**Civil Society During an Emergency: A Review of Literature from Around the World**

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**Introduction: A Global Change in the Field of Civil Societies During Emergencies**

The field of applied research on how civil society organizations operate in response to emergencies caused by natural disasters is undergoing change. Until a couple of years ago, most of this research was conducted within the framework of one of two perspectives. The first is a “bottom-up” perspective, according to which civil society can play a decisive role in emergencies, and even replace national and international emergency organizations. The second is a “top down” perspective, common in emergency administrations, and seeks models for managing civil society. Neither of these perspectives challenges the assumption that civil society responds to emergencies through spontaneous action.

Reflecting civil society’s patterns of action, research has emphasized the aid provided during first response, recovery and rehabilitation at the time of the crisis. Less attention has been given to the issue of preparedness. However, experience has shown that civil society does not always function effectively in emergencies following natural disasters, and sometimes it even has a negative impact. This gave rise to a new approach emphasizing the importance of preparation, professionalism, and readiness to serve during an emergency as a distinct aspect of civil organizations’ identity.

Two recent books about international aid have exposed the inadequacy of theactions undertaken by civil society organizations during emergencies in various places around the world. The first is*The Crisis Caravan: What's Wrong with Humanitarian Aid?*by Linda Polman.[[1]](#footnote-1) This book reveals the economic inefficiency of the international aid industry and the paucity of resources that reach the neediest populations, citing the crisis following the tsunami in Sri Lanka as an illustrative example. A subsequent book, *The Big Truck That Went By: How the World Came to Save Haiti and Left Behind a Disaster* by Jonathan Katz, addressed the failure of aid efforts in Haiti.[[2]](#footnote-2) Both books argue that the approaches and operating patterns of civil society organizations are not only ineffective but may even have harmful consequences. They look beyond the community of humanitarian emergency organizations and consider the global political discourse on this issue.

# The New Consensus

# In the past several years, two highly respected international entities have published guidebooks in the spirit of this trend towards critiquing how aid organizations operate. These guidebooks offer a new approach to civil society in general, with an emphasis on attracting and involving local organizations rather than international ones. They shift the focus to the issue of civil organizations’ preparedness for involvement during emergencies as a component of their identity. Further, these guidebooks get down to the nuts-and-bolts level of the activity needed for civil society to best achieve its potential contribution during emergency situations. These guides renounce the assumption that civil organizations can only act spontaneously, and instead promotes the idea that the key to fully utilizing their potential lies in being prepared.

# The first guidebook was published by the RAND Corporation, a nonprofit organization that conducts some of the most vital socioeconomic research in the USA.[[3]](#footnote-3) The guidebook establishes an analytical framework for observing and assessing organizations in terms of their knowledge, resources, infrastructure and equipment, services provided, relationships with partners, potential to learn, and ability to gather information. RAND suggests that, as part of this preparation, policymakers and decisionmakers should routinely conduct a two-stage mapping of organizations: an internal assessment by the organizations and validation conducted by an external governmental or municipal entity.

# The second guidebook was published in 2022 by the Global Network of Civil Society Organizations for Disaster Reduction (GNDR).[[4]](#footnote-4) GNDR was established as part of the United Nations International Strategy for Risk Reduction (UNISDR) during the decade following the catastrophic earthquake in Kobe, Japan. GNDR’s members include hundreds of self-identified civil society organizations that serve in emergencies in both developed and less developed countries.

# In response to widespread and significant dissatisfaction with the functioning of local and national civil society organizations, the Reality of Aid Network, in their publication *Reality Check,* recently proposed a strategic approach to maximize the potential of civil society in several contexts:

# Shifting the emphasis from response and recovery to building infrastructures for routine intervention

# Shifting the emphasis from national organizations to local organizations

# Developing local knowledge and professionalism in emergencies as a condition for non-spontaneous functioning

# Like RAND, this organization promotes a two-stage mapping of emergency organizations, with internal assessment and external verification. The role of civil society is defined in terms of promoting knowledge, building infrastructure, advocacy, creating partnerships, and developing tools for supervising and maintaining activity. Both guides suggest a division of labor, according to which the role of the national emergency organization is to create databases on local relief organizations, set standards, and provide them with training and support. This is defined as a governance model. The relief organizations, in turn, are committed to clarifying their own role and developing their ability to perform this role by being prepared and understanding the risks involved.

