

An overview of the “new” emergency management

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INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of 9/11 and the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, it is tempting to suggest that emergency management (EM) has attained a new level of significance in the national consciousness. Indeed, the emergence of the profession and the creation of FEMA itself owe much to the national defense mania of the Cold War era. But, if the past is any indication, the national security concerns that periodically increase public awareness and political attentiveness to EM do not result in a broad commitment of new resources to the array of natural and manmade disasters that threaten communities. Aside from the increased attention on immediate security threats, often without new resources being made available to local governments, the commitment to comprehensive disaster planning is generally lacking. It could even be suggested that the current focus on national security holds as much potential to distract the EM profession as it does to increase its operational scope, but the current security crisis could also be an opportunity to recast EM as a more strategic component in the local communities it serves.

National security concerns aside, the EM profession is presently confronting the challenge to manage new realities. This requires expanding the role of the EM function beyond its traditional scope. The emergency manager requires new skills, and the profession must be identified with the emergency manager as a proactive public actor as much as it is with institutions and technical functions. This suggests that political and organizational analysis, strategic thinking, and leadership—concepts that have already been applied to all other public management functions—may be increasingly important concepts of study for emergency managers.¹⁻³

What follows is a new conceptual framework for the EM profession as well as a basic organizational theme for its implementation. The limitations of the “old EM” must be overcome for the profession to advance to the “new EM,” which requires a broader, strategic, and more proactive orientation.

THE OLD EM

An examination of EM literature suggests that, until recently, the strategic motivation for the EM profession arose from the challenges of responding to immediate disasters rather than from the recognition of opportunities and the implementation of long-term planning. EM issues were of low salience in most states and communities.^{4,5} In fact, the literature often noted indifference or outright opposition to disaster preparedness.⁶ Public officials and public administrators in local communities did not fully comprehend the nature of the EM function. An assumption still prevalent is that EM is primarily a “response” function and a concern only for first responders. Other public officials remain uninvolved and assume that they need not learn much about the field.⁷

The development of the EM function at the local level grew out of federal legislation such as the Emergency Planning and Community Right to Know Act of 1986, but even with federal mandates assigning more disaster mitigation and preparedness functions to local governments, EM did not quickly become a priority at the local level. Unless a specific hazard was imminent, sustained governmental interest and public support at the local level was difficult to sustain.⁸ Tending to underestimate hazard potentials, policy makers and stakeholders have thus been reluctant to impose limitations on private property, unwilling to

bear the costs of hazard preparedness, and ambivalent toward hazard mitigation.⁷ EM remained a low priority, a resented unfunded federal mandate, and a responsibility often seen at odds with more important tasks such as economic development.

From its earliest days, the EM function suffered due to low political support and scarce resources. In many local jurisdictions, it became an add-on or part-time responsibility for an already overburdened local official such as a fire chief. Those appointed to local EM directorships often had little professional training or relevant experience. As a result, the focus of the EM professional tended to be disaster-specific, technical, and limited to very specific tasks.

This is beginning to change. The EM function is on its way to becoming a distinct profession, but a model is still lacking for transforming a once-limited function into a contemporary public management role connected to the whole of community life.

Recent literature suggests that EM is no longer confined to preparing for, responding to, or recovery from disasters but is increasingly an integral part of a community decision-making process connected to issues such as environmental stewardship, community planning, and sustainable development.⁹ More analysis is being devoted to EM as a component in broader community planning and development activities.^{10,11} Linking hazard mitigation to the broader task of developing sustainable communities potentially places EM at the very heart of community planning.¹² This new strategic framework requires that EM organizations must see themselves as part of the political and social settings in which they work and see challenges, identify opportunities, and create long-term roles for themselves in the process of community planning and development.

Anchoring EM to any proactive principle runs contrary to the experience of most emergency managers. Even today, many emergency managers are most comfortable with a narrowly defined concept of planning for a particular set of planned responses to specific hazards or emergencies. EM organizations have never been inclined to expand their operational role or their strategic position. If EM is to be an integral part of broader issues and concerns affecting community life, it must redefine itself.

THE NEW EM

In linking EM to the broader task of sustainable community development, the challenge is to recast EM as a participant in the nexus of institutional and public actors who influence the process of community planning and development. Sustainable development is the key to this.

Sustainability to the emergency manager usually means that a locality can withstand and overcome any damage (property damage, lost economic opportunity, etc.) without significant outside assistance.¹¹ Hazard mitigation is the specific EM function that ties it to the concept of sustainability. The fostering of local sustainability in the face of hazards—natural or manmade—is a prominent theme in current EM literature. In assessing the hazards that confront their communities, emergency managers have been increasingly trained to think in terms of mitigation. This rationale begins with the realization that disasters stem from predictable interactions between the physical environment and the demographic characteristics of the communities that experience them.

A preeminent objective of EM must be to mitigate hazards in a sustainable way to stop the trend of the increasing and catastrophic losses associated with them. With the passage of the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act of 1988, it has also become a matter of federal law. This law requires planning to mitigate the risks associated with recurring natural disasters.

