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Abstract.

The challenge of building community safety and resilience in disaster management: Coordination between national and local government.

Viewing community safety and resilience through the lens of disaster management is a challenge. This is an attempt to explain how communities mitigate, prepare, respond and recover from disaster and also why disasters can have severe impact in some communities while others pull through with less effort.

Disasters in Iceland have various origins; some have a slow onset while others start fast and furiously. They include natural hazards with atmospheric and geological origin, biological hazards, and man made hazards like transport accidents, technological failures and contamination to name only few. These hazards are potentially damaging physical events which may harm people and their health, their property, economic assets, infrastructure and the environment. Residents in many communities are living with the threat of some of these hazards. Disaster management deals with the threat by making plans, policies, structures and strategies to lessen the impacts of hazards. These are structural and non-structural measures to avoid or limit the effects of these hazards, ensure effective response by strengthening capacities in communities and make necessary adjustments and level of functioning for recovery after disaster.

Iceland adopted the first Civil Protection legislation in 1962. This was during the cold war and the focus was on prevention and preparedness for nuclear or military attack. In 1974 contracts were made between the Civil Protection and volunteers, The Red Cross and Volunteer Search and Rescue organizations, to build a mutual cooperation structure in disaster management especially in the response phase both at the local and national level. Disasters like volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and snow avalanches continued to occur in communities in Iceland with catastrophic consequences. A volcanic eruption with evacuation of 5000 people from Vestmannaeyjar in 1973, devastation of small villages by deadly snow avalanches in 1974 in the Eastern fjords, and in 1983 and 1995 in the Western fjords brought new challenges to disaster management. Again recent disasters like earthquakes in 2000 and 2008 and finally a volcanic eruption in South Iceland 2010 close to Eyjafjallajökull made responders on the alert again.

A new and revised legislation on Civil Protection was adopted in 2008. Government policy on civil protection and security is drawn up by a Civil Protection and Security Council for periods of three years at a time and the policy is implemented at national level by The National Commissioner of Police.

At the local level, the Civil Protection committees, appointed by the local authority, formulate civil protection policies and arrange the activities and Local Operational Command have a leading role in the response and rescue work in the 15 Civil Protection districts, related to actual or imminent hazard situations.

All four phases of disaster management were included in the legislation, prevention, preparedness, response and finally the importance of the recovery phase was recognized.

By taking a more holistic approach to disaster management increased responsibility was given to the local community to promote safety and improve resilience. New provisions on risk assessment and resilience were handed over to the local communities, a shift from risk being assumed by the wider community and central government to the localizations and internalization of risk where those exposed to risk are expected to take some responsibility for risk reduction.

Consequently, risk in each community needed to be identified and evaluated to ensure appropriate measures, strengthen community's capacities and safety. Both traditional assessment on probability of external threats and their possible consequences and an assessment of the community's internal strengths and weaknesses had to be considered to build community safety and resilience. The Civil Protection authorities on the national level coordinated a risk cataloguing project based on team analysis in the Civil Protection districts. A team of local Civil Protection committee members, local authorities, emergency personnel and volunteers estimated threats, risk and vulnerabilities in their local community, according to a risk model using an index method in which a level for consequences, probabilities and vulnerabilities were measured. This was an important step in the preparedness process with prioritizing suggestions for planning and decision making in disaster management at the local level. The hazards and risk are found in the natural environment, the built environment, the social environment and in the economic environment.

Not all communities have the capacity to cope after disasters and many lack the resources. The structure of the Civil Protection disaster management provides for assistance to communities facing disasters. The Joint Rescue Command Centre operates at the national level and coordinates all types of operations on land, on sea and in air or a place to direct measures to deal with hazard situations. The Centre is activated when necessary as assessed by those who are involved in the direction of operations or measures to hazard situation. The local Civil Protection committee or response body can request the centre to undertake directions and coordination of operations to a specific hazard.

Today it is understood that in some cases, damage can be explained as much in terms of community resilience and capabilities as by the magnitude and characteristics of the hazard. Educating the public about disasters, increasing community disaster awareness in local communities, enforcing building codes in earthquake prone areas, reducing vulnerability and including current and future disaster risk in urban and local planning are ways to increase community resilience.

Society is increasingly becoming more complex and with new threats emerging, such as climate change, terrorism and environmental degradation. With changing infrastructures and social expectations the objective of the Civil Protection is becoming much more comprehensive. Disaster management is not an end in itself but part of community governance and involves components of prevention, preparedness, response and recovery. If communities include disaster management in their economic, social, environmental and structural planning they are more likely to cope with, respond to and recover from disasters and thus building more resilient and safe communities.