Resilience as a Goal and Standard in Emergency Management

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Abstract

This opinion offers another perspective on the topic of resilience. The author contends that resilience is much more than mitigation and recovery but combines those efforts with the investment of deliberate civic involvement.

KEYWORDS: emergency management, education, resilience

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Capturing all the insight, perspectives, and lessons to be learned from catastrophic emergencies like hurricane Katrina, the 9-11 terror attacks, and the recurrent California wildfires is not an easy thing to do. We still lack an understanding of how much mitigation would have made a difference, or how deeply and widespread the quality of emergency response would have mattered. We always have to bring ourselves 'just as we are' to any disaster hoping that an extra measure of readiness, response, and appropriate remedial action may be there to help overcome the initial setback that major calamities unleash.

Nevertheless, one sterling revelation from these disasters, and any like them, is that existing mitigation is never enough and major disasters tend to leave the victims feeling defeated. Worse, we recognize that emergency response is one thing, and post-disaster recovery is another. In the midst of clearing rubble, removing bodies, bulldozing collapsed buildings, establishing expedient shelters, and restoring elements of power and communications we discover that recovery is a lot tougher than is ever expected.

We understand dimly, and often profoundly, that after a major catastrophe things cannot be brought back to 'normal' to as they were before the calamity struck. Better yet, we seem to intuitively grasp how crucial the difference is, and how profoundly the gap emerges, between a 'return to normal' and simply surviving the disaster. Victims stunned by the disaster's worst effects may be satisfied with their own survival and be encouraged that shelters, food, and medical assistance can be found. Getting 'back to normal' is uppermost in the minds of the wounded multitude, but often this becomes more of an illusion than a concrete hope. Most people have an image of what true recovery looks like. It looks amazingly like the tranquil reality immediately before the disaster. This is not realistic and doesn't help those who want to minimize disaster's worst effects.

People have now discovered, several years after Katrina, that various aspects of their lives – the family, the community, social networks, commercial operations, institutional systems, major industries, and local government – all rebuild, recover, and renew themselves at different times and in different ways. Some aspects of the local community are wounded but bounce back while others wither and evaporate. In some cases, people quickly grasp that some organizations, institutions, and enterprises will not return at all, having been driven away for good by calamity. So it is crucial that we understand the difference between recovery and resilience. Recovery has come to mean 'the best possible restoration of community, private businesses, and governmental operations as is achievable under the circumstances'. It means to many the restoration of critical community functions, and management of the reconstruction process. While that seems reasonable, it doesn't articulate the complex and multidimensional aspects of recovery which must be coordinated to simply survive the initial disaster. That is a far cry from 'bringing things back to normal'

and says nothing about rebuilding and restoring individuals, families, and neighborhood communities to any sense of 'normal.' Survival, while crucial, is only one metric useful in defining what resilience entails.

Resilience must be understood to embrace far more than smart mitigation practices, robust emergency response, and effective recovery operations. It must be understood in terms of the actual post-disaster situation which a city, state, or region wants to achieve within one week after the crisis is over. It means painting a realistic picture of what is required for much more than mere community survival. It must also depict what a fully restored community with essential minimums looks like. It requires careful thought to itemize and delineate what the community declares it wants to see one week after the disaster passes. Coming to grips with that image, especially one rooted in the community's own sense of its restoration – rather than it being rescued by state or federal agencies – is vital to the resilience process.

We need better information on how communities can rebound from disasters. We are also especially ignorant of how densely populated urban areas can be restored. Through the years since 9-11 we have been consumed with planning and emergency response. In addition, we must study recovery more intently and learn from it what is required and expected. Only then will we grasp what the real difference is between resilience and recovery.

Firmly, we must reckon with the prospect that searching for concrete elements of resilience will take us far beyond the conventional four-part paradigm that has shaped emergency and disaster management. Now we are concerned with more than mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery to enter a new arena of daunting technical and complex tasks. Nothing less than the explicit partnership of businesses, academics, community, and civic leaders working with government is needed to chart a course towards genuine resilience. Fundamental changes seem warranted for how we look at, and discern, what must take place to achieve resilience and the resources required. Allowing ourselves to think 'outside the box' where people are no longer passive victims, but deeply invested in the wellbeing and restoration of their communities.

Failure to have a strategy for successfully overcoming the initial disaster and its ensuing crisis itself is the starting point. Resilience seeks to establish firm metrics, requirements, standards, and criteria for reducing the worst effects of disaster at its onset, maximizing the degree of emergency response, leveraging the total integration of recovery action, and setting as a goal the restoration of civil, public safety, economic, and governmental operations within a seven day period after the disaster strikes. It is simply a commitment of resources and strategies by the combined fabric of commercial, civic, and governmental organizations and leaders to 'community restoration' as they define it, along with a continuous pre-disaster effort to build a sustained capacity for doing so.

