New Opportunities for Co-operation and Collaboration Across National Boundaries for Better Local Outcomes

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Identifying the Gap

Most of us are very familiar with a range of disasters which have befallen other nations across the world in recent times, especially in the developing world. The past few years alone have given us the earthquakes in China's Sichuan Province, Iran and Pakistan, a devastating cyclone in Burma, Hurricane Katrina in the US, and the tsunami across the Indian Ocean to name but a few.

As a television viewer, I often feel that I get a good understanding of the consequences for the communities affected and how well the authorities are 'coping' with the situation, but two things seem to lack. Firstly, as a practitioner, I often wonder how far I have understood how the authorities had planned for these often predictable events. Secondly, to someone living in Britain, the nature and the severity of these events can leave one feeling slightly disconnected: they don't happen here do they? The result of this thinking risks lulling us into a mindset in which we (the 'fortunate' of the developed world) help them (the 'unfortunate' of the developing world) with financial aid and material resources to overcome the short-term consequences of a catastrophe before the media's attention moves on.

The problem for me with this context is that there are too few serious voices posing the question of whether there is anything we could or ought to learn from these experiences. More importantly, in the UK we lack the capacity or capability within civil protection for this to be done in an on-going, systematic way. Although they have enhanced their capabilities, in my view, the Civil Contingencies Secretariat (CCS) and Emergency Planning College (EPC) are not resourced or organised to do this in a meaningful way and academic research into disaster management in the UK does not yet engage sufficiently with professional practice in order to make a real difference. As a consequence, our best practice tends to emanate mainly from central government guidance (sometimes of mixed quality or utility), public inquiries (when it's too late) or local lessons learned (limited to the scope of our own experience). It seems to me therefore that we are somehow blind – with the exception of the US, the inspiration for so many government initiatives – to the *possibility* that the rest of the world might be able to teach us something about managing the risks of, and responding to, a range of disasters.

International Co-operation Towards Common Goals

It is ironic then that there are a number of good initiatives in existence upon whose work we might draw to inform our evolving approaches to the management of disaster risk and the response to major incidents, but about which many of us remain woefully ignorant.

I will begin with one key example: how many of you have heard of the *Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015: Building the Resilience of Nations and Communities to Disasters*? Apparently this was agreed at the 'Second World Conference on Disaster Reduction' in January 2005 as an important step towards the achievement of the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals and has subsequently been adopted by 168 states, including our own. So what, one might ask? Well, let me draw your attention to its five specific *Priorities for Action:* making disaster risk reduction a priority; improving risk information and early warning; building a culture of safety and resilience; reducing the risks in key sectors; strengthening preparedness for response. In my opinion, these link perfectly with where the Civil Contingencies Act (CCA) has taken us and the challenges we now face in embedding genuine resilience within our communities. If others are wrestling with the same challenges, why wouldn't we seek to face these through a sharing of ideas and experiences so that we develop informed approaches based on *international* rather than local best practice? I would be intrigued to find out whether there is a plan somewhere which sets out how the UK proposes to achieve the priorities it signed-up to, albeit one we have not been told about.

It troubles me that, as someone who prides himself on being well-informed, I hadn't heard about this and a number of related initiatives until May 2008 when I was invited to represent the Local Government Association (LGA) at a two-day workshop on 'Building a Local Government Alliance for Disaster Risk Reduction' organised by the UN's International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) Secretariat. This workshop brought together a small number of representatives of local government from around the world with key international bodies (e.g.
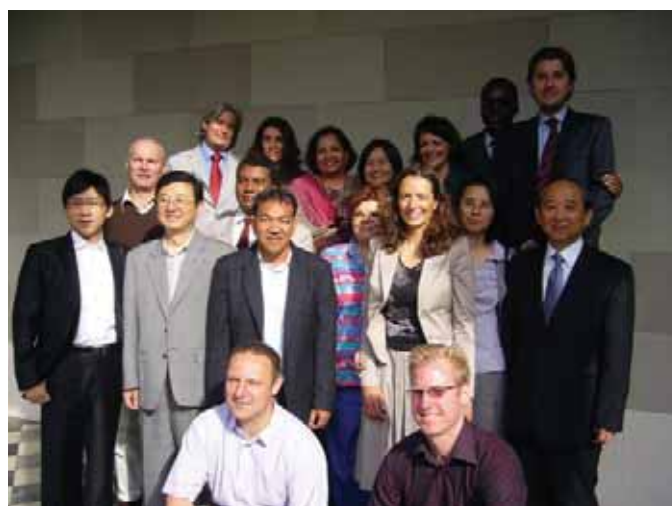
Delegates at the workshop on 'Building a Local Government Alliance for Disaster Risk Reduction'.

