
**CITIZEN KNOWLEDGE AND READINESS FOR DISASTERS
IN THE BALKANS**

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Abstract: With the beginning of the twenty-first century, further emphasis is placed on the global challenges in terms of security in the environment in which we live. All countries around the world are exposed to dangers which, in varying degrees and proportions, pose a threat to the individual country's physical security, wealth and interests. Such events, including natural and man-made disasters, usually create the need for large human capacities. The costs of disasters in terms of money, human suffering and effort, and lost resources can be devastating. Such threats are a diverse combination of natural forces and human actions. They can be direct and indirect. It's not by chance that nature responds harshly to man's activities. This includes unwise industrial, commercial, household and agricultural activities. As human beings, we build on flood plains or earthquake fault lines, make changes to riverbeds, construct sewage systems, create roads and buildings without urban planning, and cut down forests without reforestation. Air pollution, water pollution and the environment generally jeopardize the lives of people and other living things. If our activities do not cause disasters, they make response to disasters worse when they happen. Although disasters cannot be prevented or controlled in most cases, it is obvious that citizens be prepared either individually or in groups, in families, or as healthcare workers and community organizations to mitigate and lessen the damage and, when the disaster happens, to create a successful response. Knowledge is key to understanding and effectively responding to disasters of any kind. Knowledge also improves resilience – the capacity to bounce back after a disaster. Before we blame nature for disasters, we must first answer questions about our knowledge and preparation as individuals, families, and communities to respond to catastrophes. This paper examines citizen knowledge and readiness in the Balkan region for disasters. It proposes citizen emergency preparedness training (following a model used in the United States) as a means of responding to the gap in knowledge and preparation.

Keywords: disaster, emergency, preparedness, readiness, resilience

1. INTRODUCTION

Globally, emergency situations, created by disasters in the last 10 years, appear to have worsened. Understanding the impact of disasters and attributing the causes for the catastrophes is difficult. As Mohsenin (2017) warns, "It's tempting to link recent hurricanes and earthquakes to each other as evidence for natural disasters becoming more frequent, more severe, caused by human activity, or other cognitively easy causal interpretations of recent news. However, they're separate phenomena, so discrete analyses are necessary." In this paper, we build the argument for the need of a prepared citizenry to help their neighbors within their communities and assist the first responders in emergencies. First, we report on the types and severity of disasters in the Western Balkans. Then, we discuss recent government measures to prepare first responders to deal with disasters. Finally, we propose the need to prepare citizenry in the region to deal with disasters when they are capable. A model borrowed from the United States is suggested as a means for preparing the public for disasters.

2. DISASTERS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

While the following disasters in the Western Balkans may not have been prevent, greater citizen knowledge preparedness might have facilitated response and recovery. While these are only a sampling of the catastrophes that occur in the region, they represent well the diversity of disasters and their impact on the countries and their citizens. In 2018 scores of people died in Greece, either because people were not warned in time or they refused to evacuate, as devastating fires went through a community near Athens (Konstandaras, 2018; Fires in Greece, 2018). In 2016, North Macedonia declared a state of emergency when 21 were died in flooding (Casule, 2016). On February 11, 2012 in Kosovo an avalanche covered several houses and took the lives of 10 members of the Reka family. The little daughter, Amsera, survived the ruins of the house, because her mother had taken her to her breast when a concrete slab dropped over her (Aliu, 2012).

In 2008 in Albania, at a factory for the demolition of weapons in Gerdec village, a terrible explosion caused the loss of 26 lives and hundreds of injuries. Many homes suffered major damage. Many businesses that were in the area were also destroyed, and they suffered serious material damage. People who lost almost everything in the blast began numerous protests across the country. They complained about physical, moral, and material damage, while the government had given them only \$ 1,300 per person. Radioactivity was also a problem, making the land unusable. Water was contaminated and drinking it could lead to cancer. Dismantling of weapons was a priority that the government of the Albanian state had undertaken with NATO. There were close to 100,000 tons of old ammunition from 40-50 years. Another problem of consequence from explosives and guns is radioactivity (10 years, 2018; Today, 2018).

Albania and Kosovo are vulnerable to flooding, and they often occur in the form of flooding after storms in mountainous areas, following continued rains in lowland areas, and also after melting of snow accompanied by bad weather. Albania is ranked as one of the countries with the greatest economic consequences on a global scale, caused by a variety of natural disasters. Its annual average losses account for about 2.5% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Natural disasters, such as floods, earthquakes, and fires, have cost Albania 35 million Euros a year. From 2009 to 2015, the total damage caused by flooding is estimated at about 200 million Euros. The rainfall of 6 January 2015 created floods in some areas in Central and Southern Albania, causing damage estimated at about 15 million Euros, of which about 9 million Euros was created by the collapse of roads and bridges. The problem was made worse by deforestation and soil erosion. Floods have created great economic hardship for Albania (Selenica, Ardicioglu, & Kuriqi, 2011; Albanian floods, 2015; Government of Kosovo, 2014).