# Basic Assumptions and Categories in this Review

# The methodology used in this review is based on a broad definition of the concept of civil society as nongovernmental organizations that are not private businesses. In the context of emergency operations, organizations operate within several realms:

# Local community

# State/National

# International

# The concept of a Community Based Organization (CBO) has become increasingly widespread. This concept emerged due to the mixed results of research conducted in the 1990s regarding whether massive investment from the authorities is the best way to prepare for disaster situations in the long term.[[5]](#footnote-5)

# Another diagnostic trait for categorizing organizations pertains to their activities in the realms of preparedness, response, and recovery. Previous research has primary looked at the phases of response and recovery. Only a small minority of studies have exclusively considered organizations’ activities in the phase of preparing for emergencies.

# Due to the limited scope of this review, we did not distinguish between the actions of civil society in the broad internal division categorizing the organizations. We were also careful about separating the concept of community from civil society, with the assumption that the intention is to refer to community organizations.

# There are two main bodies of research on civil society during an emergency. A small minority of studies have applied empirical tools to examine the experiences of various organizations and how they function in the field during emergency situations. The majority of works, the “normative” ones, offer governance models for managing, cooperating, and utilizing the human capital potential.

# Empirical studies conducted in developed countries tend to look at so-called “small disasters” such as mudslides, fires, floods, etc. These studies often assess the functioning of medium-sized organizations that are focused on particular issues (religion, sports, disabled people, education, the elderly, health, etc.). Another group of studies analyzes emergency events and offers critiques of state and civil society organizations for not fully utilizing the potential in the local community.

# Numerous academic and professional journals publish research on disasters and disaster management, such as: *The Journal of Disaster Studies, Policy Studies and Management; Journal of Emergency Management; Journal of Homeland Security and Emergency Management; Disaster Prevention and Management;* and *Disaster Management and Response.* The articles in these journals most often examine international organizations’ responses to disasters in underdeveloped countries. Many offer models for action and governance. There are few empirical studies of disasters or emergencies in the West. Emergency situations in developed countries are more often addressed in sociology journals or journals of systems management. Few books, theoretical articles, or meta-analyses have been written about civil society during emergencies and natural disasters.

# One exceptional work was published in 2015 by Rajib Shaw, the most prominent researcher on civil society in disasters. Shaw has written numerous studies in this field, edited academic journals dealing with disasters, served as the head of the Center for Global Environmental Studies at Kyoto University, as is a member of multiple international forums. Based on empirical studies of disasters in Asia, Shaw was the first to recognize that in order to realize the full potential of various types of civil society organizations, there had to be a shift from an approach emphasizing response and recovery to an emphasis on the preparedness of civil society organizations.

# Shaw noted that the 1995 earthquake in Kobe, Japan was an historical turning point, after which emergencies were no longer considered exclusively in terms of governmental activity. This change was the result of international interest in civil society and social capital and how civil society organizations can best function during emergencies. The weakness of Japanese civil society was exposed, and it evolved as a result of facing this disaster.

# A similar process occurred in Chile, where failed efforts to dealing with an earthquake led to a change in the culture of civil society. The focus of civil society organization shifted to creating a culture of preparedness in general, and especially in terms of population evacuation.

# Another of Shaw’s contributions is his observation that when emergencies occur in developed countries, civil society organizations tend to focus on the needs of vulnerable populations such as the elderly and disabled, who need individual attention and personal contact when receiving physical or emotional assistance.

# In the conclusion of an article published in 2014, Shaw recommended that civil society operates in areas of disaster risk reduction in which their organizations have a relative advantage, such as:

# Promoting policy, governance, and advocacy on the issue of emergencies

# Preparedness through knowledge development, training, and education

# Mapping and assessing risks in the organization’s field of operation

# Developing an infrastructure for the necessary response and recovery actions in the face of a disaster

# Professionalism in the field of emergency work, familiarity with emerging frontlines and adjacent areas in which the organization will operate during the emergency

# Shaw’s approach supports the position promoted by GNDR[[6]](#footnote-6) and the tools offered by experts from the RAND Institute in their guidebook.[[7]](#footnote-7) This represents a consensual shift away from civil society acting spontaneously, and towards professionalism in their responses. This has to potential to improve the interactions between government emergency organizations and civil society organizations.

