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COORDINATION FOR DISASTERS



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With the rise of interest in international relief, and the birth of an unprecedented number of separate relief organizations, mostly small and of uncertain experience, there has arisen a demand for coordination of the agencies involved. Coordination is usually advocated on the grounds that greater efficiency or effectiveness can thereby be achieved. Effectiveness tends to be valued above efficiency when life-saving operations are under way, while the latter takes precedence as rational, cost-benefit criteria are applied to post-crisis recovery (Quarantelli 77:104). It is also sometimes suggested that a coordinated approach to relief has good public relations appeal for donors, and that order and discipline are to be valued as good per se.

With regard to efficiency, the prime objectives of coordination are the avoidance of material waste, duplication of effort, excessive coverage, and/or loss of time and effort. These objectives can be achieved by the sharing of resources, including for example information, transport, warehousing facilities, and specialist staff. Efficiency can also be achieved by dividing up the disaster area among the helping agencies so that each is responsible for delivering to the population in its assigned territory all of the services which are needed. A third approach to greater efficiency is to organize a division of labor among the agencies so that each is responsible for a given service in all or any of the affected areas (Taylor 72). A combination of these methods may be used to great effect.

The secondary objective of coordination in relation to the goal of efficiency is the avoidance of counterproductive responses on the part of multiple relief agents. In a major disaster, losses in time and effort caused by the convergence on the scene of countless individuals, organizations, and material goods, can be considerable. The affective and normative panoply with which disaster is heralded drives many actors to dispatch themselves or material assistance to the affected area. However, both personnel and material aid are frequently selected on the basis of stereotypical needs which are popularly believed to be associated with disasters. These inputs are made available, but often without clearly defined purposes or an adequate picture of how the additional resources will help. An uncoordinated mass response of this kind imposes a strain on physical space, communications facilities, and the patience of victims and those few officials who are legitimately involved with the event. It has been hypothesized that the greater the number of outside organizations converging on the scene, the greater the amount of interorganizational conflict one can expect (Mileti et al 75:90-94; Warheit 68:124). A sufficiently prestigious or powerful coordinating body can therefore perform four functions in relation to the convergence phenomenon. It can attempt to dissuade unqualified organizations and misguided individuals from lending their presence or sending inappropriate assistance; it can issue guidance on what does constitute an appropriate response; it can direct that inappropriate aid which does arrive into non-harmful channels of activity; and it can assist in resolving disputes between the otherwise uncoordinated helping organizations.

With regard to achieving effectiveness, the prime objective of coordination is to ensure that resources are distributed to the areas of greatest need, and that they are distributed equitably within areas of similar need. A second objective is to ensure that the methods and program norms employed by each agency do not conflict with those employed by any other agency. Where many private individuals, private voluntary organizations, government departments and intergovernmental agencies are all trying to help in one area, there will be many opportunities for conflicting understandings of what needs to be done and how programs of assistance should be organized. Unless minimal common policies are agreed upon, the available resources are likely to be distributed unfairly among the needy; there will be confusion and misunderstanding in the minds of the victims; and there will be ample room for resentment and bitterness to grow up among those differentially benefitting. The job of a coordinating agency should be to issue guidelines on the relief policies to be pursued, and to facilitate a compatibility among the different approaches to relief which are adopted by the various helping agencies.

The third objective of coordination which can lead to greater effectiveness in the delivery of relief, devolves on the fact that no one relief organization can provide a complete range of services to the disaster victims. Disaster relief and reconstruction in technologically sophisticated cultures demands an array of specialists each with their own particular skills. The more technologically complex the society rendering relief, the more elaborate is the functional differentiation (Kieffer 77:17-18;

Schneider 57:14). In order that the victims be able to reap the benefit of any one service, other complementary services often have to be provided. The greater, therefore, is the need for coordination in achieving any given effect. Indeed, without a coordination of inputs, some will achieve no benefit at all. Medicines without appropriately qualified personnel to dispense them can be as useless as building materials without the tools to work them or credit to buy them.

There are a number of factors which can inhibit coordination in an emergency situation. In the first few hours or days after a disaster having sudden impact, the physical disruption and disorganization of communications facilities makes the contacting of others more difficult. The length of time it takes before a true assessment of the gravity of the disaster has been formed, allows very different perceptions of needs. Different degrees of importance are attached to the event and disagreements reign over whether normal procedures should be cast aside and whether unusual cooperation with others is justified. However, as transport and telecommunications facilities are quickly restored, these reasons lose importance to other, less physical obstacles. Chief among these is the normative or ethical basis for the relief activity. For the would-be helper, rational considerations are suppressed by the heavy charges of emotion attached to the belief that something should be done quickly. Each volunteer or relief agency has its own perception of what is important and urgent, and will wish to pursue these, largely irrespective of the perceptions of others. Getting on to do something generally appears more important than being sure that what is done

is most appropriate in the circumstances and that it will not conflict with others' plans.

The third obstacle to coordination is closely related to the second, but depends more specifically on the lack of training of relief agency officials. Those who feel that they have special responsibility for developing an emergency program, but who have neither training which would assist them in sifting through the options available, nor training which could help them to identify points at which their agency's activities may conflict with the programs of others, may too readily alight on a course of action which relieves them from pressures of the moment. The internal organizational pressures to allocate resources to identifiable ends quickly -- often for fund-raising and public relations purposes, combine with an ignorance of the dangers of not coordinating, so that spending valuable time with others is not awarded the priority which it rightfully deserves.

