Non-profit response to catastrophic disasters

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Abstract

Purpose – This article aims to examine the role of non-profit organizations in response to catastrophic disasters.

Design/methodology/approach – The study uses the context of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City to study the emergence of public non-profit networks in response to an actual event. The case study utilizes the data from content analyses from news reports in The New York Times; situation reports from the FEMA; interviews with public and non-profit managers; and archival documents.

Findings – The findings of the study emphasize the importance of well-coordinated collaboration between the public and non-profit sector organizations in effective disaster response operations. This type of networks constitutes a field of substantial interest to democratic societies that are seeking to manage problems of public service delivery with innovative means at reasonable cost.

Originality/value – Its theoretical framework draws upon the literature in interorganizational networks and social capital. The research applies this framework to study the relationships that emerged among public and non-profit organizations following the World Trade Center disaster on September 11, 2001 in New York City.

Keywords Disasters, Response time, Non-profit organizations, Public sector organizations, Industrial relations, United States of America

Paper type Case study

Introduction

It has long been recognized by academics that disasters represent occasions in which the boundaries between sectors and organizations are blurred. As disasters become larger and more complex, routinized organizational roles and even disaster plans give way to managing, as it becomes increasingly evident that those earlier expectations and guidelines are largely invalid. Emergency management scholars have documented and analyzed the phenomenon of disaster-related collective action. Collective action involves the mass movement of people, goods, and other resources into disaster areas. Collective action stems primarily from emergent definitions that call for philanthropic responses and also from a collectively-shared need to provide assistance and relief to the victims of disasters (Waugh, 2000; Comfort, 1999; Dynes and Tierney, 1994). Several examples discussed in detail in response to September 11 terrorist attacks and

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many of the best efforts to save lives and properties during Hurricane Katrina highlight the vital role that non-profit organizations play during extreme emergencies.

The ability to build and maintain relationships with other organizations in order to leverage resources and competencies in emergencies is not an easy task. This study addresses the problem of interorganizational networks in response to extreme emergencies. The paper focuses on the manner in which emergency-relevant organizations coordinated with other responding non-profit organizations to develop multi-organizational networks for managing the World Trade Center (WTC) disaster. This paper addresses only disaster management operations, which were led by New York City Emergency management Office (NYCEMO) in conjunction with Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), other federal agencies, state and local governments, and private and non-profit organizations.

The objective of this paper is to contribute to a better understanding of the evolving relationship between government agencies and the non-profit organizations in response to extreme emergencies and disasters. The research addresses the following questions:

**RQ1.** How did public non-profit collaborations evolve in response to the extreme disaster?

**RQ2.** What primary public and non-profit organizations were involved in response to the attack?

**RQ3.** How did the partnerships among public non-profit organizations impact the response to the 9/11 attacks?

**RQ4.** What factors restrain or sustain this public non-profit partnership?

**RQ5.** How can interorganizational coordination be organized to function more effectively under emergency conditions?

**Theoretical background and conceptual framework**

Theoretical framework is primarily drawn from network theory and social capital to explain the public non-profit collaborations and role of non-profit organizations in emergencies (Chrislip and Larson, 1994; Berger, 1983). The conceptual framework is applied in this context to explain the ability of communities to solve the problems of collective action (Axelrod, 1997; Alter and Hage, 1993; Putnam, 1993; Nohria and Eccless, 1992; Coleman, 1990). However, most of the concepts introduced to explain public-non-profit partnerships in routine social relations do not sufficiently explain public-non-profit partnerships in dynamic environments of emergencies. Emergencies differ from routine events in several ways. Emergencies differ from routine events in critical and timely information requirements and a high level of uncertainty. Extreme emergencies pose a significant test for public, private, and non-profit sector organizations. Extreme events also require intense coordination among multiple agencies to achieve a shared goal (Comfort, 1999).

Public non-profit collaborations involve non-profit organizations addressing local, state, and national problems through negotiated efforts or partnerships with government, colleges and universities, or other public or social institutions. These efforts encompass several categories. First, governments often seek to execute their
efforts via structures of interagency collaboration. Second, the role of non-profit organizations is large and growing. Third, the frequency and variety of links with for-profit firms is impressive, and government contracting remains a growth industry (Galaskiewicz and Bielefeld, 1998). In recent years, such interorganizational collaboration has become a prominent aspect of the functioning of many different types of organizations. The number and significance of collaborative forms of organizing, including interorganizational teams, partnerships, alliances, and networks, have increased tremendously. The value of effective collaborative relationships as well as the complexities and challenges they present have been recognized by many researchers, and they continue to be a frequent subject of scholarly and practitioner-oriented literature (Linden, 2002; Savas, 2000; Gulati, 1998; Robertson, 1998; Kanter, 1994; Powell, 1990; Gray, 1989).

