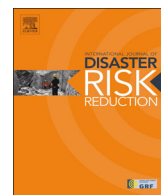


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Review Article

The 2011 flood in Minot (North Dakota, USA) and the role of faith-based and nonprofit groups in hazard event response and recovery



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ABSTRACT

The specific impact of community-based and faith-based groups on disaster response and recovery is a relatively recent complement to existing work on the role of these groups in public circles. It is generally recognized that communities in need may rely upon these groups to some extent when confronted with extraordinary events, but additional case studies of the potential extent of this reliance and sharing of learning between communities are necessary. This paper highlights the experience of the city of Minot, North Dakota, which suffered an immense flood in 2011, and the role of community-based and faith-based groups in supporting city's successful recovery effort. The question is considered: what were the impacts of nonprofit and faith-based groups on the 2011 Souris (Mouse) River flood response and recovery? The research relies upon primary data from interviews conducted with local public and faith-based group leaders. Nonprofit and faith-based groups had a particularly impressive impact on response and recovery in Minot.

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1. Introduction

Disasters are events out of control [19] – situations which exceed public sector capacities, push societal linkages to a breaking point, and demand extraordinary and selfless

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behavior from citizens, businesses, communities, and non-governmental organizations. Disasters arguably have their most sorrowful impact at the level of the individual, where crises of natural and technical variety undermine the comfort and stability people feel and leave them hurt, and looking for direction and meaning in institutions and beliefs larger than themselves. Even when local government officials act heroically, individuals still look to other segments of the public sector, such as nonprofit groups or religious organizations, for desperately needed support. In a crisis, rational thought and process can give way to emotion and reaction; people are shaken to their foundations and the norms of culture and threads of social structure in society gain greater significance.

“Consensual norms rather than technical rules represent the grounding for human behavior in the rational organization” ([1], p. 169). This concept is particularly important in crises, when the role of norms and culture become even more pronounced. Organizations create a reality informed by, and informing, the local context of crisis response. As local responses are reflective of institutional norms, we may expect that the ethos of service from various public quarters in a disaster is permeated by the culture of a community. If we seek to understand how and why of the local responses to crisis events, whether or not those yield a disaster scenario, we must try to understand the role of culture. At the heart of community culture is the role of faith and organizations engaged in service to the public good; tied to this is the response of faith-based and nonprofit groups in crisis.

The role of local institutions – local governments, nonprofit organizations, and faith-based groups – in responding to disasters is a topic worth additional consideration. The specific impact of community-based and faith-based groups on disaster response and recovery is a recent complement to existing work on the role of these groups in public circles. It is generally recognized that communities in need may rely upon these groups to some extent, but case studies of the potential extent of this reliance, beyond the events surrounding catastrophes like Hurricane Katrina, are not extensive in the literature. This is unfortunate because community-based nonprofits and faith-based groups should be part of the plan for response and recovery generally – not an afterthought when demands exceed governmental capabilities. Further, coordination of groups in a disaster situation is complex, and the attributes of successful interaction between such groups, other non-governmental groups, and the public sector, are perhaps not as well-known as necessary to protect communities and encourage recovery when the unimaginable has become tragically ordinary. Broader understanding of such phenomena can be helped by analysis and exploration of relevant case studies and sharing of experiences.

This paper highlights the experience of the city of Minot, North Dakota USA, which suffered an immense flood in 2011, and the role of community-based and faith-based groups in supporting city's recovery effort. The event did not receive adequate coverage – perhaps due to the absence of sensationalist, tragic themes. The coverage of the event was far less than an event striking a small city similar to Minot, in size and in social values, also in the

Midwestern United States – the 2011 Joplin, Missouri tornado. Minot could be representative of the capacity of small cities, and even tight-knit communities within large metropolitan areas, to more fully coordinate across agency boundaries in support of response and recovery, to the benefit of vulnerable populations. Minot is a city under some stress, due to proximity with oil operations in North Dakota, but the level of stress could easily be caused by a variety of stimuli and experienced by any small city, so the potential exists for knowledge transfer. Minot represents a community success, even under added strains of rapid development, in a time when there is great tendency to focus on human failings and public sector inadequacies. While it may be commonplace for some to believe that government failure is the rule of the day, and that public and faith-based organizations are too easily overwhelmed by the extent of the calamities that can befall a community, this thinking fails when confronted with the facts of this case – where public and faith-based officials and volunteers worked in an often selfless way in support of the public interest. The approaches in this case might also be useful to thinking about disaster response in other communities, and show the critical role of public leadership, given the ability of various community leaders to transcend their own agency interests to work collectively in favor of more community-wide outcomes.

For these reasons, this paper focuses on the question: what were the impacts of nonprofit and faith-based groups on the 2011 Souris (Mouse) River flood response and recovery? The research relies upon primary data from interviews conducted mainly in July 2012, roughly one year after the floodwaters crested in Minot, with local public and faith-based group leaders. The roles of faith-based and nonprofit groups in responding to crises are discussed first, and then the context of the event is presented. The flood event in Minot is introduced. Interviews with local officials in Minot are analyzed for increased understanding about the roles played by faith-based and nonprofit groups, and how those roles helped the flood response/recovery process in the city. Finally, ideas are presented for future research and additional exploration of this topic.

2. The changing role of community-based groups in crisis

Community-based organizations, or local nonprofit organizations that provide social services [41], have long been known for spontaneous responses in the face of local challenges. Simo and Bies suggest that “cross-sector collaborative efforts in disaster response create and enhance public value...[such efforts are] stimulated by and often necessary to compensate for weaknesses in one sector” ([37], p. 139). Here, the matter of collaborative efforts broadly given the literature is considered, and then the unique situation of Minot, a relatively large city within North Dakota, becomes the focus. Minot has a unique case study given its proximity to state's present oil boom and its attendant growth, coupled with the impact of flooding.

While numerous instances of crisis and response are etched on the collective memory, in many ways the response to Hurricane Katrina has most indicated a shift

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