

Civil Society in Crisis: A Literature Review from Around the World / Dr. Neri Horowitz

Introduction: Global Shift in the Field of Civil Society in Emergency Situations

The field of applied research on how civil society organizations operate in response to emergencies caused by natural disasters is undergoing change. Up until three years ago, most of this research was conducted within under one of two perspectives. The first perspective, written from a “bottom-up” viewpoint often suggested that civil society can play a decisive role in emergencies, and even replace national and international emergency organizations. The second perspective, “top-down,” is common in emergency administrations, and seeks models for managing civil society. Neither of these perspectives challenges the spontaneous approach of civil society operations in emergencies.

Reflecting civil society’s patterns of action, research has emphasized action in the field of rehabilitation and sometimes aspects of immediate aid in crisis and rehabilitation; it has focused less 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 role, leading to a new approach. This empirical approach emphasizes 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 the actions 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 This

¹ <https://us.macmillan.com/books/9780312610586/thecrisiscaravan>

book reveals the economic inefficiency of the international aid industry and the limited amount 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 Both books argue that the approaches and operating patterns of civil society organizations are not only ineffective but may even have harmful consequences, looking beyond the community of humanitarian emergency organizations to consider global political discourse on this issue.

The New Consensus

The critical attitude towards international aid organizations has led, in recent years, to the publication of two guides that signify a new approach concerning civil society in general and emphasize local organizations in particular. These guides, published by two entities with an exceptional international status, shift the focus of engagement with civil society in emergencies to the field of organizational preparedness and its incorporation into their identity. They draw attention to local organizations rather than international ones and delve into the nuts and bolts of the practicalities needed to harness the potential of civil society in emergencies. These approaches mark the end of a stance that assumes and relies on the spontaneous action of organizations, based on the presumption that the key to maximizing the potential of civil society lies in preparedness.

The first guidebook from the RAND Corporation, a prominent socioeconomic research body in the USA presents an analytical framework for examining each organization in terms of its knowledge, resources, infrastructure, equipment, the services it provides, its relations with partners, its learning capability, and its potential information collection.³ RAND suggests that, as

² <https://www.gbv.de/dms/sub-hamburg/726846805.pdf>

³ <http://www.rand.org/pubs/tools/TL202.html>

part of this preparation, policymakers and decisionmakers should routinely conduct a two-stage mapping of organizations: an internal assessment by the organizations and evaluation of 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)- Risk-Informed Development Guide.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:

1. Shifting the emphasis from response and recovery to building infrastructures for routine intervention
2. Shifting the emphasis from national organizations to local organizations
3. Developing local knowledge and professionalism in emergencies as a condition for non-spontaneous operation

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

⁴ <https://www.gndr.org/risk-informed-development-guide/>
<https://www.gndr.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/0-Risk-Informed-Development-Guide-full-EN.pdf>

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.

Foundational Assumptions and Categories in the Review

The methodology used in this review is based on a broad definition of the concept of civil society as any organization that is neither governmental or private/commercial. Within these organizations, when referring to action in emergencies, it is necessary to distinguish between organizations based on several parameters:

1. Local community-based
2. National
3. International

One of the innovations in the field of local community organizations is the increasing use of the term CBO (Community-Based Organization). 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

Another diagnostic trait for categorizing organizations pertains to their activities in the realms of preparedness, response, and recovery. Previous research has primarily 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.

⁵ Bankoff, G., Frerks, G., & Hilhorst, D. (2004). *Mapping Vulnerability: Disasters, Development and People*. Earthscan.

Due to the limited scope of this review, we did not differentiate between the actions of civil society that could be categorized by the type of organization. We were also careful not to separate 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 in emergencies. 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 “normative” works suggest desirable models of integration, collaboration, and harnessing of human capital potential. The empirical studies related to 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, people with disabilities, education, the elderly, health, etc.). Another group of studies analyzes emergency events and offers critique of state and civil society organizations for not fully utilizing the potential of the local community.

Numerous academic and professional journals publish research on disasters and disaster management. These include: *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 emergencies. 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, and 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. According to this approach, the condition for maximizing the potential of a civil society organization during a disaster is associated with the preparedness phase.

Shaw noted that the 1995 earthquake in Kobe, Japan was a 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 deal with an earthquake led to a change in the culture of civil society. The focus of civil society organization shifted towards creating a culture of preparedness generally, and particularly with regards so population evacuation.

Another of Shaw's contributions is related to findings according to which, in developed societies facing a crisis, a significant part of the importance of civil society organizations is tied to addressing the needs of those most vulnerable, such as the elderly and the disabled. This is due

to the need for detailed identification and face-to-face contact when providing physical or emotional assistance.