# The literature on the activities of civil society during emergencies in developed countries is relatively sparse compared to that which examines undeveloped countries. There has been relatively more written about countries such as Chile and Japan that have faced repeated disasters. Furthermore, the effectiveness of the national government and the role of local governments can complicate efforts to effectively tap the advantages of civil society. For this reason, the literature on civil society in developed countries is largely consumed with discussions about the challenges of governance and coordination during emergencies. There is a dual fear that the resources offered by civil society will be underutilized, and that their activities will be disrupted by internal conflicts.

# An example of the “double-edged sword” of excessive activity by strong civil society organizations occurred during reconstruction efforts following hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, Louisiana. It became necessary to make decisions regarding the location of temporary housing for evacuees, and organizations representing strong populations operated according to the “not in my backyard” (NIMBY) model. Pre-existing societal inequalities may cause conflicts between the actions of civil society organizations and national reconstruction efforts. Therefore, there is a need for appropriate tools to coordinate and supervise civil society in the preparedness phase as well as during an emergency. A comparative study uncovered the complex relationship between civil society and the state and local governments in their response and recovery activities during disasters.[[8]](#footnote-8)

# The traditional ethos regarding altruism in an emergency has been partially upheld by research, such as a comparative study of reconstruction efforts following Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and the earthquake in Kobe, Japan.[[9]](#footnote-9) An earlier study, conducted in the 1990s, also revealed the impact of social capital on responses to disasters.[[10]](#footnote-10)

# The complexities of managing partnerships while maximizing the potential of civil society organizations during emergencies in the US was a central theme in research conducted by Lewis Comfort and the Center for Disaster Research at the University of Pittsburgh.[[11]](#footnote-11) In a series of publications, Comfort advocated developing a policy for responding to emergencies and disasters that allows ample opportunities for independent and local organizations to be involved.[[12]](#footnote-12) However, this goal can only be achieved if decisionmakers are willing and able to allow community networks to operate. According to this approach, national emergency systems must accept the special role of localities and communities in managing community preparedness before a crisis occurs. This type of densely populated organizational environment can pose a challenge in terms of governance.

# After Hurricane Katrina, a new policy and approach developed in the US, known as the Integrated Community Based Disaster Management (ICBDM) model, which that emphasized the involvement of communities and civil society in recovery efforts.[[13]](#footnote-13) This model replaced the previous approach of centralized government action and spontaneous action by civil society. Other countries, notably Taiwan and other Southeast Asian countries, have been influenced by and adopted this model.

# Insights Into the Functioning of Civil Society During Emergencies, with Examples

# Failures in the Functioning of Civil Society

# International research has identified two arenas in which civil society organizations operating in response to a disaster may fail: excessive spontaneous activity during the initial response and recovery phase, or inadequate activity by civil organizations during these phases.

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# Excessive spontaneous activity during the response and recovery phases. In developed countries, this has been seen in the responses led by local and national organizations to disasters such as Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. In developing countries, excessive spontaneous activity, usually led by international aid organizations and foreign countries, has been seen in response to massive natural disasters such as the earthquakes in Haiti and Sri Lanka.

# Hurricane Katrina. In 2005, Hurricane Katrina devastated the city of New Orleans. Assessment of the relief efforts provided by civil society organizations during the emergency and the subsequent recovery efforts revealed a number of failures:

# Lack of coordination between the government and civil organizations

# Duplication of the same activity by multiple organizations

# Neglected areas

# Mismatch between the needs of the population and the organizations’ pattern of distributing aid

# Internal competition for resources among civil society organizations

# High overhead costs

# Opposition from the city’s stronger communities against rehabilitation efforts among disadvantaged communities

# These factors created a sense of despair and disappointment in the ability of civil society to provide an effective response to an emergency. There was reluctance to receive aid from third-sector organizations and a preference for assistance from the state institutions.

