



Disasters can happen to anybody: The case of Korea



Kyoo-Man Ha

Department of Emergency Management, Inje University, 197 Inje-Ro, Gimhae-City, Gyeongnam, 50834, Korea

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ABSTRACT

In Korea, there is a pervasive feeling of invincibility to the point that people and organizations do not believe that disasters can strike them. This has impact on the level of preparedness for disasters. This study aims to delve into how Korea has to change its governmental policies/practices with some private partners' efforts to mitigate disaster risks. A case study was utilized as the major methodology by comparing exclusive management with inclusive management. These two approaches have been comparatively analyzed via four variables, namely the central government, the local governments, the incident commander, and other stakeholders. The major finding is that Korea's practices and policies have to evolve from the current exclusive management into future-oriented inclusive management. Moreover, the importance of communication, cooperation, collaboration, and multi-discipline coordination is discussed. Additionally, the problem of reductionism and equal participation among all stakeholders, as well as the resistance from vested interests, are recognized and elaborated for Korea and the international community.

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1. Introduction

In the field of disaster management, there are two groups considered: (1) those who belong directly to the field and are directly involved and (2) those who do not belong directly to the field and are not directly involved in its management; however, both groups can be directly affected by disasters. The former is usually informed or trained, whereas the latter is generally uninformed or untrained. To appropriately manage diverse disasters in each nation, it is not only critical to work on technological developments, but it is also necessary to address the management process or mechanism at the human level. The basic principle of disaster management is to mitigate or lessen the impact of a disaster through an efficient mobilization of a program where all stakeholders participate, are fully recognized and are involved (Dastous et al. 2008; Jay et al. 2007; Kelley, 2005). Stakeholders are those who directly or indirectly work for the field of disaster management; in this paper, they are the government institutions, business entities, disaster management agencies, mass media, disaster management researchers, and the public, in general.

Similarly, the participatory process is a significant factor to improve the goal of disaster management, which is the mitigation of human loss, economic damages, and psychological impact. When the participatory process is successful, a number of advantages, such as the improvement of disaster management quality and the reduction of economic costs, may be achieved (Vink et al. 2008). In general, disaster management efficiencies are positively influenced on the outcome and effects of a disaster.

South Korea (hereinafter Korea) has had to deal with a series of local and global disasters (natural and manmade) recently. Three disasters, with two occurring in Korea, have had major impacts on the nation in a number of ways. First, the March 2011 earthquake with tsunami in neighboring Fukushima, Japan has caused much anxiety and worry to Koreans. Second, the ferry Sewol sinking in the south coast of Korea on April 2015 was a dark day for the nation. Only 172 out of 476 people were rescued due to complicated factors that included the negligence of the ferry captain, the first responders' inadequate performance, the government failures, societal corruption, among others (Hwang, 2015). Third, the Middle-East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) hit one hospital in Pyungtaek, Korea in May 2015. Because of poor ventilation in the hospital; the lack of information sharing among governments, hospitals, and residents; government's failure to immediately respond; the lack of citizens' disaster awareness; the lack of a national disaster management framework; and others, MERS has spread to many parts of Korea. As a result, 36 people have died of the disease and 186 people have been infected in Korea as of September 30, 2015 (Ministry of Food and Drug Safety (MFDS), 2015).

Korea has had several problems and challenges with its disaster management system. The Ministry of Public Safety and Security (MPSS) has tried to manage all kinds of hazards without solid systematic coordination with other ministries. At the same time, the MPSS consists of just three groups of professionals, namely firefighters, civil engineers, and maritime police. Vertical relationship is supported fully among disaster management individuals and institutions whereas horizontal relationship is not considered or observed. Consequently, problems worsened as Korea failed to follow best practices of comprehensive emergency and disaster management. Above all, Korea has not acted

E-mail address: ha1999@hotmail.com.

with awareness that disaster can strike anywhere, may affect anyone and everyone, thus creating a gap in preparedness and response; an important philosophy of “expecting the unexpected” is ignored (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2001). Until fundamental changes in focus, attitudes, and planning are made, Korea will continue to struggle to deal with the risks related to disasters.

Following the context of international best practices, we will examine Korea's current practices and make recommendations for an effective disaster management approach that considers all disaster management stakeholders' roles and contributions.

Surely, the fundamental principle in the field is that disaster management is not several stakeholders' business only, but all stakeholders' responsibility (Moe and Pathranarakul, 2006). For the ultimate goal of improving disaster management, this article aims to analyze how Korea has dealt with and should cope with the possibility of an occurrence of a natural or manmade disaster that may have serious effects on those affected by the disaster, whether direct or indirect victims. The focus of this research is to compare two opposite approaches to disaster management for Korea, both the current approach and the collaborative approach taken by other nations.