Sálvano Briceño, who was appointed the Director of the Secretariat of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UN/ISDR), signing the Memorandum of Understanding.

UNOSAT, International Labour Organisation) to discuss whether there was a need for an alliance of local government organisations to help deliver the Hyogo Priorities of Action and, if so, how this might work. The underlying premise was that, whilst national governments are the UN's stakeholders and vital in supporting the process, they are not able to deliver the detailed requirements of the Priorities for Action like regional and local government which is closer to its communities.

The event began with the local government representatives from India, South Africa, the Philippines and Spain giving presentations on the risks which they face in their areas and the strategies they have adopted to treat these risks. This was followed by UN officers providing details about the role of the UN and its agencies in meeting this challenge and what they felt was needed to be put in place.

Lessons for the British Context
Although I began with little idea of what to expect from this experience, I drew a number of common sense conclusions from the excellent presentations and ensuing discussions.

Firstly, whilst the nature, breadth and severity of the disaster risks faced by different societies and environments differ enormously, the actual fundamental needs of human beings and their environments vary little. Clearly there are dangers of generalising overly in a world of tremendous cultural, political and geographical diversity where communities' expectations and tolerance of adversity will differ enormously, but this common ground is central to the question of whether there is scope for genuine collaboration.

Secondly, as a result of their exposure to higher overall levels of disaster risk and actual incidents, local government organisations and their communities abroad are often much better prepared for emergencies than we are in several ways. This appeared to be particularly the case in relation to educating children and adults about the risks they face, what they should do in the event of a disaster and how they will be alerted. Hearing these approaches, I was reminded again of how little we have

really progressed around the implementation of the CCA's 'Communicating with the Public' duty which was the least well-articulated part of its accompanying guidance. Whilst local responders could have done more with this, I believe this outcome derives from insufficient leadership by central government which manifests itself in a reluctance to be open with the public and to allow this to be a component in the national education curriculum. The bottom line is that this deficiency will continue to affect our ability to respond to, and recover from, incidents effectively over a prolonged period unless we change our attitudes to the public's role. I do not believe that we should have to wait for the onset of major climate change and a growing number of natural disasters in order to find the will to adopt a more open and robust approach to preparing our communities properly for the risks they face when the benefits of community resilience seem so obvious.

Thirdly, the systems of governance in other countries may lend themselves better to the effective management of major emergencies at the local, regional and national levels in a scaleable fashion. Most important forms of power and capability (political, economic, cultural, technological) have become increasingly concentrated at the national level in the UK and there is little in the way of an intermediate capability between central and local government - unlike in Spain, Germany, the US, Australia etc – so that when local responders require resources beyond those immediately available to them recourse to central government is the default setting. I would like to play devil's advocate here by suggesting that, as in Spain, if the incident is not of national importance, why does national government need to involve itself? Of course, this problem was implicitly noted during the promulgation of the CCA with the creation of Regional Resilience Teams (RRTs), but these remain primarily an arm of central government with insufficient resourcing and autonomy to undertake the same role as in other countries. In actual incidents, the RRTs have been forced to act as conduits for ministerial requests rather than leading meaningful co-ordination of area-wide incidents or providing useful resources held in regional stockpiles. Having witnessed the latest emergency co-ordination resources of the Catalan Regional Government, I would welcome its comparison with its English regional peers. Clearly, it is not for me to advocate more regional government in general, but I would like to suggest that there needs to be a rebalancing in the capabilities and capacity of key actors in emergency planning and response in the UK so that these reside closer to the communities we seek to help. The current review of the CCA is a perfect opportunity for this to be debated.

