

IN FOCUS

Australia and its swift disaster response management

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Australia is no stranger to natural disasters. However, the country's environmental vulnerability to climatological and hydro-metrological disasters has been dramatically increasing since 2010 with the recurrence of one major flood every year. The Queensland floods in 2010/2011 inundated 80 per cent of the state and heavily impacted the national economy as well as local communities. The International Disaster Database EM-DAT estimated the damage to be USD 7.3 billion. 35 people died during the incident; 175,000 were affected and in immediate need for assistance such as food, water or shelter supplies (The OFDA/CRED International Disaster Database, 2013). Just one year later, in February and March 2012, Victoria, Queensland and New South Wales were hit by yet another flood commonly referred to as the Eastern Australian floods. Fortunately, the number of people affected was significantly smaller (13,300) and no casualties were reported.

"Global best practice"

Operating under the internationally recognized principles of "Prevent, Prepare, Respond and Recover", the management of Australia's evacuation process, especially during the Queensland disaster, has been quite frequently referred to as "global best practice" (Arklay, 2012) in recognition of their particularly well handled crises management.

The advantage of being developed

Australia has access to several types of resource that make it easier to act quickly and efficiently. However, the magnitude of the Queensland floods in 2011 exceeded the country's capacity during the evacuation process and called for additional help. Therefore, the Australian Government's Department of Defense provided an Australian Division Force (ADF) team to help assist in the recovery efforts. The defense personnel carried out a number of different tasks: from searching for bodies and performing rescues, to airlifting people to safety or delivering medical supplies, to the distribution of food and more than two million liters of purified water, especially in isolated communities to prevent a future health crisis (Lahey, 2011: 15-16). Thus, the ADF was effectively coordinating the evacuation, relief efforts and recovery support.

Swift coordination

The strong coordination, not only within the ADF, but also among all branches of the government – local, state and federal – in

responding quickly to the disaster, is one of the factors that was handled particularly well during both emergencies (Clarke, 2013). The good working relationships among the police, emergency service personnel and local councils were considered to be very effective. Certainly, the special establishment of the Queensland Reconstruction Authority overlooking the emergency management for the disaster in 2011, and later in 2012 too, has been a key factor of a well-organized coordination of relief and recovery disaster management. Funds were made available immediately for those who had not sufficient insurance coverage and there was an immense national outpour of help from fellow Australians in general. Most people whose houses had been flooded stayed with family or friends but the government also set up additional emergency crises camps.

Make use of social media

The increasing use of social media has been another driving factor for making the evacuation process both in 2011 and 2012 successful. As the affected areas were surveyed, it became clear that many households were unable to watch TV or make use of their landline phones due to the flooding. Therefore, Australia's emergency management began spreading information and updates on the current disaster management situation through different channels such as Facebook and Twitter because people still had their mobile phones. The Queensland police for example began spreading information as soon as people had to be evacuated and at the height of the Queensland flood disaster, more than 35,000 tweets containing the hashtag 'qldfloods' were sent via Twitter (Mellick, 2013; The Brookings Institute, 2012). Since then, social media has become a key factor in providing useful information to the general public before, during and after a disaster.

Bibliography

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