The methodology used here is a single case study. To compare two approaches for Korea, we have examined four fundamental variables: the central government's policy, local government's strategy, the incident commander's post, and other stakeholders' (i.e., mass media, researchers, and business entities, and the public, in general) efforts. Our findings suggest that Korea has to evolve from an exclusive management into an inclusive management. Further, our findings imply that having full stakeholders' equal participation in disaster management is critical to managing disasters and has international implications.

2. Literature review

Although it may be human nature for an individual to think that a disaster will never happen to them, the truth is, it can happen to anybody. Disasters can be unpredictable and sudden, but sometimes, they can have a pattern or some degree of predictability. However, disasters do not recognize national or international position, political authority, social class, cultural background, or psychological condition. Therefore, disaster management, to be effective, cannot afford to fall in the hands of those who can be complacent and who may ignore the possibility that disasters can strike anywhere, at anytime.

Researchers throughout the world have noted the importance of not having a narrow focus in examining disasters, but rather, the need to examine all those affected by disaster and all those who are involved in disaster management. Examples include the multi-faceted organizational relationship, networks and disaster management, and multi-level governance. Some have studied this subject in the emergency medicine domain, while others have focused on emergency planning. Although some have studied this topic in developed nations, others have done it in less-developed nations. In short, the topic has been widely recognized in the international field of disaster management (Kapucu, 2012).

To elaborate, researchers across the globe have made efforts to examine several sub-topics concerning all disaster management stakeholders including the people that have been frequently affected not only by a single hazard, but also by multiple disasters. Cascading effects or conjoint hazards cause critical impacts to human society. To deal with multiple risks, it has been repeatedly shown by research efforts that participation from all stakeholders is required in all stages of an emergency (Komendantova et al. 2014).

Because a disaster may cause multiple failures, which may affect different stakeholders and infrastructures in different ways, researchers have maintained that the field of disaster management has to consider multiple perspectives in addressing a specific disaster. When dealing with various disasters, the field of disaster management needs to include all different thoughts or opinions from society. When relying on

a single or partial perspective, it would be hardly possible to appropriately manage multiple risks (Turoff et al. 2013).

Each stakeholder is likely to differ in his or her views on possible disaster management alternatives in part because of the locus of concern each holds and particularly depending on his or her geographical location or level of responsibility. Including different views of all stakeholders promotes better disaster management that can be more effective in mitigating multiple risks and concerns (Saldana-Zorrilla, 2008).

Dealing effectively with disasters requires inter-disciplinary planning and response (MacAskill and Guthrie, 2014). Indeed, effective decision-making in disaster management must involve groups from a variety of disciplines working together. Hence, in effective disaster management, a multidisciplinary approach has been used in many aspects such as planning, response, development and exercise of training, and creating guidelines for emergency managers. In addition, when coping with an unexpected disaster, multi-disciplines have to be immediately and efficiently utilized (Quick, 1998).

For disaster management, researchers throughout the world have found that a highly diverse team especially when the community affective is diverse. This has been found to promote more flexible plans, which can address the differing needs of a diverse community. Some of the characteristics of a diverse community are variety in language, communication, ways of thinking, and culture. In particular, effective disaster management that has included a diverse group of professionals in its planning and response has resulted in a reduction of human injury and death (Dean, 2001).

Researchers throughout the world have strongly recommended comprehensive emergency management by emphasizing the various needs of all disaster management stakeholders. While dealing with all kinds of hazards, all disaster impacts, or all the four phases (disaster prevention/mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery) of disaster management lifetimes, the field has to allocate roles and responsibilities to each professional and the members of the public. In doing so, all stakeholders will work together to face and resolve disaster issues throughout its lifecycle (Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), 2010).

For effective emergency management, disaster management groups have continued to engage the public in mitigating the impacts of disasters. In particular, the involvement of the public has been through their inclusion during planning and action formation, gathering information and other resources to and from the public, and sharing information through public hearings, seminars and workshops, and informal discussions (Ioannides et al. 2005; McGee, 2011).

Researchers across the globe have also continued to discuss an integrated disaster management approach while studying diverse networks among all professionals in the field of disaster management. As each stakeholder will have to deal with a disaster based on how it affects him/her, a network among the different stakeholders should be formed to ensure that all stakeholder needs are served. Moreover, considering that each stakeholder may not be able to effectively fight against a series of disasters alone, there is a synergistic benefit to the formation of networks among all stakeholders (Zinkhan and Balazs, 2004).

An integrated disaster management approach enhances the sustainability of disaster management. By stimulating motivation and knowledge, improving engagement with affected areas, and mobilizing and sharing many resources, an integrated disaster management approach can promote and sustain disaster management. To this point, diverse networks are more effective towards the goal of sustainability than official governance alone (Caniato et al. 2015).

Despite a plethora of international researches revealing the possibility of an occurrence of a natural or manmade disaster, Korean researchers have not made similar efforts to study it. Even though some Koreans have discussed the role of specific professionals on disaster management, the majority of researchers have not attempted to systematically examine the importance of all disaster management professionals, particularly via the international perspective (Yeo, 2014).

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