Communities that commit to a one-week restoration goal may take many years to achieve that outcome, but the ensuing deliberative process will contain revolutionary insights and issues related to a community's sense of its responsibilities in crisis. It will discover what its true capabilities are against known risks. It will take the measure of its own internal resources, and it will ruthlessly evaluate the performance of its response assets. It will trigger imagination and innovation in finding ways to ensure the community's survival and restoration. It will not obliterate the hopelessness or panic which major crises trigger, but it holds potential for reorienting the affected population towards a specific and finite goal which they have examined, discussed, prepared for, and imagined in advance of any disaster. In so doing, communities will discover in the semi-idyllic environment of pre-disaster planning what the true differences are between recovery and resilience – between survival and restoration.

Focusing on all the elements of a genuine resilience framework means the deliberate integration of a community's leaders, resources, and ideas in a pre-disaster setting to define the conditions they want to see post-disaster. This will entail specifying what the community must do, what the state can do, and what the Federal government's role should be. As such, this is inherently a bottom-up process of civic engagement which puts community leaders and citizens on equal footing with their government to develop standards, metrics, and requirements necessary to restore the community's overall landscape to a satisfactory pre-disaster condition as quickly as possible. Of course, this effort is long term, arduous, and full of complications turning the normal paradigm of letting the government plan for you and protect you completely on its head. By design, this formulation will require a new social contract which links citizens, neighborhoods, commercial entities, social organizations, and government into an intelligent and self-aware system whose main goal is the preservation and restoration of itself. The long-term transformative political, social, and cultural aspects of this reorientation cannot be lightly dismissed. Making communities better able to protect, safeguard, and restore themselves with targeted state and federal support is truly a fundamental shift in American values away from the sheer dependence that cities and towns now have on the state and Federal government to come to their aid when required.

There will still be a federal mixing of governmental layers as always, but the burden of preparing for, planning, resourcing, and developing a truly resilient community will reside in the citizens, school leaders, neighborhood groups, commercial interests, and local government itself. It will begin and end there, and the message will be that 'we can absorb any calamity or disaster, we can restore ourselves and recover, we will not be defeated.'

Now, professionals in emergency management are contemplating what the recovery landscape looks like. Rising from the ashes phoenix-like to restore

things 'as they once were' may be too expensive, complex, and daunting for towns devastated by F4 tornadoes or for seaside communities obliterated by colossal tsunamis. So we find ourselves trying to decipher what the 'new normal' looks like. Matching the collective perceptions and hopes of disaster victims with reality on the ground post-disaster will be the principal challenge.

If recovery is survival, and resilience is restoration, then how do we explicitly transition from one to the other? Temporary shelters, FEMA trailers, and makeshift convoys of bottled water and supplies are not reflective of resilience. We need much more. What will it take to get us there? It is a vision that must be articulated, embraced, and adopted by communities willing to make such a commitment.

This brings us to the most challenging demands and requirements that the emergency management profession has ever faced. We accept at face value that some disasters will be so devastating, widespread, and destructive that prospects for restoring anything to pre-crisis conditions is an idle dream. However, the corollary is that many disasters will not be. Here, a program of rebuilding, restoration, rehabilitation, renewal, and recovery is a very real possibility. Contending with the dual demands of grasping what recovery really means and then usefully distinguishing it from resilience requires that emergency managers gain perspective on what the differences entail. Fundamentally, they are not the same.

Resilience and recovery are very similar, both focusing on the same objectives and outcome. Their shared goal: a survivable and viable community that has withstood disaster and emerges from it wounded, but fully capable of conducting governmental and commercial operations. The main distinction is the emphasis on planning and strategic mitigation, which is embodied in the notion of resilience. It assumes a community committed to every conceivable and robust pre-disaster activity aimed at assuring its survival and continuation. Recovery, by contrast, tends to focus more on the immediate operational, logistical, sociological, and commercial aspects of bringing a damaged community back to life in the aftermath of a disaster. Here the emphasis is on what specific tasks must be performed to restore essential community institutions, neighborhoods, and related environments. Resilience aims to thwart, diminish, or curtail a disaster's worst effects well in advance of calamity, while recovery attempts to restore to 'nearly normal' as quickly as possible. One is short term, immediate, and temporary. The other is deliberate, strategic, and enduring for the affected community.

There seems to be at least five dimensions to resilience:
[1] personal and familial socio-psychological well being;
[2] organizational and institutional restoration;
[3] economic and commercial resumption of services and productivity;

[4] restoring infrastructural systems integrity; and
[5] operational regularity of public safety and government.
These disparate elements must be assessed independently, and then recombined in a comprehensive manner to resemble a unified strategy. Resilience is the result of a deliberative process with built-in assumptions and intentions reflecting a community's firm commitment to its own survival and restoration.