3. THE STATE OF PREPAREDNESS

Considerable resources and training have been provided to countries in the Western Balkans to prepare their first responders to respond to disasters. However, little effort has gone into developing the knowledge and preparedness of the citizenry in these countries. For example, in 2016 a combined NATO and American project trained responders and emergency managers in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. The four-year project, supported by the NATO Science for Peace and Security (SPS) Programme and the US Department of Homeland Security, is based on the Next-Generation Incident Command System (NICS), developed by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Lincoln Laboratory (MIT LL) in collaboration with DHS S&T in the United States. NICS is a software platform that facilitates collaboration among emergency response agencies in case of incidents. The goal is to develop and deploy a system in the Western Balkans to enhance situational awareness and help coordinate a response to incidents among responders and improve civil emergency management (NATO, 2016).

On the other hand, Utah Valley University students, who have visited the Balkans in 2014, 2016, 2017, and 2019 to introduce community emergency preparedness for citizens have found lay people and responders eager to learn, but unable to get support of government authorities (Dayberry, 2019). While responders were knowledgeable and skilled, they found citizens knew very little about disasters and emergency preparedness. The students proposed introducing the FEMA-sponsored Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) to municipalities in Kosovo and North Macedonia. While their earlier efforts were frustrated by a lack of support and resources, in 2019 two municipalities asked for CERT to be taught in their communities.

4. COMMUNITY EMERGENCY RESPONSE TEAMS

Local governments in the United States use Community Emergency Response Teams as one way to prepare their citizens for disasters. The program is sponsored by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and coordinated by state government. Members of Community Emergency Response Teams (CERTs) are prepared to help their neighbors if a disaster happens. They assist fire and police teams in major events where additional assistance may be needed.

The CERT program had its origins in 1985, when a group of Los Angeles fire officials went to Japan to see how the Japanese responded to earthquakes. During their stay, when a deadly earthquake occurred, they learned first-hand how Japanese community members played a significant role in disaster support and response. Later that year, they made a trip to Mexico following the 8.1 Mexico City Earthquake that killed more than 10,000 people. LAFD officials learned how neighbors and passers spontaneously responded when the quake struck, often digging with their bare hands to help free trapped victims. Many of the rescuers became victims themselves. A year later, the Los Angeles Fire Department created a pilot project to teach community members about basic fire suppression, first aid, search, and evacuation techniques. The first CERT trained people demonstrated the effectiveness of the CERT idea, when they responded to the October 1, 1987 Whittier Narrows Earthquake. The response of CERT teams showed

how valuable the CERT program could, so the city stepped up to support it. Later in January 1994 CERT members responded to the Northridge earthquake where over 60 people died and 8700 were injured (Los Angeles Fire Department, n.d.).

In 1993, CERT became part of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) offerings to communities nationwide. When this training was made available nationally by FEMA in 1993, 28 states and Puerto Rico had offered CERT training. Today, the program is offered in all 50 states and U.S. territories. Over 2,700 local CERT programs exist nationwide, with more than 600,000 people trained since CERT became a national program. FEMA supports CERT by sponsoring Train-the-Trainer and Program Manager Courses for members of the fire, medical and emergency management community (Ready.gov, n.d.).

The CERT course is taught in the community by a team of first responders, and other qualified volunteers, all of whom have typically taken a Train-the-Trainer course. The organization and scheduling of classes varies from city to city, but most training is 20 hours. It is usually taught in two to four-hour blocks over a series of evenings or weekends. In addition to community CERT, the program is offered to teens and college students and at workplaces.

Campus CERT programs can operate on any type of college or university campus. Because a college or university often functions as a “city within a city,” it often has its own emergency management capabilities. A Campus CERT program supports and enhances existing capabilities. CERT volunteers participate in activities to increase the campus preparedness for disasters and emergencies.

Workplace CERT programs support and enhance existing capabilities in a place of business. CERT volunteers participate in increasing the preparedness and resilience of the workplace and community. A Workplace CERT program provides skills that help employees to perform basic disaster response operations in an emergency. Each Workplace CERT is unique because of the nature of the business where it is located.

