



First to Respond Last To Leave: The Role of Para-Military Agencies in Disaster Management: Evidence from Nigeria

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Abstract

Shortly after the recent fire's disaster in Lagos, Kano, Katsina and Oyo market in Nigeria, an account of the activities and initiatives of para-military agencies in disaster management was conducted. A review of these inventories shows some significant changes in both the types of activities being undertaken by para-military agencies. The inventories document a rapid increase in the number of roles played in recovery. In building resilience to all hazards, it is necessary to better understand the roles that different para-military agencies played, not only in recovery, but across all levels of disaster risk reduction. These roles range from leading first aid through to co-producing knowledge underpinning risk management strategies and actions. Every para-military agency has the capacity to weave disaster readiness, response and recovery, and risk reduction into their core organization mandate, and therefore represent a valuable, though often underestimated and poorly understood resource. Hence, it is therefore recommended that there is need to build the collaboration of the various agencies of government and partner international organizations and also build the capacities of the implementation agencies and regulatory bodies, their influence over the lifecycle be increased and public awareness increasing around issues related to disaster risk, while promoting public participation in the processes of development. This view provides much needed guidance to decision makers to take action towards a more resilient future.

Keywords: Para-military agencies; Disaster risk; Public participation; Nigeria.

1. Introduction

Disasters draw attention to the ways in which the social is shaped through relationships between humans, objects and technologies. While, concentration of people, buildings, infrastructure and economic activity in cities makes them the locus of both large- and small-scale disasters which have a huge implication of loss of life [1]. Fast pace of urbanisation in emerging economies, like Nigeria, is leading to a growing density of population, coupled with growing risk of hazard exposure and vulnerabilities. Public expenditure for relief on account of natural disasters can be taxing on the budgeted social sector expenses in every successive year, which makes preparedness and mitigation increasingly pertinent. While, Nigeria is characterized by a number of environmental, ecological, demographic and economic features that produce a high degree of vulnerability to disaster [2-6]. Nigerian Government is increasing capacity to assess and effectively respond to disasters through preparedness and mitigation activities [4, 7, 8]. It is becoming increasingly recognized that disasters cannot be examined in isolation from the social environment on which they impact: A disaster is not a physical happening, it is a social event. Thus, it is a misnomer to talk about natural disasters as if they could exit outside of the actions and decisions of human being and societies. For instance, floods, tornadoes, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, tsunamis, and other so called natural agent have social consequences only as a result of the pre, trans and post impact activities of individuals and communities [4, 7, 9-12].

Disaster management, in the broadest sense of the term, includes mitigating against the possible impacts of natural events (drought, floods, cyclones, volcanic eruption, earthquakes and landslides, to name a few) before they occur so that disasters might be avoided. Development planning, particularly if it uses an interdisciplinary, multisectoral (integrated) approach, must be concerned with mitigating the effects of multiple natural events in a study area, none of which may ever trigger a call for an international disaster response, but whose impact continually affects social and economic investment [4-8, 12]. Environment-development linkages are no more clearly manifest than in the human suffering and loss of social and economic infrastructure following a disaster, whether it be quick or slow onset. Are these linkages more important than in the development planning process? Disaster management is environmental management, and environmental management (managing the goods, services and hazardous event of the ecosystems upon which the earth's population depends) is the powerful force shaping development planning today [13-16].

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The international Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction has set a goal which define a process for not only generating, but most importantly, applying knowledge and experience to mitigate the impact of disasters, particularly in developing countries. For development planning processes this signifies transforming and interpreting information for and by planners to alter criteria for making investment decisions in both the private and public sector. Natural events, the hazards they pose, the resulting vulnerability, and the costs and benefits of reducing risk must be part of that criteria [3, 4, 12, 17].

Natural disasters, even with their frequent occurrence and high cost, appear to generate a small constituency for their prevention. Far too often disaster mitigation concerns are limited to on-site structural design and emergency preparedness activities. But for issues other than those directly related to the manner in which human shelter and its immediate surroundings are designed and constructed, reduction of vulnerability to natural disasters is generally beyond the efforts of citizen. This same situation is reflected in many other environmental management issues. Environmental groups addressing these issues are natural allies in forming a constituency for mitigating natural disasters [6, 10, 11, 14].

Mitigation actions must address both the vulnerability of what exists as well as what is to be built. Strategies are strikingly similar: the use of information to make the most effective, efficient use possible of available resources, and the incorporation of information into the different stages of development planning process as appropriate for the level of decision being taken. Disaster mitigation for population in terms of their shelter and immediate surroundings must be accompanied by vulnerability reduction to social and economic infrastructure and should be given a higher environmental management priority. Collaboration and communication must be improved between the development community, the scientific and engineering research communities and those who prepare for and respond to humanitarian assistances such as civil defense, road safety, fire service, NEMA etc. needs following disasters. Out of these relationships must grow increased technical assistance, training and technology transfer [6, 13, 17].