The socio-psychological aspect deals with the public's emotional consciousness, its attachment to (and influence by) the disaster itself, along with the human spirit of grit, determination, and survival. Organizational and institutional restoration deals with social and mediating institutions like schools and influential community groups. Commercial and economic activity is resumed to offer those services and commodities that the disaster nullified. Key infrastructures in power, water, sewer, communications, and related functions are demonstrably back in operation. Finally, government services and public safety must be restored. This raises the fair and urgent question of how a community achieves resilience both as a goal and a yardstick for enhancing its survivability and continuation in facing future disasters.

Early in 2009, DHS Secretary Napolitano announced her vision for the nation: "a proud, prepared, and resilient America." In her explanation, Secretary Napolitano validated the long-standing imperative to implement "resilience" as the goal, metric, and means for achieving and sustaining critical infrastructures and national preparedness. DHS went on to further articulate what infrastructure resilience looks like "…it is the ability to reduce the magnitude and/or duration of disruptive events…along with the ability to anticipate, absorb, adapt to, and/or rapidly recover from a potentially devastating event." The main idea was that infrastructure protection and resilience represent complementary elements of a comprehensive preparedness strategy. DHS went on to say that resilience has three key abilities:
- Robustness: Maintain critical operations and functions in the face of crisis.
- Resourcefulness: Prepare for, respond to, and manage a crisis or disruption as it unfolds.
- Rapid Recovery: Return to and/or reconstitute normal operations as quickly and efficiently as possible after a disruption or disaster.

The implication is that municipal leaders should be committed to improving preparedness by ensuring their infrastructure systems can endure all hazards, and successfully reconstitute standard services as soon as possible after a man-made or natural disaster. Is this done with new technology, new resources, and new strategies, or is something else involved? So far, it is not clear where the material will come from to build a new edifice that redefines what disaster-resistant communities should look like. But this raises the question of what role the states and federal government should play in orchestrating a headlong march

towards a more resilient America. This is especially compelling if one accepts the fundamental notion that resilience projects are grass-roots local inventions.

Resilience is the ability of an organization or community to rebound following a crisis or a disaster event. But it is also the ability to absorb strain and withstand destructive disasters. Building resilience may require a shift from a reactive to a proactive approach for crisis management and disaster recovery. In a new century, we may have to completely redefine our terms and standards. Certainly it seems resilience is not about responding to a one-time crisis or disaster event. More specifically it seems that continuously anticipating risks, maintaining a flexible balance of readiness and mitigation to offset worst case events, tapping into the experiences and insights of other communities, and rapidly adjusting to new dynamics or trends may be the best possible courses of action for now. Bitter and painful experiences of prior disasters have taught us that hope is not an option, nor a strategy. Instead, resourcefulness, creativity, and a firm commitment to survival are crucial values that government, businesses, and citizens must share to bring about the mindset that resilience is genuine and achievable.

Right now, the collection of tasks, organizational variables, and other complex issues germane to building a culture of resilience is hard to imagine. For many communities, just having the capability to handle a major HAZMAT rail accident is overwhelming. Resilience may seem 'a bridge too far', but when one contemplates the powerful deterrent and inspirational power embedded in resilience and recovery, it remains reflective of the integrity, determination, and drive that brought our society through the Great Depression and World War II. It sustains our society even now as we contend with all the challenges the 21st century will certainly bring. Resilience has the potential to reinforce community security, and significantly modify urban security, in ways that indirectly enhance national security. It is an alien realm that beckons pioneering and entrepreneurial energy of the type that transforms communities in ways not readily understood.

Moreover, we need a wider commitment to resilience as a legitimate area of inquiry and research outside our own borders. Under provisions of the 2005 Hyogo Protocol we should also examine whether greater international attention can be devoted towards understanding what resilience is; to gather engineers, infrastructural experts, business leaders, and academics working on an effective and operational framework. We should commit ourselves to a more resilient global village for this new century. By studying its components, contributing factors, and underlying dynamics we may share insights beneficial to all.

Resilience as a goal is well understood even if the task of getting there is equivalent to finding a cure for cancer, extending human life 50 years, or sending rockets to Mars. We will discover whether better technology, smarter risk avoidance, more aggressive mitigation measures, or other techniques bring us

closer to the goal. We know that technology is not infallible, and we appreciate that resilience is not the mirror image of vulnerability. All risks and all vulnerabilities cannot be erased through collective determination and the innovative applications of social technology. Instead, these risks and vulnerabilities become more manageable, more survivable, and a grand bargain is struck which aims for community restoration.

Resilience as a standard places new and rigorous burdens on both the public and private sectors, but we intuitively recognize it is a fair and sensible yardstick for preserving aspects of life which we cherish. We are in the midst of a perplexing predicament. Author and disaster expert David Alexander notes, "..it is fair to ask whether measures designed to reduce vulnerability automatically create resilience, and if measures designed to create resilience automatically reduce vulnerability.." Right now we are in the earliest stages of discerning what he means. But we should not be discouraged, delayed, or distracted from the validity of pursuing that objective – nor discovering how it will reshape our overall approach to handling future disasters.