In complex and turbulent environments of disasters, organizations frequently develop formal or informal relationships in order to work together to pursue shared goals and address common concerns. Since collaborations are based on a recognition of key interdependencies across sectors and organizations and thus on the need for inter-sectoral collaboration to solve emergent problems, they also require effective mobilization and utilization of many available community resources, public as well as private. Given the voluntary nature of many networks in emergencies, their effectiveness depends, for the most part, on the willingness of an array of individual leaders and organizations across sectors to participate in and contribute to the success of the collaborative endeavor.

**Collaborations in extreme conditions of emergencies**

Extreme emergencies are occurrences that are notable, rare, unique, and profound, in terms of their impacts, effects, or outcomes. When extreme disasters occur at the interface between natural, social and human systems, they are often called “disasters” (Red Cross, 2001). Quarantelli and Dynes (1977) define disaster as the disruption to society after the “event”. Hence, it is not the earthquake that is the disaster but the extreme stress on society that it causes that is the disaster. Everybody is affected in extreme disasters and individuals and single organizations cannot prevent the harm caused by the event. In extreme disasters standard procedures cannot be followed and they require dynamic system to adapt to unanticipated and rapidly changing conditions. The September 11, 2001 terrorist attack is an example of extreme emergencies with significant impact upon humanity (Figure 1).

Inter-organizational collaboration is an important element of a resilient community. Resilient communities systems are characterized by reduced failure, measured in terms of lives lost, damage, and negative social and economic impacts, and reduced time to recovery -that is, more rapid restoration of the social systems and institutions to their

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**Figure 1.**

Conceptual framework: partnerships in response to emergencies
normal, pre-disaster levels of functioning. Aaron Wildawsky (1971, p. 77) describes resilience as “the capacity to cope with unexpected dangers after they have become manifest, learning to bounce back”. Multidisciplinary Center for Earthquake Engineering Research (MCEER, 2002) has identified four general properties that can be applied to all systems and to the elements that comprise resilient systems: robustness (ability to withstand the forces generated by a hazard agent without loss or significant deterioration of function); resourcefulness (capacity to apply material, informational, and human resources to remedy disruptions when they occur); redundancy (the extent to which elements, systems, or other units of analysis exist that are capable of satisfying the performance requirements of a social unit in the event of loss or disruption that threaten functionality); and rapidity (the ability to contain losses and restore system or other units in a timely manner).

Methodology
This section describes the research methods as well as the data analysis procedures used in conducting this research. This paper uses the context of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City to study the emergence of public non-profit networks in response to an actual event. The case study utilizes the data from content analyses from news reports in The New York Times (9/12/01 – 10/04/01); situation reports from the FEMA (9/11/01 – 10/04/01); situation reports from Health and Human Services (HHS, 2001); interviews with public and non-profit managers; and archival documents.

Situation reports prepared by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA, 2001), designated as the lead agency for consequence management, were used as the official account of organizational operations following the September 11 attacks. News stories reported in The New York Times (9/12/01 – 10/04/01) were analyzed to corroborate findings from the official documents and to provide a daily record of organizational actions and events as they evolved. Content analyses were used to identify the responding organizations. A total of 43 interviews were conducted with managers of public and non-profit organizations involved in response to September 11 identified by the content analyses. Finally, observational data and documentary analysis were used in the study.

Organizational response to 9/11 attacks
The content analysis of the FEMA situation reports, news stories reported in the New York Times, HHS reports, New York State Office of Attorney General’s Charitable Organizations Report, identified a response system to the World Trade Center site that was composed of 1,607 organizations. A total of 1,196 philanthropic organizations were identified in response to the disaster. This figure documents the immediate assistance provided by non-profit organizations to the federal, state, regional and municipal agencies of New York after the attacks.

