Enhancing Public Resilience: A community approach

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ABSTRACT: The overall aim of this study is to explore the interface between local authorities and voluntary initiatives, to identify key enablers for enhancing public resilience. In other words, the present study is about mapping the state of collaboration between local authorities and the organized voluntary and not organized public, and attends to good examples of coproducing safety. The analyses are based on a literature study together with 33 interviews with representatives of four social actors at the community level: 1) professionals working at municipalities, 2) volunteers engaged in NGOs, 3) semi-organized individuals, and 4) non-organized individuals, in three geographical areas in Sweden representing different kinds of physical and social environments. The main results show that there are some particular areas that are important for enhancing public resilience. These areas are; Collaboration, Formal and informal practices, General ability and specific competence, Dynamics between collective efforts and individual self-help, Aspects of education and empowerment, Traditional communication versus digital media, Individual involvement, and Age and generations. The paper identifies a number of challenges and opportunities in each area. A general observation is also that the scope and depth of collaboration between public and municipal emergency actors and voluntary organizations differ a lot depending on population density, size of local community and geographical characteristics. These factors seem to have most impact on how formal the collaboration is between the professional and voluntary organizations and issues related to resources of different kinds.

Keywords: Public resilience, Community, Voluntary initiatives.

1. INTRODUCTION

In response to the European Parliament and the Council's call for increased action at Community level to prevent disasters and mitigate their impacts, a Community approach on the prevention of natural and man-made disasters is being launched. According to the Community approach, awareness-raising of the general public can contribute to disaster prevention (COM (2009)82). Likewise, the European Security Research and Innovation Forum (ESRIF) states that European citizens should be regarded as a decisive and integral active part in any future crisis management solution. Every individual has his or her own resilience capabilities that need to be enforced and deployed in a crisis situation (ESRIF Final Report 2009:112). One way of moving forward towards increased public engagement in situations of crisis and disaster is formally recognizing the value of local volunteer efforts (United Nations 2005). Regulatory frameworks encourage volunteerism by empowering volunteers with formal roles during and in the aftermath of disasters.

This study explores individual experiences and success factors[1], which can be part of the description on how to connect with community needs and how to activate and utilize efforts within the community[2]. The overall aim is to explore the interface between local authorities and voluntary initiatives, to identify key enablers for enhancing public resilience. In other words, the present study is about mapping the state of collaboration between local authorities and the organized voluntary and not organized public, and attends to good examples of coproducing safety.

Focusing on resilience means putting greater emphasis on what communities can do for themselves and how to strengthen their capacities, rather than concentrating on their vulnerability to disaster or environmental shocks and stresses, or their needs in an emergency (Twigg 2009:8). Thus, the concept of community resilience has developed within a salutogenic perspective (Paton & Johnston 2001:272).

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[1] In previous risk research the heterogeneity of the general public, regarding how people perceive and respond to risks and crises, have been pinpointed. Especially positional factors such as age and gender (see e.g. Olofsson & Rashid 2011; Olofsson & Öhman 2007; Zinn & Pierce 2002), and situational factors such as education, place of residence and having children (see e.g. Slovic 2000; Lindell & Perry 1992) have been studied.

[2] A community, is defined here as a collective of people living in a particular area, or being socially connected through a common ethnicity, religion or interest (cf. Johansson & Linnell, 2012). Community resilience entails the ongoing and developing capacity of the community to account for its vulnerabilities and develop capabilities that aid that community (Chandra et al. 2011:9). The UK government, for example, defines community resilience as "communities and individuals harnessing local resources and expertise to help themselves in an emergency, in a way that complements the response of the emergency services" (SCDC 2011:3).

A comprehensive literature review on community resilience definitions and dimensions concluded that (a) communities can develop resilience strategically via collective action; (b) that community resilience is facilitated through developing and engaging diverse resources from throughout the community; (c) that community members can be active agents in the development of community resilience; and (d) that resilience is developed through engagement of the community's resources, i.e. taking action and not just developing the community's capacity (Magis 2010:406). Moreover, community engagement helps relieve the burdens on health and safety agencies by enabling more members of the public to assume the role of responder rather than victim (Schoch-Spana 2006:16).