# Tsunami in Sri Lanka and Earthquake in Haiti. The failures in providing aid to the victims of a tsunami in Sri Lanka in 2004 and an earthquake in Haiti in 2010 are widely viewed as watershed events in the history of humanitarian aid provided by international organizations. The pattern of resource mobilization and action that had been prevalent in the West since the 1960s began to change, in response to criticism from involved organizations, as publicized in a number of important books. These failures include:

# Inadequate response to the needs of the population

# Over-emphasis on providing immediate aid in the initial response phase, when the main challenge was recovery

# Working with corrupt and ineffective intermediaries, leading to distribution of aid in ways that encouraged disorder and violence

# Paucity of aid that actually reached the victims

# Logistics that left a significant part of the aid in centers located far from the people in need

# Rendering the affected population passive and powerless

# Delegitimization of the local and national leadership

# Lack of activity by civil society organizations during the initial response and recovery phases following a disaster can make it difficult for subsequent rehabilitation efforts to succeed. This was seen, for example, after the earthquake in Kobe, Japan in 1995 and the earthquake in Chile in 2010.

# Earthquake in Kobe, Japan. After the earthquake in Kobe, the following failures of civil society became apparent:

# Lack of social networks. This was particularly notable among socially vulnerable and isolated populations, such as the elderly. During the phases of advance warning and evacuation of the impact area, the vast majority of people who escaped were rescued by family members, neighbors, and friends.

# Lack of knowledge and equipment. This greatly hampered the ability to rescue the many people who were trapped in the ruins.

# Gaps between the needs of the population and the government's rehabilitation policy. This became apparent during the rehabilitation stages, and led to ineffective resource allocation, slow rehabilitation, a lack of coordination for housing and transportation needs, inaccessibility of services to the elderly to services, and more.

# Lack of bottom-up planning in business rehabilitation. Resource allocation did not match the needs of businesses, sabotaging economic rehabilitation efforts in the city.

# After this crisis, the municipality of Kobe began developing a policy for coordinating the emergency management activities of the government and civil society organizations. The city encouraged the involvement of civil society organizations specializing in the field of emergency response. This led to more effective action during subsequent earthquakes. The new approach begins with preparation, followed by evacuation assistance during the disaster, and the participation of residents in reconstruction efforts.

# In the decade following the Kobe earthquake, the UN adopted an approach that redefines the roles of civil society organizations in a more sophisticated way than either community models or centralized political models.

# Civil Society in Chile after the 2010 Earthquake. An earthquake in Chile in 2010 killed some five hundred people. The disaster set off major repercussions including social chaos and looting. This took the Chilean government and its military by surprise, given their relatively high level of institutional preparedness and technology adequate for dealing with major earthquakes.

# Important lessons were learned from this experience, particularly regarding civil society’s involvement in the stages of preparedness and warning. In 2015, an even stronger earthquake hit close to urban centers, yet because the warning and evacuation systems functioned effectively, only 11 people lost their lives. During the evacuation and rescue activities in the initial response phase, civil society organizations integrated new online technologies and social networks that enabled the tracking of relatives and family members. During the emergency, relevant organizations received information about high-risk and vulnerable populations and were thus able to mobilize a large number of rescue volunteers.

# Training that simulated emergency situations, and the involvement of the population, contributed to improvement in the overall response, such as preventing travel that blocks roads and clearing sidewalks to facilitate mobility in an emergency. This integration of civil society in the country’s warning systems represents a rare innovation. Only certified and trained organizations are involved in this network.

# In recent years, Japanese and Chilean teams participated in joint training activities for responses to disasters. The cooperative effort involved Chile’s National Office of Emergency of the Interior Ministry (ONEMI), the Chilean army, local authorities, and civil society organizations. The activity involved operating warning and evacuation systems to provide assistance to at-risk groups and the public in schools, businesses, and workplaces. The nonprofit organization Inclusive was founded to care for disabled people in emergencies, and has become is a model for civil society organizations around the world.

# The Functioning of Civil Society Organizations During an Emergency

# This international review has identified three modes through which civil society organizations can offer assistance during emergencies:

# Local organizations linked to local communities -- Community Based Organizations (CBO)

# Professional organizations dealing with a defined group (elderly, at-risk children and youth, disabled people, the homeless, animals, etc.)