The majority of interviewees (74 percent) stated that cooperating with other organizations helped their organization serve the community in emergencies to a great extent. A significant percent (21 percent) also believe the benefit of partnerships but only to some extent. They also see a partnership with other organizations as an essential way of providing services to the community in emergencies (61 percent). The organizations believe that building of healthy communities is accomplished through
partnership with public organizations that result in community investment. Each one of the respondents recognized that the best chance for success in service to the community lies in working together in a coordinated effort. The majority of the non-profit organizations feel that they cannot serve effectively in emergencies without cooperating with other organizations. The respondents also emphasized the importance of establishing network relations before an emergency happens.

Willingness to share (22 percent); proper training (22); trust (20 percent); education (16 percent); human relations (12 percent); and experience, common interest, and communication skills (7 percent) are considered as important skills, values, and attitudes that managers and staff must have to be successful in building partnerships. One of my respondents elaborated the skills needed by the people for successful partnerships. “People in partnering organizations need to set high standards of performance for themselves and for others, as well as a great sense of personal accountability and responsibility. Good, reliable, honest information is very critical in emergencies. To be heard, to have one’s concerns taken seriously”[1]. The following factors hindered organizations from collaborating with other organizations: lack of communication (49 percent); lack of common priorities, sizes of organizations, lack of experience (13 percent); lack of trust (13 percent); lack of flexibility (11 percent); lack of technical structure (9 percent); and lack of leadership (6 percent).

The attacks significantly increased (70 percent – 30 out of 43 respondents) organizational interactions. The attack also impacted the missions, policies, and structures of the neighboring organizations in several ways. The most significant changes observed were the changes in policies (25 percent), mission (21 percent), and organizational structure (16 percent). The other changes (9 percent) caused by the attacks were sharing know-hows among organizations. One of the respondents stated that they added focus on disaster preparedness and response after 9/11[2].

Collective action: the philanthropic response to disasters
Collective action brings non-profit organizations with their needed resources to disaster areas while simultaneously creating substantial management challenges. Several non-emergency related non-profit organizations performed emergency-related tasks, and formed an astonishing array of support groups to assist and complement the activities of formal disaster response and relief agencies. And, as is typical in major disasters, material donations following the September 11 attack included both things that were urgently needed and goods that were of no conceivable use, creating massive logistical and storage challenges for local agencies.

The WTC event was a high-impact extreme disaster that cut across geographical jurisdictions and functional lines too large to be handled by the local organizations. The 9/11 case exemplifies a disaster where recovery and response efforts by agencies from various localities and sectors were hindered because no interagency networks were proposed but arose spontaneously. Although, the event demonstrated the need for interagency coordination in disasters, it took many days before effective communication channels were instituted. Most of the managers interviewed mentioned the serious need for previous communication between disaster response organizations and the local non-profit organizations. Non-profit organizations should be included in response operations in coordination with public authorities.
The role of philanthropic organizations

The resources and expertise possessed by the non-profit organizations are important assets for communities. Non-profit organizations have been vital to solving America’s problems and strengthening its democratic traditions since its founding (Salamon, 1999). Despite the lack of a reliable roadmap, philanthropic organizations, including donors and service providers, responded, with unaccustomed speed and agility to the urgent humanitarian needs in both the immediate vicinity of the 9/11 attack and in the wider New York region (Seessel, 2002). Non-profit organizations offered significant services to the victims of the attacks. As they have served the immediate need of the victims, if it can be built on the experience of these organizations, they may offer a viable option for becoming part of the service infrastructure that will be required to meet the needs of the victims that will result from an extreme emergency. What is needed, however, is a commitment to build the organizational capacity of these non-profits so that they can truly fulfill their mission and a commitment to include them as part of the response and recovery process[3].