However, there are still few studies that clarify in depth how community approaches can enhance public empowerment as well as crisis management. A large part of the contributing literature comes from the US, while contributions from the EU are still modest (Johansson & Linnell, 2012). A general conclusion, therefore, is that empirical research on how to include the public in collaboration on crisis and emergency management in a European context is needed. The Swedish crisis management policy context is particularly suited for this type of study since national regulations stress individual responsibility for preparing and handling crises (Government bill 2001/02:158).

2. METHOD

In order to analyse possibilities of increasing public resilience during crises, and how representatives of the public can take action to engage, we performed interviews with safety coordinators, and individuals that are organized, semi-organized and non-organized in respect to organizations volunteering during crises. In total, 33 interviews were undertaken, with representatives of four social actors at the community level, 21 of the people interviewed were male while 12 were female:

- Representatives of local community or municipality level (safety coordinator or similar posts in the municipality)

- Members of voluntary organizations (dealing with basic forms of societal crisis management)

- Semi-organized individuals (engaged in non-traditional forms of organization, i.e. networks etc.)

- Non-organized individuals (individuals with no known involvement in organized crisis management)

In order to obtain maximum variation in our informants' views and experiences, participants were recruited from three regions in Sweden, all of them with specific demographic and geographic challenges, which can represent not only Sweden, and the Nordic countries, but also different other regions throughout Europe: The most southern part of Sweden is partly densely populated and vulnerable due to its flat topography and relative inexperience to extreme winter conditions. The Stockholm-area is very densely populated. Due to its central position (in terms of influence on the rest of the country), collaboration between societal actors in this region is somewhat more "professionalized" compared to other regions. The mid Sweden area (southern Norrland) is sparsely populated. It is characterized by its mountains and its inland-climate. Due to extreme conditions, especially during the winter, people are relatively experienced in weather-related precautions.

The questions constituting the interview guide were developed by the research group. The themes covered by the four categories were basically the same, but the order and formulation of the questions differed slightly. Themes covered in the guides are, for example individual responsibility (to engage, to act, and to be prepared), preparedness (including education, training and exercises), collaboration (between the public, voluntary organizations, and public authorities/local councils), communication (mainly between voluntary organizations and public authorities/local councils), the role of civil society (Should we expect civil society to be more involved, or in other ways?), and real-life experiences (good and bad examples of collaboration, communication, etc.)

Analyses of the transcribed interviews were undertaken in a collective manner by the research group, employing the approach of qualitative content analysis (QCA). This approach is generally used to interpret meaning from the content of text-based data and, hence, adhere to the naturalistic paradigm (Hsieh and Shannon 2005:1277).

3. RESULTS

The main results show that there are some particular areas that are important for enhancing public resilience. These areas are: Collaboration, Formal and informal practices, General ability and specific competence, Dynamics between collective efforts and individual self-help, Aspects of education and empowerment, Traditional communication versus digital media, Individual involvement, and Age and generations. A number of challenges and opportunities in each area are identified.

3.1 Collaboration: formal and informal practices

This theme describes the degree of formalization in collaborative efforts between the voluntary public and municipal safety coordinators. Formal and informal ways of collaboration can thus be understood as endpoints on a scale, where most interaction between the municipality and the voluntary public occurs somewhere in-between. Formal collaboration, in this material, means that the tasks handed over to voluntary groups are predefined and that collaborative efforts between the municipality and the

2

voluntary public are planned, regulated and contractual. Informal collaboration, on the other hand, means that issues of insurance and economic compensation are not solved beforehand and that collaborative efforts are expected to arise ad hoc during a crisis.

3.2 Specific competences and general abilities

This theme describes the dynamics between municipal safety coordinators' needs and voluntary organizations' expectations regarding tasks and assignments that can be managed by others that the municipality itself. The voluntary public could adjust their activities to the predefined needs expressed by the safety coordinator while simultaneously describing various areas where they could serve as an important resource during times of societal strain.