1.1. Federal Fire Service

The concept of training the public to be self-sufficient following a major fire disaster is not only sound, but in reality, with the limited emergency resources that this country can provide, is a realistic way that the loss of life, suffering and damage can be reduced. With the established fact that fires are an integral part of disasters, there is a need for a complete one-package plan which will prepare building occupants for survival. The fire service in co-operation with civil defense should develop a complete package for emergency response of building occupants including:

- i. Fire Survey
- ii. The isolation of ignition sources
- iii. Identification of the correct extinguishing media
- iv. Basic fire suppression techniques

Fire safety inspection programmes of commercial premises need to include the safeguarding of life and property from fires, hazardous conditions and the escape of occupants in relation to fire hazards. Also, the provision of automatic shut-off valves on domestic mains gas supply is a “catch 22” situation. There is no doubt that the immediate shut-off of the supply at the onset of a fire disaster will lessen a significant ignition source. The return of reticulation (and electricity if shut-off device is fitted) after a major disruption can also be done safely. On the other hand, the logistics of physically reinstating domestic consumers individually within an acceptable time frame may be beyond the ability of a gas company. The provision of automatic shut-off valves on domestic gas supply warrants further investigation and the use of excess flow valves, rather than fire valves to reduce the incidence of “false alarms” is desirable. Similarly, contingency plans between the Federal fire service and electricity and gas supply authorities requires closer co-operation and field liaison when those services are being reinstated as a result of a major outage.

1.2. Disaster Preparedness

Nigerian Federal Fire Service takes a proactive role in disaster preparedness. Its disaster preparedness division is staffed by uniformed personnel who provide a community emergency response team. This unit provides free training to the community. Its purpose is to improve community self-reliance and therefore survival in the event of a disaster, such as a major fire outbreak as witness in Lagos, Kano, Katsina and Oyo State. The training programme is designed to provide for community self-sufficiency by developing multi-functional teams to act as an adjunct to city emergency service during a major disaster. In this country, the ideal of community self-help needs renewed enthusiasm. Nigeria Federal fire service personnel are training in and carrying out rescue as an everyday function. Suggesting the federal fire service of Nigeria has the expertise and the credibility to train citizens and volunteer groups in disaster preparedness.

1.3. Urban Search and Rescue

The concept of training citizen rescue groups to carry out rescue operations on a major scale is flawed. It is difficult to get civilians, however noble their intention, to train to the professional level required, for a perceived event that may or may not take place in their lifetimes. Nor will they be able to be mobilised in sufficient time for the maximum effect. It must be remembered that the rescue of entrapped persons in building collapse, will always be most effective when performed in the immediate post impact stage. Hours of delay in marshalling resources will result in the main, with the recovery of bodies only. It is time that the Nigeria federal fire service pursued funding to include the rescue role as a fire service function and become the “Fire and Rescue Service”, recognizing its function

as the leading edge of civil defense. There is need to make provision to develop, resource, and properly train personnel in building collapse and heavy rescue techniques. Equipment for locating multiple casualties needs to be extended to include search systems, both visual and sound, designed to locate victims in collapsed structures.

1.4. Mobilising and Operational Support

Presently, the Nigeria federal fire service requires all areas to have task force planning in place to provide concentrated resources to any part of the country needing assistance. In order to further refine the concept for the purpose of support in major disasters, there is need to develop task forces, in co-operation with all the emergency services, that are trained and available for operational readiness, to provide a response to arrive anywhere in Nigeria within hours. This has to include the provision of mobilisation by helicopter. These task forces need to be self-sustaining for 72 hours. They have to be able to carry out self-sustaining functions for a period of up to 10 days in:

- i. Urban rescue
- ii. Hazardous Substances
- iii. Firefighting, and why not
- iv. Medical Assistance
- v. Law and Order?

The resources needed in Lagos, Kano, Katsina and Oyo State fire disaster for both the initial response and the recovery operations were vast. The various State Government was fortunate in being able to muster massive support to assist local resources.

2. Federal Road Safety Commission

The role of this federal road safety commission includes: preventing or minimizing accidents on the highway, clearing obstructions on any part of the highways, educating drivers, motorists and other members of the public generally on the proper use of the highways. designing and producing the driver's license to be used by various categories of vehicle operators. determining, from time to time, the requirements to be satisfied by an applicant for a driver's license. designing and producing vehicle number plates, the standardization of highway traffic codes, educating drivers, motorists and other members of the public generally on the proper use of the highways, giving prompt attention and care to victims of accidents, conducting researches into causes of motor accidents and methods of preventing them and putting into use the result of such researches, determining and enforcing speed limits for all categories of roads and vehicles and controlling the use of speed limiting devices, cooperating with bodies or agencies or groups in road safety activities or in prevention of accidents on the highways, making regulations in pursuance of any of the functions assigned to the Corps by or under this Act, regulating the use of sirens, flashers and beacon lights on vehicles other than ambulances and vehicles belonging to the Armed Forces, Nigeria Police, Fire Service and other para-military agencies, providing roadside and mobile clinics for the treatment of accident victims free of charge, regulating the use of mobile phones by motorists, regulating the use of seat belts and other safety devices, regulating the use of motorcycles on the highways, maintaining the validity period for drivers' licenses which shall be three years subject to renewal at the expiration of the validity period etc.

