

COURSE : DISASTER MANAGEMENT (MA/MSc PART I)

Paper : VIII

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Topic : Role of Universities in Disaster Management

INTRODUCTION

The role of the university spans all phases of disaster cycle. As an educational and research institution, the university is by necessity involved in all the phases since it is charged with the mission of contributing broadly to society. The university, however, is mostly limited to mobilizing funds and emergency voluntary support. Considering the limitation, the university can offer an assistance in other aspect especially in terms of academic contributions such as an institute for research and education on disasters, policy proposals, be involved in reconstruction phase as a member of local community, carry out a public role as an established NGO and the dispatch of longer term volunteers and other aids.

ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES

Disaster reduction can be accomplished by carrying out a program to identify and assess the physical characteristics of likely disaster, formulate and implement strategies to reduce these disasters and anticipate the disaster impacts and plan response actions in light of these anticipated effects. In most instances, universities are not that suitable to play the role of “contractor” to produce a viable disaster preparedness and risk management plan. That may be better done by the government agencies or private contractors. However, universities play a major role in the planning and implementation efforts since all these efforts require major scientific base whereby the proper information and the uncertainties associated with disaster impact need to be fully understood before the preparedness plan can be translated into policy and regulatory measures. Universities are often, but not always, the source of pertinent information and the developers of analytical and critical methods and tools. (7) If these potential assets are combined with strong management skills typically found in the private sector, then academia can make major and lasting contributions.

The roles of university in community education and training

Public training in disaster medicine and preparation are also as important as medical personal training. The community awareness regarding disaster response has increased over the decade because of the frequent occurrence of the disasters and the increased visibility of disaster response through the news and medias. In addition, the public itself is a major human resource during the disastrous event. Such public education programs should be incorporated into emergency medical services and emergency medicine outreach programs.

University, as an academic institution may need to develop and organize a comprehensive educational disaster programs or curriculum for the community. The programs should be simple, easy to understand, high quality and low cost. These programs should be conducted by those who are actively involved within the institutions, organizations and communities in order to provide accurate and scientifically valid training regarding disasters.

The roles of university in research

Research may be one of the most misunderstood components of disaster medicine. It is often regarded by disaster responders as an esoteric undertaking carried out by individual who have little understanding of “the real world” and less understanding of clinical disaster issues. In reality, research into disasters is one of the most vital function that can be carried out by those involved in such events. The best disaster researches are individuals with substantial experience in disaster response and planning because they know what questions need to be asked. Conducting research on a disaster is an attempt to determine the truth about the event itself. Without such efforts and application of the resulting knowledge to the disaster planning and response process, mistakes will continuously be repeated.

Until the last decade, disaster medical researches had been limited to narrative descriptions of the event(s) that precipitated the disaster, reports on the numbers of persons killed, injured, and/or displaced, and/or descriptions of what medical interventions were or were not applied. The adequacy of the medical interventions has been judged in terms of the response and related to the needs as assessed by the providers or any other external group and not necessarily related to the real needs of the affected population.

Unfortunately, many of these reports have been biased and self-serving, as they have been performed by the responding agencies themselves. They have had little value in the elimination or modification of hazards, reduction of risks, improvement of the absorbing and/or buffering capacities, reduction of vulnerability, and/or enhancement of preparedness for responses of future events or for the design and implementation of future relief activities. Little in the way of hypotheses that may affect the future have been generated, or much less, tested.

Experimental and prospective studies of the effects of an intervention relative to disasters have not been reported. For the most part, research in disaster medicine is performed retrospectively, after the impact phase and during the recovery activities. Collecting prospective information during a disaster is considered impossible or ethically inappropriate. Applications for the use of experimental studies in the setting of disasters or events that result in mass casualties may be quite limited, and the design, acceptance, and implementation of such studies in these settings remain as tasks for the future. Universities and other agencies should jointly come together to consider and improve the above matter.

In India, we have the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, University of Delhi, University of Pune, University of South Gujarat and other educational institutions which have taken up the task of strengthening government's efforts in conducting research on impacted communities, designing rehabilitation initiatives, disaster preparedness and mitigation strategies.

Although knowledge does not guarantee power over natural catastrophe, it is a prime requisite of disaster preparedness and prevention. The integration of disaster risk education both formal and informal educational means at schools and universities is the one way to ensure that these messages reach into every home and community and that learning is sustained into future generations. To highlight this aspect there is plethora of research material available at the global level as well as national level. Major studies in this area have been carried out by ISDR (2007, 2008), UNDP (2004, 2005, 2006) and World Bank.

It is because of the efforts of the activists connected with nongovernmental organizations, scientific, academic and research institutions disaster risk education has been prioritised both at the grassroots and policy levels. For instance the 2006-07 UNISDR campaign “Disaster risk reduction begins at school” aimed to promote the integration of disaster risk reduction into government plans for school curricula and to ensure that school buildings are safe from the impacts of natural hazards is an outcome of UNISDR 2006 study.

Similarly based on the global research studies on climate change awareness and environmental education, Ministries of Education in developing economies like India, China, Bangladesh and others are taking on the challenge of disseminating disaster risk reduction education. The current International Decade of Education for Sustainable Development led by UNESCO, provides a long-term focus for taking this agenda forward. Early efforts in disaster education focused exclusively on hazards. More recent efforts have begun to engage children and youth in discovering and recognizing the myriad local hazards that they face, and introduce primary disaster risk mitigation: physical protection of people and property, environmental stewardship, and recognizing underlying vulnerability connected with tenuous livelihoods.