Fourthly, although 'emergency planning' has moved closer towards the mainstream of the work of local responders, the experiences of colleagues from abroad suggest that we have some way to go. We were provided with multiple examples of local government seamlessly linking the emergency management agenda with that of, for example, land-use planning to ensure that the risk of disasters was not only not added to through new building, but consciously reduced (e.g. by moving communities). I was struck by how much these approaches adopted a common sense approach to problem-solving rather than the 'you can't do that' approach so characteristic of the UK with its overly complex and fractured infrastructure. The Pitt Review provides an opportunity to develop a new, more encompassing way of managing a particular form of disaster risk, but we need to go beyond this. I would suggest that we still exist far too much in an 'emergency planning ghetto' and that other key parts of the CCA need to be radically revamped. As you know, unlike most areas in which risk management is applied, the CCA duty confines itself to 'risk assessment' and only offers stakeholders the opportunity to treat identified unacceptably high risks by developing plans and strategies to mitigate them and then testing the plans and any associated capabilities. If the scope of this duty were to be widened to allow us to engage with further risk treatment techniques, in particular risk reduction, then I believe the resilience agenda would have more natural points of connection with other aspects of local governance which would provide further opportunities to leave the ghetto behind. Of course, this is not about extending the writ of emergency planning, but rather that we should work in partnership with a broader range of stakeholders for the benefits of our communities.

Where Next?

My recent conversations with colleagues from abroad have not led me to fundamentally change my thinking on how we should deal with disasters. However, they have made me realise just how many officers like us there are around the world trying to identify the best ways to protect their populations against identified hazards and how much we continually 'reinvent the wheel' or seek solutions in relative isolation.

It came as no surprise that our workshop unanimously concluded that there was a very strong case for the creation of a 'Local Government Alliance for Disaster Risk Reduction' to give local responders a meaningful voice by sharing ideas or experiences around approaches and technologies, giving rise to actions which can hopefully ripple out beyond the parties directly engaged. Of course, the trick is going to be how this goodwill can be put into concrete effect, given the barriers posed by distance, cost and language. To this end, it was agreed that a compact Advisory Board would be created to develop the shape and content of the proposed Alliance which could meet on the fringe of other major international events, at dedicated annual conferences, or at regional sub-groups. The UNISDR Secretariat kindly agreed to develop its internet capability (**http://www.unisdr.org/eng/partner-netw/local-government/local-government.html**) to facilitate the virtual exchange of information between interested parties. The site already provides access to a range of interesting documents, including the Hyogo Framework and a good practice guide to the teaching of disaster risk reduction in various countries, and I would commend this to colleagues across the UK. I will also be emphasising the need for the LGA to engage with this Alliance and to communicate developments to local practitioners.

I believe that national government also needs to allow itself to develop the capability to be informed better about what is going on in the wider world rather than restricting itself to sources best described as the 'usual suspects'. The forthcoming Review of the CCA offers an ideal opportunity to travel beyond our comfort zone and to learn from other societies, but this should be an on-going rather than discrete experience. As I suggested earlier, the CCS and the EPC are not currently resourced to trawl the outside world for better ways of delivering what is needed and filtering this information for the benefit of local practitioners. Perhaps government could also reflect on how it could empower local responders to engage more with their peers in other countries through 'self-help alliances'.

Whatever happens, local responders should not sit back and wait for best practice to come to us. At the very least, we should be reviewing the resources provided by the likes of UNISDR on the internet, reaching out to other services to see if we can evolve risk treatment techniques beyond those stipulated by the CCA, establishing how our partner cities in Europe and beyond undertake civil protection and possibly engage in collaborative ventures with them and so forth. Like all partnerships, these relationships are likely to be two-way traffic with the benefits playing out in the longer-term. It's time to mend our ways!