The Importance of 
International Disaster Management Studies 
in the Field of Emergency Management

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Abstract:
Traditionally, the myriad courses offered by FEMA’s Emergency Management Institute have focused solely on the study and practice of emergency management as they pertain to municipalities within the United States. Only a small number of these courses make even a glancing reference to the problem of how disasters are managed elsewhere in the world. As a result, curricula tend to be limited to the development and practice of the emergency management discipline at the domestic level. This paper argues that such a bias should be abandoned so that students and practitioners in the United States may benefit from the rest of the world’s experience in emergency and disaster management. This knowledge is vital for five reasons: 1) The United States’ emergency management system is imperfect, 2) The United States is moving towards a ‘Third World’ system, 3) Climate change equals bigger, stronger, and more numerous disasters, 4) Climate change means global instability, and 5) The expanding discipline demands the inclusion of international disaster management studies.

Introduction

For the first time in three years, the topic of international disaster management will not be featured on the agenda of the FEMA Emergency Management Institute Higher Education Conference. It’s absence leaves a major gap in the comprehensive study and understanding of emergency management. It’s exclusion from the conference (and likewise in most emergency management curricula at university programs throughout the United States) is primarily a product of the deficiency of educators and resources currently focusing on the topic. Both of these shortfalls, which together contribute to the flawed popular belief that the international experience has little to offer American emergency managers, can and should be corrected within the academic community.

What is International Disaster Management?

Two separate but interrelated concepts are represented by the term ‘international disaster management’ in academics, namely:

1. The study of disaster management in scenarios where the capacity of a single nation’s response mechanisms are overwhelmed
2. The study of the diverse emergency and disaster management systems and structures that exist throughout the world
Not one field of study within the various emergency management programs administered by colleges, universities, and other institutions throughout the United States should consider the international experience irrelevant, as the following five arguments will demonstrate.

**Argument 1: The United States’ emergency management system is imperfect**

Most would agree that the US emergency management system is the most advanced and well funded in the world. The equipment utilized, the training applied, and the dedication of its many practitioners to exercise and testing, are unequalled. Despite all of these achievements failures occur with regularity, thus proving in cruel fashion that we as a nation do not yet possess all of the answers to emergency management’s problems.

When international disaster management is broached, what typically come to mind are the frail emergency management systems found in the developing world, rife with insufficient funding, poor training, corruption, and other obstacles. However, there are a great number of highly successful emergency management systems found in the many industrialized nations of the world, and a handful in the developing world, that we stand to learn from considerably. Their lessons become our lessons only when we pay attention. For example:

- **The Netherlands**: After fighting the encroachment of the North Sea for over 800 years, the Dutch have developed a flood control system unrivaled by any other nation. US planners often measure success in terms of resisting 100-year floods (as is currently employed in New Orleans) or 500-year floods. In the Netherlands, flood control systems are being updated to increase protection to 100,000-year flood events from the present 10,000-year flood defenses in place.

- **Japan**: The Japanese have been suffering from the effects of tsunamis for over a thousand years. Almost 200 major events have been recorded in the last 1300 years alone, or an average of one event per 6.7 years. The result of this experience is a remarkably diverse tsunami management system that combines widespread public education, advanced warning systems, and extensive mitigation countermeasures.

- **Israel**: As a result of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, the government of Israel has developed highly advanced systems of threat monitoring, detection, and prevention, and has improved their systems for dealing with the consequences when events actually occur. Following the September 11th terrorist attacks, officials from the Department of Homeland Security, and from many State and local government agencies, met with officials from the Government of Israel to learn from their experiences related to terrorism (including anti-missile technology on commercial airliners, airline passenger security, monitoring of terrorist groups, and attack scene security.)

- **Australia and New Zealand**: The hazards risk management methodology developed by the national emergency management agencies of Australia and New Zealand are the most comprehensive in the world. They were one of the primary resources used in the development of FEMA’s approach of the same
topic when guidance was developed for use by towns and cities throughout the United States.

- **India**: With the help of the British colonialists, the Indian government solved a centuries-old problem of drought and famine. Recognizing that the nation was never without sufficient resources, and that their only deficiency was in the movement of those resources to those in need, they developed the extensive railway system that reaches virtually every region of the country. Since its initiation, there has not been a single drought-related famine in India. Many researchers have theorized that the most significant failure in the response to Hurricane Katrina on the Gulf Coast in 2005 was a breakdown in the systems used to transport needed supplies to disaster-affected zones.

**Argument 2: The United States is moving towards a ‘Third World’ system**

Traditionally, disaster response in the developing world (often referred to as the ‘Third World’) has revolved around the recognition that central governments are unable to manage all of the consequences of ‘mega-disasters’. These governments have compensated by forming pre- and post-disaster cooperative agreements and other arrangements with nongovernmental, nonprofit, and private organizations and businesses, who together provide the various components of the response that the beleaguered government is unable to manage on their own. Included in these services are mass care, transportation, re-supply, and case management, among others. These organizations are good at what they do, and they do it regularly, leaving them much more prepared and more able to deliver when called upon to do so.

The insinuation that the US might be moving towards a ‘Third-World’ system evokes negative reactions – in response to assumptions that the speaker is claiming that the US is regressing. However, the opposite may in fact be true – in a sense the shift is a ‘correction’ to assumptions that may have been the basis of flawed emergency management practices - as were evidenced in the response to Hurricane Katrina in the Gulf Coast. Following Katrina, many of the shortfalls of the government response systems in the United States were exposed. Private and non-profit organizations stepped in to fill existing gaps, including businesses like Chevron and Walmart, international nonprofit organizations like Save the Children, local organizations like the Baton Rouge Community Foundation, and religious organizations like Southern Baptist Disaster Relief.