The new EM has begun with a focus on hazard mitigation. Over the past decade, emergency managers have become more conversant with the concept of structural mitigation—increasing the resilience and damage-resistance of buildings and infrastructure through building codes, engineering designs, construction practices, etc. Emergency managers have also become increasingly, if more reluctantly, conversant with the notion of nonstructural mitigation. This includes directing new development away from high-risk locations through land use plans and regulations, relocating existing developments that have sustained damage to safer locations, and maintaining the protective features of the natural environment that may absorb and reduce hazard

impacts. The emphasis on hazard mitigation, structural and especially nonstructural, brings EM to the center of the vital task of planning and implementing sustainable community development.

Planning for sustainable development—a concept originally associated with environmental policy—has been broadened to include all community planning, including planning for economic development. It links concerns for social, economic, and environmental well-being in a process aimed at meeting present needs, while preserving the ability of future generations to meet their needs. EM has been linked to this broader task of sustainable development,^{10,13} and hazard mitigation has been a primary vehicle for that linkage.^{11,12} The emphasis is on reducing the vulnerability of communities to natural and manmade disasters in the context of other community goals such as reducing poverty, providing jobs, and generally improving people's living conditions.¹⁴

From an EM perspective, sustainable development requires an evaluation by each locality of its environmental resources and hazard risk potential, resulting in a series of choices that will impact the economic, social, and physical well-being of the community. These choices include identifying losses that a community is willing to bear, but all public choices relating to these matters must adhere to the value of sustainability as defined in the context of the broader community planning and development process.

Emergency managers know that communities must address the interdependent causes of natural and manmade disasters and decide which potential risks and losses are acceptable and which actions are needed to maintain the social, economic, and political stability necessary for the community to flourish. They seldom perceive this in the context of a broader role for EM in community planning. However, consider the connection between the two. If a community seeks to promote sustainability in the face of serious earthquake risks, structural mitigation alone is insufficient. Much more is required than building codes. Sustainability also requires a linkage of policies on building codes to policies on housing density, urban transit, social equality, environmental quality, economic development, etc. All policies are linked by

the concept of sustainability, which includes EM policy and makes the emergency manager a participant in community planning.

The logic of hazard mitigation suggests that a part of ensuring the economic, political, and social development of a community is a full awareness of hazard risks and a plan to mitigate them. Community planning and development must include anticipation of and solutions to risks associated with potential hazards. But to the extent that EM's orientation remains disaster-driven, the relevance of the new EM will be restricted, even if there is a greater awareness of its connection to broader concerns. The wider context of EM requires a more broadly engaged EM professional.

THE NEW EM PROFESSIONAL

If EM is to become a critical part of the process of sustainable community development, emergency managers must see themselves as participating with all political and social institutions in a coordinated effort. Building sustainable communities must be the fundamental public value served by the EM function, but the question remains: In the performing of their specific tasks, how can emergency managers organize their work to serve this public value?

As a first step, emergency managers must perceive themselves as having a common agenda with other community institutions. All relevant public and private stakeholders in the context of sustainable development must be brought into the EM planning process. In turn, emergency managers must be brought in as stakeholders to the network of community policymakers involved in planning and development activities.

The second step is defining the technical components in each phase of the EM function—risk assessment, mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery—as part of a holistic system of integrated policies related to disaster mitigation and sustainability in the community. Hazard or disaster mitigation must be the preeminent task that ties EM into the value of sustainability and defines its role in the context of community planning.

The final step is the linkage of all policies necessary to promote social, economic, and political stability, including EM policies, in the process of community planning. The end product of EM must be connected to

all facets of community life in a coordinated effort to promote sustainability.

To accomplish these three steps, EM needs to broaden its orientation beyond efficient disaster response and recovery operations. To be more proactive by emphasizing mitigation, emergency managers must become partners with all community leaders associated with the concept of sustainable development. To build networks of support groups and stakeholders, and to establish the linkages with other community leaders and institutions necessary to bring about this transformation, technical skill alone is insufficient. The training of emergency managers needs to be refocused on more strategic skills.

Advanced educational training is increasingly required for all emergency managers. The training associated with public administration—training in leadership, organizational behavior, strategic planning, analytical methods, and public policy—has never been more urgently needed. A more proactive EM professional is needed to articulate a broader role for EM, to link it to the building of sustainable communities, and to emphasize mitigation.

Finally, the training of all public management professionals should include a basic foundation in EM. Educational programs should provide training that reflects the link between hazard mitigation, community planning, and sustainable development. This does not mean that all public administrators should be cross-trained as emergency managers, but EM should be a component of their professional education. It should include a focus on the value of mitigating hazards in a sustainable way as a key component to community planning and development.

CONCLUSION

The old EM tended to be event- or disaster-driven, focused primarily on response and recovery with a narrow focus on technical capabilities. The new EM, driven by the development of a stronger emphasis on hazard mitigation and increasingly connected to the concept of sustainable development, requires that EM be seen as a part of a more strategic system that connects the emergency manager to the broader concerns of community planning. This requires the integration of all technical

components with integrated policies and programs related to disaster mitigation as it is connected to the building of sustainable communities. Resident in this development are both the opportunity and the need to broaden the definition of the EM function, which in turn requires a more broadly trained, strategic, and proactive EM professional.

With a conceptual orientation centered on sustainable development and a practical emphasis on hazard mitigation, the outline for the future of the profession is visible. The challenge now is to prepare new EM professionals for the future suggested by that outline.

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