The study of New York City’s Non-profits revealed a total of 13,938 reporting non-profit organizations in New York City on the eve of the tragedy, including 8,034 operating and 1,044 supporting organizations (i.e. charitable trusts, fund dispersal, and umbrella groups) and 4,860 private and corporate foundations. The WTC zone had 365 operating (5 percent of the city total) and 111 supporting organizations (11 percent) and the offices of 708 foundations (15 percent) (Seley and Wolpart, 2002). Non-profit organizations were quick and highly visible in the response-recovery operations after the terrorist attack. Across the country, individuals, non-profits, and companies rose to the challenge to aid and rebuild in the wake of the attacks. Within hours of the second tower’s fall, the September 11th Fund was formed in partnership with the New York Community Trust (NYCT). The September 11th Fund received $506 million and granted $336 million for cash assistance and services, recovery efforts at the three attack sites, and support to rebuild communities devastated by the tragedy. Working with others, they used the remaining $170 million to provide mental health counseling, employment assistance, health care, legal and financial advice, cash assistance, and help for school children, small businesses and non-profits (New York Times, 9/24/01). Cash and blood donations began within hours, and within two days the Red Cross had prepared a nationally televised solicitation for donations and contributions[4]. However, the American Red Cross failed to recognize that the WTC disaster was unique. They tried to use their standard procedures for maximizing blood donations and for diverting funds collected to their generic disaster relief fund. They were also slow in developing a plan for distributing the very large amount of money they collected for relief to the victims.

The General Accounting Office (GAO, 2002) released an interim report on the response of charities to 9/11. The report describes the roles that charities played during the aftermath of 9/11 and identifies some ways to improve the charitable aid process in future disasters. The GAO noted that it is difficult to precisely tally the amount of money raised, but reported that 34 of the larger charities raised $2.4 billion, with the American Red Cross raising the most, $988 million, and the next largest, the September 11th Fund, raising $503 million. GAO indicated that more money has been raised, but that it could not provide a reliable figure because there were more than 300 charities involved in collecting funds for 9/11 survivors. In the following section, more detailed
characterization of selected non-profit organizations involved in 9/11 response operations are presented.

The American Red Cross provides health care, food, shelter, and education and training in an emergency. During this initial phase, the Red Cross mobilized volunteers who helped to open 12 shelters and provide food, clothing, emergency cash, and comfort to those who were physically injured, had a loved one missing, had been displaced from their home, had lost their job, or were simply overwhelmed by the enormity of the event. The Red Cross was also on the front lines, with the Salvation Army, in providing relief centers and care for the rescue workers. The Red Cross was by far the largest beneficiary of 9/11-related donations, receiving almost $1 billion out of a total of about $2-$2.5 billion (Foundation Center, 2002).

The Red Cross made special efforts to help people who were not in the mainstream of society. It opened a special tent across the street from the Pier 94 Family Assistance Center to accommodate undocumented immigrants or their families who were reluctant to enter the official site for fear of being discovered, and worked with Association Tepeyac, a Hispanic immigrant advocacy and social services organization, to help undocumented workers produce necessary verifications of employment so that they could receive Red Cross and other benefits.

The September 11th fund presents an example of high performing network structures that have developed significant levels of trust. The mission of the fund was to meet the immediate need of the victims’ families. The September 11th Fund utilized staff of its co-sponsoring organizations, the New York Community Trust (NYCT) and United Way of New York City, to develop distribution policies and guidelines. The Trust managed about 1,600 charitable funds and in 2001 made about 15,000 grants totaling $128 million[5]. Beginning in the week of the attack and continuing for several weeks, staff met with several non-profit social services agencies to determine the needs as they were becoming known, and to assess their capacities to take on additional work in the relief and recovery effort (DiPerna, 2003).

By June 30, 2002, the September 11th Fund had received $501 million and distributed $301 million in 250 grants to non-profit organizations that provided cash and services to victims. More than 100,000 individuals received cash and services, including 3,800 families and other financial dependents of those who were killed or were severely injured, 35,000 people who lost their jobs, and 6,000 individuals and families who were displaced from their homes (Spitzer, 2002). In addition, the Fund continued and expanded funding for previous services including grants and loans for small businesses and non-profit organizations in lower Manhattan; continued legal and financial advice on issues such as settling estates or applying to the federal Victim Compensation Fund; and continued cash assistance for those who are eligible but have not yet come forward, including surviving families, the injured, and displaced residents[6].

Safe Horizon is a non-profit victim assistance, advocacy and violence prevention organization, the largest such agency in the country, formerly known as Victim Services. For many years the agency has worked closely with the State of New York’s Crime Victims Board in processing crime victims’ compensation claims. By September 15, in response to a request by the New York State Governor, Safe Horizon began serving as the Crime Victims Board’s agent for writing checks for financial assistance for surviving spouses who lost their primary wage earners in the attack[7].