When disasters occur in the developing world, much of the funding to support response and recovery is passed by the United Nations or the affected government directly to organizations that specialize in varying response and recovery tasks. Although the United States Government has worked with the American Red Cross for decades, it has little experience in more widespread application of this cooperative practice, and almost no experience exists at the State and local levels. Since Katrina, many changes have been made to accommodate such a system, and many new cooperative agreements have been made – a sign of the shift that is already occurring.
Argument 3: Climate change equals bigger, stronger, and more numerous disasters

Regardless of an individual’s theory on the causes of climate change – be it part of a natural cycle or a human induced trend – it is undeniable that the phenomenon is occurring and we are worse for wear as result. The US Agency for International Development (USAID) Office of Foreign Disasters Assistance (OFDA) has already recognized and documented that disasters are growing steadily in number. Their size and reach are also increasing, and the result points to more regional, multi-national disaster events that will increasingly involve the United States. These disasters will require considerable cross-border cooperation in their management, and will call upon an international employment of many US emergency management resources.

Climate change is also bringing about a change in the very nature of the nation’s hazard profile. The United States is witnessing an increase in the magnitude and intensity of existing hazards, and it is seeing for the first time new hazards for which it has little or no experience at all. For all of these hazard shifts, the nation’s emergency managers have much to learn from the many other countries that have endured such events for millennia. The lessons that can be learned from them will help to save lives and property in the short term, and spare our communities from the shallow learning curve that results from high-consequence, low probability disasters.

Argument 4: Climate change means global instability

Addressing the impact of disasters outside of the United States has been primarily managed by OFDA, the disaster management branch of USAID. This assistance comes in the form of coordination, technical assistance, and financial support. OFDA assistance serves two purposes: 1) It is a diplomatic gesture, and 2) It is a humanitarian responsibility. However, there is a third reason that will likely be added to these two that will result in an increase in both the scope and the nature of US emergency management assistance abroad.

A recent statement made by 11 retired US Generals and Admirals proclaimed that climate change has become a national security issue1. The crux of their argument is that the resultant disasters and environmental degradation will create conditions in the affected countries that contribute to a loss of stability affecting the United States both directly (from a flood of illegal immigration) and indirectly (resource loss, conflict, economic losses, terrorism). There is a clear link between development and disaster management, and the United States Government has already taken an active role in ensuring the efficacy of how development aid already being spent in these disaster-prone countries.

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1 The Center for Naval Analyses (CNA) Corporation brought together eleven retired three-star and four-star admirals and generals to provide advice, expertise and perspective on the impact of climate change. The resulting report, “National Security and the Threat of Climate Change,” found that: 1) projected climate change poses a serious threat to America's national security, 2) climate change acts as a threat multiplier for instability in some of the most volatile regions of the world, 3) projected climate change will add to tensions even in stable regions of the world, and 4) climate change, national security and energy dependence are a related set of global challenges.
This translates to a need for an expansion in emergency management training more suitable for these different climates, regions, and economies. And when disasters do occur, it will be contingent upon the United States to ensure that the recovery that follows allows for a viable future for the affected nations. This is a much greater direct role than has traditionally been taken by US emergency managers.

**Argument 5: The expanding discipline demands the inclusion of international disaster management studies**

Today’s disaster managers are taking on a much more important role in municipal government at all levels, and are assuming responsibilities way outside the realm of yesterday’s professionals. Programs throughout the country are recognizing the links between emergency management and other careers and disciplines, including business, public health, education, and international development. For instance, at the George Washington University, home to the Institute for Crisis, Disaster and Risk Management, cooperative agreements are already underway with the university’s Elliot School for International Affairs to allow students of both disciplines the opportunity for shared knowledge and training. The fact is, more and more students of emergency management will be looking to work in the international community, and the one-sided view of the United States’ experience cannot adequately prepare them for the range of issues that exist outside of our borders.

One of the primary obstacles to teaching international disaster management in the past has been the lack of courses and textbook resources with which educators could use with their students. A small number of practitioners were relied upon to teach an even smaller number of courses that were offered at a handful of universities. This trend has begun to reverse, most notably in reaction to the massive international response that followed the 2004 tsunami events in Asia. Moreover, there finally exists a comprehensive university-level textbook covering the full range of topics on the subject, appropriately titled “Introduction to International Disaster Management,” (2006) published by Butterworth-Heinemann.

**About the Author:**
Damon P. Coppola received his M.E.M. in Crisis, Emergency, and Risk Management from the George Washington University School of Engineering and Applied Science. He is the author of *Introduction to International Disaster Management*, and co-author of several leading emergency management textbooks including *Introduction to Emergency Management* and *Introduction to Homeland Security*. Mr. Coppola is co-author of the FEMA EMI Higher Education Course *Hazards Risk Management*, and the FEMA textbook *Emergency Management Case Studies*. He has provided emergency and disaster management assistance to The World Bank, the United Nations, The (US) Corporation for National and Community Service, Save the Children US Programs, the Humane Society of the United States, The Army Corps of Engineers, the Casey Foundation, the Council on Foundations, and many municipal emergency management agencies. Mr. Coppola currently resides in Bangkok, Thailand, and may be reached at dcoppola@gwu.edu.