2.1. Civil Defence

The civil defence review of 1992 says bluntly "No-one currently has any idea of the cost of emergencies or the value received for inputs made during recovery". Discussing disaster data bases, UNDRO News in Sept/Oct 1991 listed five items:

- i. People killed
- ii. People injured
- iii. People homeless
- iv. People affected
- v. Monetary value of losses sustained.

The Civil Defence Act says that civil defence is about "the safety of the public" and measures to deal with happenings or situations that may cause "loss of life or injury or distress to persons". Civil defence measures could be very wide in scope and civil defence emergencies are a narrower category, for they are to be declared only in situation which cannot be dealt with the Police, the Nigerian federal fire service or otherwise without the adoption of civil defence measures. Interestingly, the Civil Defence organization should enhance its capacity to act as first responder to any disaster situation with the help of its volunteers at different levels. It should have its own 'Quick Reaction Teams'(QRT) of volunteers with pre-designated roles and responsibilities, based on vulnerability and quick mobility to respond to any disaster situation. The QRT should also have its communication network to keep in touch with the Civil Defence control room on real-time basis for reporting about its actions and getting instructions from the control room. After initially responding to the disaster with its own and locally available resources of police, etc., the Civil Defence may integrate itself with the Disaster Management efforts launched under the aegis of the state/DDMA. It may deploy its personnel, volunteers and other material resources such as communication equipment, Disaster Management vehicles, etc., in consultation and coordination with other agencies. In particular, the Civil Defence organization can supplement the government efforts during and after a disaster. Their roles include: assisting in taking precautionary measures whenever any advance warning is received about any Natural disaster, helping in evacuation of population to less vulnerable areas depending on the nature of disaster, launching search and rescue operations, providing first aid to injure and transporting them to medical centres, setting up 'Information and Guidance Centres for providing information regarding missing persons, injured etc., and also

information about the nature of facilities and assistance available to affected people, participating in distribution of relief material to affected people, assisting police/traffic police in ensuring smooth movement of emergency vehicles in the affected areas, helping the local administration in assessing the extent of loss to life and property, training Infrastructure in States have been upgraded, disaster awareness training is conducted involving Civil Defence, NCC & NYKS in Districts/States etc.

3. Conclusion

Fortunately, in any one location, disasters are relatively infrequent occurrences and according to Amina J Mohammed, "a diverging world is a catastrophe for all of us. It's both morally right and in everyone's economic self-interest to help developing countries overcome this crisis". However, when disaster strikes, affected communities face a variety of losses, challenges and demands that differ significantly from anything normally encountered in their daily lives. Disruptions in societal functions, damage to basic and essential infrastructure and losses, and disruption to livelihood and economic activities can arise on a scale that means that recovery takes years. Thus, the significant role played by para-military agencies in disaster response and recovery situations has become increasingly well-recognised. However, despite this growing awareness, there is little nuance around. Indeed, there is certainly more work to be done in accurately ascertaining the cost of past disasters in Nigeria and looking at potential costs. Civil defence, Federal fire service and Road safety commission etc has always been concerned with preventing people death, injury as well as distress. The advantages may still lie in the future, as they do for many control projects, or such overseas ventures and other event, but offering meanwhile some psychic security. However, disaster prevention measures must be part of the process of protecting our investment in sustainable development, not simply an additional cost and this is vital to protect our environment and safeguarding our investments for development. Making disaster reduction a priority in public policy is essential if we want a safer, healthier and more productive world in the 21st century. Thus, the case for investing in prevention, risk reduction and resilience is clear, but significant barriers, such as short-termism, inequities, and lack of inclusion in policy making stand in the way. Short-term costs of investments may loom larger than uncertain long-term benefits, for all citizen and private sectors. Thus, investments in prevention, risk reduction and resilience are an economic imperative and have significant social and environmental co-benefits. The economic case for investing in risk reduction and resilience is clear. Such investments also have significant co-benefits. By focusing on risk and risk reduction, governments, businesses and households lengthen their decision and planning horizons, thus helping toward addressing some short-term biases in decision-making. Hence, understanding the origin of hazards and shocks can help policymakers identify ways to best manage risk, as well as to identify who is best placed to do so. While, this view sets out further recommendations and analysis which are interlinked in nature of risk in a tightly intertwined world, and the importance of providing financing for risk reduction and resilience that is risk-informed.

Competing Interests

We affirm that we have no conflict of interest that may be alleged as prejudicing the impartiality of the study reported. This researcher did not receive special assistance from government, not-for-profit sectors or commercial institutions.

Consent

All the authors announced that they had received written notice from the participants.

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