The U.S. Government Response to Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy

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Abstract

Numerous systemic failures and shortcomings characterized the governmental response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005. A 2006 report by the U.S. Senate’s Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee found “gross dereliction of duty on the part of nearly all the agencies involved and of those in a position to lead.”

After Katrina, the federal government replaced the National Response Plan with the National Response Framework, and made other changes to emergency management planning policy. While the response to Katrina was characterized by a lack of both agility and discipline, the response to Sandy was both agile and disciplined. However, there are still improvements to be made.

Agility and Discipline

John Harrald establishes that effective disaster response should have:

Agility – the ability to react and adapt to unexpected circumstances
Discipline – the quality of maintaining organized structure and memory

From this agility/discipline framework, Harrald establishes four types of organizations:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not Disciplined</th>
<th>Disciplined</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not Agile</td>
<td>Agile</td>
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<tr>
<td>Type 1: Dysfunctional</td>
<td>Type 2: Ad Hoc/Reactive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Type 3: Bureaucratic/Procedural</td>
<td>Balanced/Adaptive</td>
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Response to Hurricane Katrina resembled a Type 1 organization (Dysfunctional), whereas response to Sandy was closest to a Type 3 (Balanced/Adaptive).

National Response Plan

The National Response Plan, in effect during Hurricane Katrina, established the Interagency Incident Management Group (IIMG) at the federal level, the Regional Response Coordination Center (RRCC) at the regional level, and the Joint Field Office (JFO) at the field level. Each was a place for different agencies to come together during disasters, and each was headed by one or more federal officials.

The National Response Plan was described as “bureaucratic and internally repetitive”. Many officials at all levels weren’t familiar with the plan.

Hurricane Katrina

The response to Katrina was fraught with problems:

- Government officials failed to prepare for or heed long-term warnings.
- Officials “took insufficient actions or made poor decisions” during the response period.
- Systems crucial to response failed.
- Officials “failed to provide effective leadership.”
- Problems arose from the plans themselves and from the execution of those plans.
- Leaders did not grasp the severity of the situation until it was too late.
- There were repeated problems of confusion and dispute among government agencies at all levels of government.
- Organizations failed to adapt to new situations on the ground in an agile way.
- Planning before Katrina had been crafted post-9/11, emphasizing terrorist attacks more than natural disasters.

After Katrina: National Response Framework

After Katrina, the National Response Plan was replaced by the National Response Framework. Major changes include:

- An emphasis on leaders taking action rather than waiting for particular designations or waiting for other entities to make requests.
- Better-defined roles for key actors.
- Increased role of emergency professionals as opposed to elected officials.
- A new National Operations Center to continuously monitor threats and maintain situational awareness.
- Reduced redundancy and improved coordination.
- A greater emphasis on the links between preparedness, response, and recovery.

Hurricane Sandy

Sandy was a true test of the new National Response Framework. In general, Sandy response was much more effective than the response to Katrina.

- The Framework was clearer more effective a structure than the Plan had been.
- Leaders at all levels were much more informed of the plans and took warnings much more seriously.
- Agencies were much better prepared before landfall.
- Situational awareness had improved.
- Provision of supplies and logistics were more efficient.
- Law enforcement was more effective.
- However, there were still areas for improvement:
- Communications were improved from Katrina, but problems still persisted.
- The efficacy of evacuations is not clear.
- Few people used shelters, suggesting a failure of government action.
- Preparedness and response have much room for improvement.

Recommendations

Some recommendations include:

- Encourage and design for improvisation in situational awareness.
- Give proper training for evacuation personnel.
- Create local and regional evacuation plans.
- Communicate with the public on evacuations and shelter, in preparation, response, and recovery stages.
- Plan for non-governmental organizations and volunteers taking part in response and recovery.
- Recover smartly, and consider where and how rebuilding takes place.
- Learn from bright spots, organizations that did well during Katrina and Sandy.
- Fund emergency response adequately at all levels of government, specifically FEMA.
- Continue to educate elected officials about their roles during emergencies.
- Continue to professionalize response roles.

Works Cited