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Safe Horizon had been forced to vacate its downtown headquarters, at 2 Lafayette Street, after the attack, and when staff returned ten days later, they were without phones, fax, or internet until December 2001. Despite these obstacles, and in the absence of formal agreements with funding organizations or existing procedures for handing out money, Safe Horizon moved forward quickly to provide cash and crisis counseling not only at the main Family Assistance Center but also at four other centers in the outer boroughs to facilitate access for people who were reluctant to come to downtown Manhattan. Safe Horizon also opened a toll-free 24-hour hotline and, with Seedco and United Way, prepared and published in print form and on-line a directory of resources for victims and their families (Spitzer, 2002).

The first days after September 11 were challenging for New York Cares like many other non-profit and government agencies. A non-functioning web site and sporadically working phones made it difficult to get in touch with agency partners. Phone calls and e-mails from individuals who wanted to help in some way and who were frustrated by the lack of available volunteer opportunities made the response operations most challenging for the organization[8]. New York Cares responded to the aftermath of the attack by reaching out to social service agencies, schools, homeless shelters, and other organizations, and mobilizing teams of volunteers to help with their work. Since September 11, New York Cares has been an integral part of the recovery and response efforts, and has provided several hours of volunteers for recovery related projects. In addition, New York Cares has trained almost 100 volunteer team leaders to serve as on-site project managers.

New York Cares volunteers working with other organizations provided critical services to the relief workers, the victims, and the families. New York Cares worked closely with NYCEMO. NYCEMO assigned New York Cares responsible for responding to all voluntary help inquiries. New York Cares, to respond more quickly, created an online signup for disaster recovery projects to enable volunteers see a list of available opportunities and sign up directly.

The ongoing lack of a disaster response infrastructure among New York City voluntary agencies was a serious problem in coordinating the response operations in the city. In the future, New York Cares will be the local agency responsible for mobilizing volunteers after disasters. According to the agreement between NYCEMO and New York Cares, when a disaster is declared, New York Cares will place staff at the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) who will help the city to identify and manage volunteers to meet emerging needs. During non-disaster times, New York Cares will work with NYCEMO to create a better infrastructure for disaster volunteer mobilization and management[9]. New York Cares and NYCEMO will need partnerships and input from other agencies and non-profit organizations to put this system together and function well in response to a disaster.

Conclusion
More than 1,600 non-profit organizations were involved in response to 9/11. As stated by William Waugh (2000, p. 45) “The real challenge for emergency managers may be blending these disparate elements into a working, effective system”. The primary role of leaders in complex environment of emergencies is to articulate the goal of the system...
in ways that personnel at all levels can understand. In emergency management, this means protecting lives first, property second, and maintaining the continuity of operations for the community (Waugh, 1990). It means enabling each member of the response system to understand how her/his actions may contribute to, or detract from, the effectiveness of the entire operation, and building a consensus on goals that allows personnel with different responsibilities operating at different locations to work together.

The study examined the role of non-profit organizations to achieve public service goals in emergencies. Overall, charitable aid made a major contribution in response to the September 11 attacks despite very difficult circumstances. Non-profit organizations partnering with public organizations and stimulating civic participation played an important role in the 9/11 response operations. Through the work of these charities, millions of people have been able to contribute to the recovery effort and helps meet the needs of the people directly and indirectly affected by the attacks.

The ongoing lack of a disaster response infrastructure among NYC voluntary agencies was a serious problem in coordinating the response operations in New York City. Trustworthiness and social capital can, especially, play an important role in extreme emergencies within which there is no clear policy or guidelines available to the participant organizations and individuals. As Axelrod and Cohen states that partnering is easier in a community or organization blessed with a substantial stock of social capital (Axelrod and Cohen, 1999).

Critical role of social fabric become evident after Hurricane Katrina response operations. This paper did not specifically focused on Hurricane Katrina operations. However, there are significant lessons can be learned from 9/11 response operations to other catastrophic disasters man-made or natural. We do understand the fundamental role networks play in ensuring resilience in response operations. The crucial point is, however, of turning this knowledge into practice. It is very important that communities that have strong working relationships with each other on a daily basis will function better under the uncertain environments of disasters. Trust is crucial in uncertain situations caused by an extreme disaster. Building trust among public and non-profit organizations can best be done outside emergency situations.

Notes
1. Interview with City Harvest, New York, NY, 3/21/2003.
4. Interview with American Red Cross, 11/02/2002.
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