The fourth obstacle to coordination is the need which many relief agencies experience for their own separate, identifiable, public image. This is especially true of the private non-governmental organizations which rely on public subscription for their support. Each agency feels that it must be able to demonstrate to its donor public how its contributions are used and, by implication, what the advantages are of contributing to that particular agency over contributing to any other similar organization. The competitive spirit is anathema to inter-agency coordination. Depending on the organization in question, individual programs of relief are regularly fashioned

with an eye to their publicity value, rather than according to whether they will fit in with a coordinated, effective, and efficient response by all agencies.

Not only may each relief organization have its own constituency of donors, but some also have their own constituencies of victims. Churches or affinity groups are prone to have members scattered throughout a disaster-affected area. These types of organizations may insist that they should have the right to assist their members, and only their members, in all of those places, irrespective of the work being done by other organizations with the population at large. However, because of the practical difficulty, or unacceptability, of distinguishing members from non-members, an affinity group may end up by attempting to serve all claimants who approach it for assistance. Achieving coordination by allocating different organizations to different areas then becomes highly problematic.

A factor which produces a need for coordination and is, of itself, an obstacle to achieving it, is the large number of new organizations which may be born as a result of an emergency. New and unofficial groups emerge in inverse proportion to the degree of public confidence that authorities and existing relief agencies have the situation in hand; and in proportion to existing opportunities for the participation of would-be helpers in the relief effort. When the crisis appears grave but unclearly defined; when the officials do not give an immediate lead; where inter-organizational coordination is low; and when the community as a whole has relatively

little experience of dealing with crisis; then new groups under new leaders can be expected to spring into existence (Janis 54:21; Mileti et al 75:72-3). Even more than with established relief agencies, the basis for participation in these new groups will be normative rather than utilitarian (Dynes 70:671), high stress being placed on the virtue of doing something, rather than on selecting the optimal and economically most rational course of action. Local leaders will emerge (Bates et al 63; Killian 54:69; Mileti et al 75: 88,124; Taylor et al 76) and are often effective for as long as the needs remain elemental. But from the point of view of achieving a coordinated response, a difficulty arises in that these leaders operate without any necessary allegiance to a central authority (Barton 69:94) and are therefore extremely difficult to coordinate in a combined assault.

In the last analysis, coordination is possible only when individual administrators feel that the sacrifices and effort involved are worthwhile. For the greater good, it will be necessary for each to relinquish some autonomy. Being coordinated often means being prepared to subject one's own will to that of another. An act of faith is required in the utility of the process, even before the potential benefits are evident. Even then, the benefits and the costs are unlikely to be distributed evenly among the participating organizations.

If administrators are to be persuaded of the benefits obtainable from coordinating with others, then a certain amount of groundwork has to be undertaken before a disaster strikes. In particular, it is useful for those who are likely to be involved in the administration of the relief

to establish personal contact with those with whom they are likely to correlate. Relief agencies do not coordinate with one another en masse, but via the medium of trust and understanding which is fashioned between their respective officials. Secondly, preparedness plans should be drawn up which will facilitate coordination. Any ambiguity or uncertainty as to which body has the power, or duty, to exercise the coordinating function, should be ironed out before the disaster strikes. An appropriate division of labor should be made among the various relief agencies likely to be involved. Finally, in a society where particularistic-ascriptive social norms prevail, denying the legitimacy or usefulness of cooperating with comparative strangers, education and training will need to be provided in the advantages of coordination with others (Atkinson 66:155; Clifford 56; Miletic et al 75:90-1; Parr 69:80).

If efforts dedicated to coordinating with others do not yield perceived benefits, then enthusiasm for inter-agency cooperation will wane, and funding for the coordination function will become a problem. Where the coordination activity is dependent on the voluntary contributions of participating organizations, then it can be expected that support will eventually be withdrawn, especially where conflict between organizations continues (Thompson and Hawkes 62:282) and where compliance with established norms becomes mandatory but onerous for those footing the bill. Where financing is secured independently of the bodies being coordinated, then it is not uncommon for the participating organizations to withdraw their cooperation, and for the coordinating body to establish itself in its own right as yet another action group possessed of its own program.

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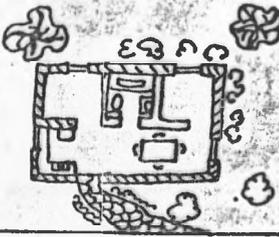
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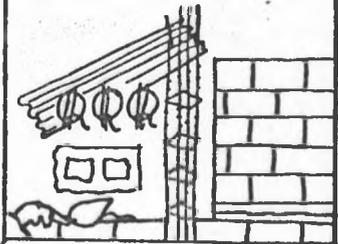
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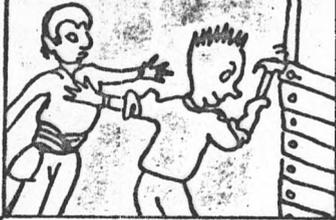
ARQUITECTO



ALTRUISTA



ALBAÑIL



VOLUNTARIO



MEDICO



DAMNIFICADO



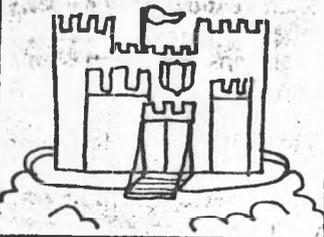
TURISTA



OPORTUNISTA



CLERIGO



SOÑADOR



NEGOCIANTE



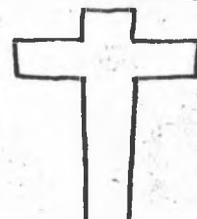
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DESILUSIONADO



CRISTO