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

1. Promoting policy, governance, and advocacy on the issue of emergencies
2. Preparedness through knowledge development, training, and education
3. Mapping and assessing risks in the organization's field of operation
4. Developing an infrastructure for the response and recovery actions necessary when facing a disaster
5. 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 GNDR⁶ and the tools offered in the guide by experts at the RAND Corporation.⁷ This consensus represents a shift away from spontaneous action on the part of civil society, towards professionalism in disaster responsiveness as a component of an organization's identity. This has the potential to improve governance in the interactions between government emergency organizations and civil society.

The literature on the work of civil society during emergencies is relatively sparse when it comes to developed countries, as compared with literature on developing countries. There is

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https://books.google.co.il/books?id=XX5WAwAAQBAJ&pg=PA1&lpg=PA1&dq=rajib+shaw+civil+society&source=bl&ots=aj0NTkQ5iP&sig=SwvfW460lO7ue5ofP7YQDdTjKrw&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewiVy_aWIZHRAhUZeFAKHe1dCh4Q6AEIMTAE#v=onepage&q=rajib%20shaw%20civil%20society&f=false

⁷ https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-4-431-54877-5_1#page-1

slightly more written about developed countries such as Chile and Japan that have faced repeated disasters. While developed countries have many advantages, the effectiveness of national government and the presence of local government bodies can complicate efforts to effectively utilize these advantages.

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. It reflects a two-pronged 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 rehabilitation efforts following hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, Louisiana. Decisions needed to be made regarding the location of temporary housing for evacuees, and organizations representing strong populations operated according to the “not in my backyard” (NIMBY) model. This is an example of how pre-existing societal inequalities may cause conflicts between the work of civil society organizations and national rehabilitation efforts; it has given rise to the current focus on governance in civil society during disasters and the need for appropriate tools to coordinate and supervise the preparedness phase.

A comparative study on the relationship between civil society and the state and local governments in the response during and after disasters further depicts the complexity therein. 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 and the earthquake

in Kobe, Japan.⁸ An earlier study, conducted in the 1990s, also revealed the impact of social capital on responses to disasters.⁹

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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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 emphasizes the involvement of communities and civil society in recovery efforts', as summarized in Patel.¹² This model replaced the previous approach of centralized government action and spontaneous action

⁸<https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=6b40f55d976f2dca9882d830463af650e86d2d6f>

⁹ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1467-7717.00112>

¹⁰ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1078087405284881>

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https://www.researchgate.net/publication/266737137_An_Interactive_Intelligent_Spatial_Information_System_IIS_IS_For_Disaster_Management_A_Community_Model_for_Hazardous_Material

¹² <https://www.lsu.edu/faculty/fweil/CommunityInDisasterResponseConceptualModels.pdf>

by civil society. Other countries, notably Taiwan and other Southeast Asian countries, have been influenced by and adopted this model.

Examples and Insights on the Functioning of Civil Society During Emergencies

A. 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 (discussed below): excessive spontaneous activity during the initial response and recovery phase, or inadequate activity by civil organizations during these phases.

- 1. 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 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 nonprofit organizations and a preference for assistance from 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*

2. 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 phase, 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 2014, 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 work involved operating warning and evacuation systems to provide assistance to at-risk groups and the greater 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.

3. 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:

- A. Local organizations linked to local communities: Community Based Organizations (CBO)
- B. Professional organizations dedicated to a defined group (the elderly, at-risk children and youth, people with disabilities, people dealing with homelessness, animals, etc.)
- C. Organizations that are embedded into national emergency systems (Red Cross/Crescent, Salvation Army)

D. The research identifies very few cases of positive outcomes resulting from coordination between the government and civil society at the national level. Improving synergy in this context is at the forefront of the global emergency management field in recent years, as reflected in the decisions of the UN and the policy document of the RAND Corporation, which acts as a central partner in shaping the American emergency policy

Civil society organizations during emergencies in developed countries: Research has found that civil society organizations which already emphasized disaster responsiveness are the ones that function most successfully during all phases of emergency situations. One example is a volunteer fire department in Victoria, Australia, which engages in routine training together with the local 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. Moreover, investment in appropriate technological infrastructure greatly increases the ability of civil society organizations to reach at-risk populations in emergency situations. In places like Hawaii, Kenya, and Sri Lanka, partnerships have been established between civil society organizations and national emergency institutions.

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 stages of life and the 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 this 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 of the emergency preparedness program in Sussex County, Delaware, revealed a high level of knowledge sharing, resource mobilization, and tools, and especially the activation of the residents, which improved public 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 organizations 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 nonprofit organizations and the government. This includes a detailed strategy for coordinated action by state and civil society organizations during an emergency: beginning with preparedness, followed by aid during the disaster, and ending with the rehabilitation phase.

Since 2015, most developed countries and many developing countries have adopted these protocols and have submitted plans for implementation. 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.