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MAINE VOICES

Smart societies don't shun knowledge

We've gained a lot of knowledge about how to handle disasters, but are using little of it.

The feeling that it is inappropriate to critically evaluate the government response to the humanitarian ordeal so many face in Hurricane Katrina's wake is an unease to which disaster researchers have long been sensitive.

We investigate how society copes with risks and their impacts, including while events are still unfolding, as well as long afterwards. But the level of rhetoric about blame emerging regarding the immediate emergency response, particularly in New Orleans, heightens the need to use the lessons that have been learned at a cost over time.

Nonetheless, the evidence is that there is amnesia at crucially high levels regarding hard-earned lessons and insights of the last 50 years.

The first modern disaster response study was the U.S. government's Strategic Bombing Survey late in and just after World War II.

The survey most importantly revealed the erroneous assumption that saturation bombing brings an enemy population to its knees. That was a myth – at least

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jack D. Kartzel, a professor at USM's Muskie School, conducted his first National Science Foundation disaster assessment in 1980 on the eruptions of Mount St. Helens, and was a member of the scientific committees of the Second National Assessment of Research on Natural Hazards.

for non-atomic bombing – and a research-based lesson sadly forgotten in a later war.

When Alan Barton, later followed by many other social scientists, began in the 1950s to study how communities cope in peacetime natural disasters, new lessons about myths of disaster emerged.

Research eventually helped support a change in disaster planning doctrine from the civil defense mentality that treated local and state government as nonentities in disaster, to a more mature and useful collaborative system both among levels of government and between the public and voluntary and private sectors.

Over time, disaster research has helped document how every level of government and private organizations need to work together; how the on-spot networks that have to spring up in disasters can be aided by creating the relationships beforehand, between local fire and police, between local, state and federal personnel, and between those authorities and key neighborhood, community and statewide

NGOs and community-based organizations.

The modest partnership between researchers and emergency managers, including the pre-Homeland Security FEMA, has produced important technical improvements in how to warn people.

Managers can help them be motivated to hear and respond, oversee difficult post-evacuation returns to residences and anticipate chaotic incident command needs when informal volunteers appear on the scene with valuable but unorganized resources, to name a few areas.

Not surprisingly, our abilities have been strained by Katrina, the largest and most difficult urban disaster since the 1906 San Francisco quake – an event injuring an extremely vulnerable population and one that will take years if not lifetimes to overcome.

Nonetheless, the evidence is that there is amnesia at crucially high levels regarding hard-earned lessons and insights of the last 50 years.

One piece of that evidence is that FEMA, as part of the Homeland Security Department, has lost a strong regional office presence throughout the nation, crucial to the kinds of pre-disaster relationships so effective in a natural disaster.

This has eroded years of progress. Instead, a highly centralized, law-enforcement-oriented climate has pervaded what in the years just prior to 9/11 was becoming an increasingly better, integrated national capacity to deal with large-scale

natural disasters.

It is as if all that knowledge gained at cost was suddenly rendered irrelevant by the new threats of on-shore terrorism. It was not.

The United States, above all other societies, has prospered and led by embracing and using scientific and technical knowledge of all kinds that is at least in principle above politics.

It has been said by many commentators that this grave disaster reveals societal fault lines. One I fear is the shunning by national leaders of past knowledge gained about how to work with civilian needs to cope together with acts of nature.

— Special to the Press Herald