of leadership from the local authorities was evidently lacking in the response to Hurricane Katrina. Instead of taking action, Louisiana Governor, Kathleen Blanco was full of complain about the layered bureaucracy, possibly within the federal government:

No one, it seems, even those at the highest level, seems to be able to break through the bureaucracy

(Sobel and Leeson, 2006: 57)

Instead of complaining, the New Orleans mayor and Governor Blanco could have taken a more proactive step by completing the mandatory evacuation order form issued on August 28 (Guardian [2006] cited in Module 5, unit 9: Reading). Furthermore, through Isomorphic learning (Toft and Reynolds, 2005), both the mayor of New Orleans and Governor Blanco could have learned vital lessons from the Mayor of Kobe which could have gone a long way in lessening the negative impacts of Katrina.

Coming back to the case study of Kobe Earthquake where some local authorities, particularly the Mayor of Kobe displayed decisive leadership, there were also some weaknesses displayed at another level of local authority (i. e. the Prefectural level). It was reported that the Prefectural Governor delayed for four hours before calling for military aid (Module 5, unit 6). This delay could be explained by numerous factors. Firstly, it was reported that the city’s emergency radio system failed and telephones as well as many roads were unusable. Secondly, the delay could have also been explained by the poor communication between the Municipality and the Prefecture, showing that neither was sufficiently aware of the other’s roles and responsibilities (Module 5, unit 6). Had it been that the roles of the different levels of government were clear, and that there was proper coordination and collaboration between the three levels of government – Municipal, Prefecture and National, the response to Kobe Earthquake could have been more effective.

One of the reasons that could have hampered proper coordination and collaboration at the three levels of government can be attributed to social expectation and culture (Institute of Lifelong Learning (2012) Module 5, unit 6). Past experience demonstrates that crisis control is efficient and successful only when routine is temporarily suspended (Nakamura, 2001). Unsurprising, in the case of Kobe Earthquake, notable success came in when the mayor of Kobe, Sasayama Yukitoshi scrapped the normal routine that eventually smoothed the way for eventual recovery of Kobe (Nakamura, 2001). However, when Directives from the Prime Minister’s Office and Cabinet were issued they were not acted on (Institute of Lifelong Learning (2012) Module 5, unit 6) due to the structured and hierarchical chain of command that characterizes the government administration in Japan (Nakamura, 2001). Heath explained that, if Directives were not countersigned by the right people, then those below them felt unable to act:

… Japanese bureaucrats are likely to wait until consensus is achieved, display bond loyalty to their specific employer, and seek means to avert and avoid loss of face. Such behaviour is likely to slow down response management and create consequent time lags.

(Heath [1995: 13-14] cited in Module 5, unit 6: 6-17).

In comparison, local government officials also delayed their response to Hurricane Katrina. New Orleans Mayor, Ray Nagin for instance waited 15 hours after receiving a call from the National Hurricane Centre Director Max Mayfield informing him that untold disaster would soon be upon the city, to mandate an evacuation (Sobel and Leeson, 2006). When the Hurricane finally arrived, even though the local authorities were aware the levee system in New Orleans had broken by 6. 00 P. M. on the day the Hurricane hit, they waiting for nearly 24 hours before sounding the alarm (Sobel and Leeson, 2006). As if to complete the cycle of delay, federal help of any kind also took nearly a week to arrive. Walter Maestri, Emergency Management Director of the Jefferson Parish reports: “ For approximately six days, we sat here waiting” (Sobel and Leeson, 2006: 60).

What were interesting in the aftermath of Katrina are the intricacies of the various responsibilities of state and federal authorities and the degree of accusation and counter-accusations therein. For instance, while the Department of Homeland Security said the local authorities were inadequate, the locals responded that FEMA has been obstructive (Reynolds, 2005). As a result, it took days to sort out who should send troops and from where (Reynolds, 2005). It is therefore, such intricacies that do not always allow for quick decision making and response to disasters. Therefore, Howitt and Leonard (2006) rightly argue that ‘ these problems were not simply the failure of a particular place or leaders to be ready for disaster but rather an indication of more fundamental issues.

According to Col (2007), one of the fundamental issues seems to be the inaction and missteps (by both state authorities and the federal government) that occurred during the preparedness and mitigation phases that were most critical in leading to the eventual Katrina tragedy. Similarly, Sobel and Leeson (2006) used public choice theory to explain the failure of FEMA and other governmental agencies to carry out effective disaster relief in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Some of their findings also point to the lack of effective coordination and collaboration at the various levels of government. Story published by the BBC News in the aftermath of Katrina, revealed that the breakdown of the relief operation in New Orleans was the result of multiple failures by city, state and federal authorities (Reynolds, 2005). Had it been that there was proper coordination and collaboration between the different levels of government, the response to the Katrina would have been much better.

Coordination and Collaboration between Central Government and Local Authorities Although the role and actions of local authorities are predominantly critical in disaster response, it is important to recognize that all levels of governments are generally involved in disaster response (Col, 2007). It is almost common knowledge that coordination and collaboration between all levels of government play an essential function, because in a large scale disaster response, these will assist in saving lives. Unfortunately, lack of coordination and collaboration between local authorities and central government is a real issue (Kasumasari, Alam and Siddiqui, 2010).

While local authorities are not only proximate to disaster sites; they also have detailed knowledge of local conditions as well as some emergency capacity to respond quickly to initial alerts (Howitt and Leonard, 2006), they are easily overwhelmed by large scale disaster events. Additionally, they may also lack disaster management capability, appropriate power and responsibilities to respond to large scale disaster (Kasumasari, Alam and Siddiqui, 2010). On the other hand, central governments may have important specialized resources and capabilities (Howitt and Leonard, 2006) which the local authorities require for effective response. However, unlike the local authorities, the central governments are less able to respond immediately as their resources and capabilities may have to travel considerable distance to get to the disaster site (Howitt and Leonard, 2006). Nevertheless, the central government has historically played a much larger role in pre-event planning and post-event recovery than in the management of a disaster in progress (Howitt and Leonard, 2006). In addition, they can provide important specialized resources and capabilities required for immediate response to large scale disaster.

Therefore, to be effective, all stakeholders (including local authorities and central government) must be involved in working collaboratively, especially when responding to catastrophic disasters (Kasumasari, Alam and Siddiqui, 2010). However for such collaboration to work well it is a prerequisite to have a clear distinction between what actions need to be decentralized and what actions need to be managed centrally (Malalgoda, Amaratunga and Pathirage, 2010). This could be the kind of ‘ balanced model’ that some crises experts, represented mainly by European scholars have been advocating for (Rosenthal et al., [1989: 457-458] cited in Module 5, unit 6: Readings: 6-36).

Conclusion

The two case studies of catastrophic events of Kobe Earthquake and Hurricane Katrina illustrated that local authorities might be better placed to respond to small and medium scale disasters, because they are easily overwhelmed by large scale disaster events. The essay also demonstrated that both the local authorities and central government have unique roles during disaster response that could complement each other. However, the real problem for effective response is lack of coordination and collaboration between different levels of government. Rather than arguing for or against the local authorities or central government, the essay concludes that disaster response should be seen as a collective responsibility. Therefore, coordination and collaboration among all stakeholders (including local authorities and central government) is required to avoid conflict and ensure effective and efficient disaster response.

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