Here is the list of lessons with their content:

1. Disaster Preparedness: Addresses hazards specific to the community. Materials cover actions that participants and their families take before, during and after a disaster as well as an overview of CERT and local laws governing volunteers.
2. Fire Suppression: Covers fire chemistry, hazardous materials, fire hazards and fire suppression strategies. However, the thrust of this session is the safe use of fire extinguishers, controlling utilities and extinguishing a small fire.
3. Medical Operations Part I: Participants practice diagnosing and treating airway obstruction, bleeding and shock by using simple triage and rapid treatment techniques.
4. Medical Operations Part II: Covers evaluating patients by doing a head to toe assessment, establishing a medical treatment area and performing basic first aid.
5. Light Search and Rescue Operations: Participants learn about search and rescue planning, size-up, search techniques, rescue techniques and rescuer safety.
6. Psychology and Team Organization: Covers signs and symptoms that might be experienced by the disaster victim and workers, and addresses CERT organization and management.
7. Course Review and Disaster Simulation: Participants review and practice the skills that they have learned during the previous six sessions in a disaster activity (BeReady.gov, n.d.).

Participants bring their own safety equipment (gloves, goggles, mask) and disaster supplies (bandages, flashlight, dressings) to each session. By bringing their own materials for each session, participants are creating a disaster response kit of items they will need during a disaster.

Training materials in the form of a manual and an online class (FEMA IS-317: Introduction to CERT) are offered for free on the Ready.gov website. The materials are available in English and Spanish. Campus CERT Starter Guide is designed specifically for Campus CERT programs and the Workplace CERT Starter Guide for Workplace CERT programs (FEMA, 2015).

5. CERT OPERATIONS

One of the criticisms of CERT is that people get trained and have nothing to do until the big disaster happens. Organized CERT programs keep their people busy by involving them in training and exercises, by supporting community emergency preparedness activities, and by participating in major events.

When a disaster occurs, first responders are quickly overwhelmed. They respond first to the most pressing needs and worst situations. This leaves trained CERT members to self-deploy in their neighborhoods, campuses, and workplaces to assure that people are safe and get treatment for injuries. When first responders arrive, the CERT team works under the direction of the firefighters, paramedics, or police until their service is no longer needed.

Most of a CERT members time is spent in preparing themselves and their communities for emergencies. FEMA (the Federal Emergency Management Agency in the United States) lists a number of drills and exercises on its website. The exercises follow national guidance and principles outlined by the Homeland Security Exercise Program (HSEEP). Nevertheless, CERT programs are encouraged to adapt the exercises for the kinds of disasters and other emergencies that might impact their communities. The scenario, objectives, and events are modified depending on the events the CERT program is likely to respond to and what the areas where they need test or practice.

Emergency managers also may call upon CERT to help in activities to prepare their communities for the unique disasters they may face. Activities may include surveying community members and providing them with information to meet their preparedness needs. They could assist with preparedness fairs or training at schools, churches, clubs, and workplaces to help people create survival kits, home emergency plans, and learn disaster survival skills.

Also, CERT can play a vital role in keeping safe in major events. In addition to providing first aid and traffic control or ushering, they can help first responders when called upon. Also, by being present, they can watch for danger and warn first responders and participants. In large crowds their very presence provides people a feeling of safety and security (Ready.gov, n.d.).

6. CONCLUSION

The global security environment is becoming much more complex than in the past decades. Modernization of life, rapid technology advancement, strategic change, global political developments and many other factors are increasing the complexity of the global environment every day.

The Balkans region is exposed to natural disasters. Their effect tends to worsen due to rapid urbanization, coupled with uncontrolled construction practices in ignoring relevant codes, land misuse, natural resources, environmental activity, and a number of other factors that characterized the transition from an economy centralized to that of the free market. Institutions and the entire society need to contribute to the construction and implementation of a common and comprehensive strategy for dealing with threats. Strengthening inter-institutional, regional, and national preparedness requires more than the involvement of local officials and public servants. It requires the participation and active involvement of members of the public to be successful.

This paper proposes that the CERT concept be applied in the Balkans as means of increasing the knowledge and preparedness of the citizens for disasters. If the CERT program were to be piloted in Balkan countries, it would require the cooperation and support of local officials and public safety agencies. CERT trained instructors from the United States could be involved in teaching the program. Local community members, including high school and college students, seniors and the retired, will need to be recruited to participate in CERT training. This can be done in 20 hours over a week's period. Following the training, officials would need to continue to support the CERT concept by sponsoring future classes. Graduates of the first class will be able to teach future classes and help bring other people into the CERT organization.

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