

International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters

Special Issue

Issues in Comparative Emergency Management

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Editor's introduction

By B. E. Aquirre*

The meetings of the International Research Committee on Disasters (IRCD) in Brisbane and Melbourne, Australia, coinciding with the activities of the Committee during the meetings of the International Sociological Association (ISA), are without doubt the most successful meetings in the history of the Committee. Their success can be traced to the superb organisational work of Andrew Coghlan and Joe Scanlon; the extraordinary hospitality and good will of Emergency Management Australia (EMA) and the EMA Institute; the cooperation of other colleagues at the *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, RMIT University, and the Department of Human Services; and the general intellectual cordiality and openness of the participants. The participants were from many walks of life, from private practice, national emergency management and international agencies, and from universities and research centres on various continents. Each in her or his own way contributed to the lustre of the proceedings. Indeed, the sense of accomplishment is so widespread that the intent of the IRCD is to continue the workshops in upcoming meetings of the ISA in South Africa and Europe.

This special issue of the International Journal of Mass Emergency Disasters (*IJMED*) reflects the intent of the workshop, a sharing of Australian and other research, and occurs in conjunction with a parallel special issue of the *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*. It is not meant to be all-inclusive of the scholarship presented during the meetings, for the papers underwent peer reviews and some of the initial presentations could not be rewritten by their authors in time for their inclusion in this special issue; others have been accepted for publication elsewhere (for a complete list of ISA presentations, see the IRCD newsletter *Unscheduled Events* at http://muweb.millersville.edu/~isarcdue/UE_NOV_2001.PDF; a summary of the EMAI workshop is found at http://muweb.millersville.edu/~isarcdue/UE_SEPT_2002.PDF).

There is a varying degree of thematic continuity among the five articles that make up this special issue, captured by three underlying themes. The first two articles, by Gabriel and by Buckle and his associates, explore disaster management issues in Australia and the innovations that are taking place in Australian thinking about disasters, in what constitutes an enviable perspective if compared to other countries' efforts to mitigate disaster losses. A third article, by Handmer, also uses material from Australia to examine with exceeding rigor and discernment the complexities of disaster loss estimation practices. The final two articles, by Norman and Cole and by Scanlon, explore, respectively, emergency management issues in England and Wales and in Canada in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

In 'The Development of Municipal Emergency Management Planning in Victoria, Australia,' Paul Gabriel points out the unique blend of influences and conceptions that inform the emergency policy process in Victoria. As he points out, the emphasis on local initiative and civilian participation, and prevention and mitigation at the community level, transforms work on hazards, for it allows for a holistic understanding of the functions of government and other actors and an understanding of risk reduction as part of the development of resilient communities. Given the current emphasis in the U.S. on an overall military solution to all threats, there is irony in reading that this Australian model, with its emphasis on an engaged citizenry and local participation, in fact had its inception in the U.S.

Buckle, Marsh, and Smale's reframing of risk, hazards, and disasters expands on these themes by presenting selected findings from their research in four different settings. To my way of thinking, one of the most important implications of this summary of their recent work is the expansion of the concept of vulnerability to include considerations of the resilience of local institutions, or what they call the capacity of communities. This has very important implications. The vulnerability paradigm is often used as a synonym for weakness, marginality, exploitation, and injustice, part of a political economy view of disasters in which vulnerability stands for poverty. Much more nuanced understandings are possible, however, if the resilience of communities, families, and victims is understood as a key dimension of their vulnerability. Doing so forces us

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to recognise their historical specificity, to give them power as actors in their own lives rather than looking at them as inert and in need of saving and rescuing by government bureaucracies, community organisers, and the intelligentsia.

Derived from his work on estimating economic losses associated with floods in Queensland, Australia, John Handmer's assessment of disaster economic loss estimation techniques has wide applicability. He identifies categories of reasons for variations in estimates. His conclusions, that in many instances loss estimations are neither accurate nor comparable and that there are uncertainties inherent in the approach to making them so, run contrary to a contemporary overemphasis on accounting for disaster losses in terms of precise money figures.

Finally, the two remaining articles addressing the post-September 11th environment are widely different in tone. The first, by Sarah Norman and Eve Coles, gives a well-informed albeit alarming perspective on the lack of effectiveness of disaster planning and coordination in England and Wales and the resulting vulnerabilities. It is worth quoting from them on this key point:

[M]uch of the impetus generated by events of the past two years has slowly disappeared as the recommendations of the review [of emergency planning in the United Kingdom] have been buried in the bureaucracy of the Civil Service administration known in the U.K. as 'Whitehall.'

A distinct lack of research from a British perspective is evident.... As yet another review is relegated to the 'slow waltz' of Whitehall, the question must be asked whether the role and importance of issues such as legislation, structure, communication and coordination will continue to be shrouded in secrecy, hampered by the continued mismatch of policies that successive governments have introduced, and low public interest, all of which is demonstrated by the last fifty years of the British civil defense system.

The surprising contrast to the relatively high effectiveness of disaster programs in Australia is painfully clear.

Joe Scanlon's analysis of the multiple emergency operations centres (EOCs) that operated in Gander, Newfoundland, to handle the problems posed by 38 diverted flights to its airport on September 11th not only traces the origins of these EOCs and how they worked together, but it also offers rare, rich documentation of the key insight that successful disaster response is a mixture of planning *and* improvisation. As Scanlon indicates, the success of the operation was a mixture of local preparedness, the importance of the airport for the local economy, and the community's previous disaster experience with previous airport incidents. But it also resulted from the ability of the people of Gander to work together under an implicit shared collective purpose that encouraged a 'can do' approach to the emergency.

I am very pleased to offer the readers of this special issue a set of articles by a distinguished group of contributors. They will find in the collection a wide set of topics, a diverse set of national experiences, and a growing maturity of the field of disaster studies that augurs well for its future.

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