**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**

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

Research tends to reflect the pattern of actions undertaken by civil society organizations; that is, emphasis has been placed on studying the aid they provide and their rehabilitative activities at the time of the crisis. Less attention has been given to the issue of preparedness. However, experiences during multiple natural disasters gave rise to the idea that civil society does not function well in an emergency, and sometimes even has a negative impact. This led to a new empirical 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 looks at the economic inefficiency of the international aid industry and the paucity of resources that reach the neediest populations. The book looks at 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. The authors looked beyond the community of humanitarian emergency organizations and considered the global political discourse.

# The New Consensus

# In the past two years, two highly respected international entities have published guidebooks in the spirit of this trend towards critiquing international aid organizations. These guidebooks indicate a new approach to civil society in general, with a particular emphasis on local organizations. They shift the focus to the issue of civil organizations’ preparedness for involvement during emergencies as a component of their identity. This approach strives to attract and engage local organizations rather than international ones. Finally, the guidebooks get down to the nuts-and-bolts level of the activity needed to maximize civil society’s potential in an emergency. This marks the end of the approach that assumed organizations would act spontaneously, and instead adopts the idea that the key to fully utilizing civil society’s 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 the framework for 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 by the United Nations during the decade following the catastrophic earthquake in Kobe, Japan. Its members include hundreds of self-identified civil society organizations that serve in emergencies in developed and less developed countries. The organization is an arm of the United Nations International Strategy for Risk Reduction (UNISDR).

# 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 supervision and maintenance. 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 of this review is based on a broad definition of the concept of civil society organizations as nongovernmental organizations that are not private businesses. In the context of emergency operations, a distinction is made among these organizations according to several parameters:

# Local community

# State/National

# International

# A recent innovation has been increased use of the term Community Based Organization (CBO). This follows research conducted in the 1990s, which yielded mixed results regarding the need for massive investment from the authorities in order to achieve the potential for preparing 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. 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 among 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, on the assumption that the intention was to refer to community organizations.

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)