# Organizations that are embedded into national emergency systems (Red Cross/Crescent, Salvation Army)

# The research had identified few cases of beneficial functioning as a result of government cooperation between national governmental entities and civil society organizations. Improving governance in this context has been at the forefront of the field of emergency management around the world over the past few years. This priority is reflected in UN resolutions and the policy document issued by RAND, a central partner in shaping emergency policy in the USA.

# Civil society organizations during emergencies in developed countries: Research has found that civil society organizations that already emphasized responding to disasters are the ones that function the most successfully during all phases of emergency situations. One example is a volunteer fire department in Victoria Australia, which engages in routine training with the population in identifying fire hazards and fire prevention taking into account seasonal risks. They operate first response teams and provide assistance to the official fire brigades.

# Integrating local organizations into Early Warning Systems (EWS) has become a central feature of preparing small and remote communities for emergency situations. It has been found that face-to-face contact has the most beneficial impact on a population’s behavior and preparedness. Local knowledge about vulnerable populations is particularly important. Investment in appropriate technological infrastructure greatly increases the ability of civil society organizations to reach at-risk populations in emergency situations. Partnerships between civil society organizations and national emergency institutions have been developed in places such as Hawaii, Kenya, and Sri Lanka.

# The US Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) recently developed a Whole Community Approach. Its goal is to engage the entire community in preparedness via local organizations, in order to better meet their needs during an emergency. This approach views the community as an interwoven tapestry of households and organizations, and strives to address all the life realms and needs of its members. This approach enhances a previously widespread concept of recruiting volunteer organizations as a key part of involving the community to meet local needs during an emergency. The strength of the new approach lies in the ability to obtain information about the community’s needs and its resources in terms of physical assets, expertise, and volunteers.

# An evaluation a of the emergency preparedness program in Sussex County, Delaware, found a high level of knowledge sharing, mobilization of resources and tools, and especially residents’ involvement, which improved their level of awareness as well.

# There has been a shift from civil society organizations being involved only in first response assistance and recovery efforts towards their greater involvement in preparedness. This has become an integral and essential aspect of their professional identity. According to this new approach, civil society can only function effectively during an emergency if they are engaged in structured processes of preparedness at both the organizational and state level.

# For example, Chile and Japan had no developed civil society until recurrent earthquakes gave rise to civil organizations that cooperated with state institutions to prepare for future emergencies. In these countries, a civil society grew out of these emergency response organizations. The UN, GNDR, and RAND have developed a toolbox for use by third-sector organizations and the state. This includes a detailed strategy for coordinated action by state and civil society organizations during an emergency, beginning with preparedness, through providing aid during the disaster, and ending with the subsequent rehabilitation phase.

# Since 2015, most developed countries and many developing countries have adopted these protocols and have submitted plans for implementation in their country. This is a novelty for civil society, in that every organization is expected to adopt emergency assessments as part of its goals, identity, and activity.

1. <https://us.macmillan.com/books/9780312610586/thecrisiscaravan> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.gbv.de/dms/sub-hamburg/726846805.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 3 http://www.rand.org/pubs/tools/TL202.html [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.gndr.org/risk-informed-development-guide/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. # Bankoff, G., Frerks, G., & Hilhorst, D. (2004). *Mapping Vulnerability: Disasters, Development and People*. Earthscan.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://books.google.co.il/books?id=XX5WAwAAQBAJ&pg=PA1&lpg=PA1&dq=rajib+shaw+civil+society&source=bl&ots=aj0NTkO5iP&sig=SwvfW460lO7ue5ofP7YQDdTjKrw&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiVy_aWlZHRAhUZeFAKHe1dCh4Q6AEIMTAE#v=onepage&q=rajib%20shaw%20civil%20society&f=false> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-4-431-54877-5_1#page-1> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. file:///C:/Users/%D7%A0%D7%A8%D7%99/Downloads/fulltext\_stamped%20(1).pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.832.4807&rep=rep1&type=pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1467-7717.00112> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. <http://www.cdm.pitt.edu/Portals/2/PDF/Publications/Cities_at_Risk_Katrina_NewOrleans.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. <http://www.cdm.pitt.edu/Portals/2/PDF/Publications/self_organization_in_disaster_mitigation_and_management.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. <https://www.lsu.edu/faculty/fweil/CommunityInDisasterResponseConceptualModels.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)