3.3 The dynamics between collective efforts and individual self-help

This theme describes different understandings of what could be the most appropriate and efficient task for the voluntary public to carry out in times of crisis. Collective efforts and individual self-help can be understood as endpoints on a scale, where most tasks exercised by voluntary groups occur somewhere in-between. That is, during a crisis people tend to both manage themselves in order not to restrain professional crisis managers and engage in collective efforts in order to facilitate the work of professional actors. Collective efforts are thus performed through various organizational forms, from traditional civil defence organizations to contemporary network organizations like Missing People. Individual self-help is often taught within these organizations as part of general crisis preparedness abilities.

3.4 Traditional communication versus digital media

Interviews with safety coordinators, organized volunteers, and non-organized individuals reflect the transformation process of communication during events and crises from traditional communication channels and ways of contact into the new digital landscape of communication characterized by a multitude of digital communication platforms such as mobile phones, internet web pages, and social media. Interviewees' perceptions reflect the dynamic tensions of opportunities and challenges in traditional and new communication forms.

3.5 Individual motivation and involvement

Individual involvement is an essential theme in the material. The interviewees talk about this as well as their own drive engage in voluntary crisis management, and also about other people's involvement. People in general are described as prepared and interested in contributing, but at the same time as difficult to get formally involved in traditional organizations for voluntary crisis management. That is, there is a great desire to be involved among people, but this it is difficult to organize formally. In the interviews there are many statements about one's own and others' motives to engage in voluntary crisis management. One way of elevating the voluntary public to the level of professional actors is to make sure people are educated and properly trained. This theme highlights some aspects in the present material regarding the importance of education and training.

3.6 Generation and age

The last theme is different compared to the other themes since it reflects discussions about an individual characteristic, namely age. Age is a central theme in the material. When the interviewees, regardless of whether they are civil servants, volunteers or non-organized individuals, talk about age, their choice of word often highlights age from a functionalist perspective. Young people are emphasized as capable and strong while older people are described as a generation no longer having much power or influence. Furthermore, young people are described as difficult to reach and to involve as volunteers, since they are perceived as busy, with their family or with their work. In the descriptions of young people's work and interest, the interviewees talks about technical interests, often in terms of 'computer' and 'IT-systems'.

4. ADDED VALUE FOR THE POST 2015 FRAMEWORK FOR DISASTER RISK REDUCTION

The Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA) explain, describe and detail the work that is required from all different sectors and actors to reduce disaster losses. Its goal is to substantially reduce disaster losses by 2015 by building the resilience of nations and communities to disasters. This means reducing loss of lives and social, economic, and environmental assets when hazards strike.

Effective disaster risk reduction requires effective community participation. The scope and depth of collaboration between public and municipal emergency actors and voluntary organizations differ a lot depending on population density, size of local community and geographical characteristics. These factors seem to have most impact on how formal the collaboration is between the professional and voluntary organizations and issues related to resources of different kinds. Public-private collaboration are important for prevention, preparedness, operations and recovery. They can in turn improve the resilience of communities, though more empirical research on how to include the public in collaboration on crisis and emergency management in a European context is needed.

3

Our research shows that there should be better adaptation of the coming Post 2015 framework for disaster reduction, from the international and national to the local level. There is also a need for more good examples about how to work with the framework especially at the interface between local authorities and voluntary initiatives. It is needed to identify key enablers for enhancing public resilience and to further map the state of collaboration between local authorities and the organized voluntary and not organized public.

5. CONCLUSIONS

A general observation is that the scope and depth of collaboration between public and municipal emergency actors and voluntary organizations differ a lot depending on population density, size of local community and geographical characteristics. These factors seem to have most impact on how formal the collaboration is between the professional and voluntary organizations and issues related to resources of different kinds.

One major theme expressed during the majority of interviews is a division between the individual responsibility to protect one's own life and property, as expressed in Act (2003:778), and the too often unused task-force of engaged and voluntary citizens. This theme can be summarized by the slogan used by a local voluntary resource group in the mid Sweden area: "*It is one thing to manage yourself in vulnerable situations, but something completely different to also be able to help others*" (http://frg.skelleftea.org).

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