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comment

On top of the millions of deaths and protracted health consequences brought about by this pandemic, Covid-19 is a particularly cruel crisis in that it isolates and deprives people of the comfort they would normally derive from the affirming company of other human beings. As Lyndon Bird says on p8: "We are social animals. We need to get together to share thoughts, feelings, ideas, hopes, and sometimes complaints."

Of course, technology has helped with multiple ways of communicating that were unimaginable just a few years ago. But although many of today's virtual methods of communication are widely viewed as being here to stay, in some circumstances human contact is, quite simply, irreplaceable. Virtual interaction can never fully replicate the complex subtexts and nuanced cues when meeting another person face-to-face.

Words and body language are vital, as described in Jeannie Barr's exploration of communication and vocabulary used during emergencies. The choice of language and tone can be either helpful or detrimental in a crisis (p73).

On p64 Lina Kolesnikova examines how Covid-19 has disrupted working and shopping habits, as well as the ways we access healthcare and information. She says that the very essence of what we define as 'critical' infrastructure is being transformed. This brings new risks in terms of resilience and security, including in the areas of technology we have come to rely upon during Covid-19.

Design is another undervalued but essential piece in the jigsaw of humanitarian and emergency response disciplines. David Wales notes on p76: "As the meeting point between states and communities, public service agencies would greatly benefit from making design a standard approach."

The key lies in understanding people – their culture, fears, concerns, past experiences and predispositions. Michele Wucker calls this an individual's unique risk fingerprint (p44).

All of the above should be combined with a simple shift of focus onto the people dealing with – and affected by – a crisis, says Thomas Lahnthaler (p50). Because, above all, we must not forget that crisis management is about people.

Partnerships with natural first responders

Marcus T Coleman says that when governments work alongside neighbours, caregivers and young people, the resilience of the whole community is strengthened. Here, he explains how such partnerships can be nurtured

Supporting the mission of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and learning from crisis leaders in countries from Sweden to Japan, I have seen what is possible when there is a tangible and actionable commitment to unlocking the full potential of natural first responders. This includes investing in a whole community approach to disaster operations that affirms the importance of neighbours helping neighbours.

While there are longer term consequences of climate change that we must plan for, it pays to be smart about how we approach advancing equity and support historically under-served populations in the present.

If crisis leaders put measures in place to do this in existing emergency management systems, it can build social capital that can withstand disruptions from all hazards. When crisis leaders refuse to take this approach, neighbours and communities are left susceptible to compounding inequities in times of crisis.

Climate change brings a sense of urgency to getting it right. In the United Nations Disaster Risk Reduction report, *Human Cost of Disasters*, we get a glimpse of the scope and scale of human suffering: "Between 2000 and 2019, there were 510,837 deaths and 3.9 billion people affected by 6,681 climate-related disasters. This compares with 3,656 climate-related events, which accounted for 995,330 deaths (47 per cent due to drought/famine) and 3.2 billion affected in the period 1980-1999."

Crisis leaders have an opportunity to serve as standard bearers in organising, equipping, training and learning from the most natural first responders, which include neighbours, caregivers and young people. Working with these groups alongside all levels of government in partnership strengthens whole community resilience.

So how do we do this?

One perspective uses the advice from one of my favourite emergency managers, Former FEMA Administrator Craig Fugate, to make it happen.

The power of neighbours helping each other is invaluable in helping to advance equity, but this power must be nurtured

Thomas Kuhlenbeck | Ikon

First, think big: How bad could it be? The bigger the problem, the greater the need for partnerships. One step towards thinking big is for crisis leaders to co-create a memorandum of agreement with organisations focused on civil and human rights. Organisations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the League of United Latin American Citizens or Amnesty International are keen experts in addressing civil and human rights challenges in the context of crises and disasters. By the very nature of their missions, civil rights and humanitarian rights organisations can be great collaborators on thinking big about the consequences a disaster would have for communities.

Second, go big; it is better to have too much than not enough. A lack of imagination is not a viable reason for failing to meet the needs of historically under-served communities. Crisis leaders should continue to build strong partnerships with disability rights organisations. This includes going big on mobilising private sector partners as well. For example the World Institute on Disability, led by Marcie Roth, is co-lead for The Global Alliance, a call to action to galvanise disability-led organisations, foundations, corporations and other allies to identify needs and link partners to accelerate assistance and resources, both during and after disasters. Roth notes: "People with disabilities are two to four times more likely than others to be injured or die in disasters, primarily due to inadequate community-wide planning and access to emergency and disaster assistance.

"The Global Alliance is a direct response to Covid-19, which is impacting multiply-marginalised people with disabilities even more disproportionately than other disasters, with devastating outcomes."

Going big through coalition building helps strengthen the network of natural first responders, which includes formal and family caregivers.

Third, go fast – speed is key. Many governments have taken various steps towards advancing equity in their disaster operations in an expeditious and thoughtful manner. For those new to the process, there are organisations and networks committed to helping advance equitable outcomes throughout the disaster cycle.

According to the UN, a key priority for emergency management is to: "Strengthen the design and implementation of inclusive policies and social safety net mechanisms, including through community involvement, integrated with livelihood enhancement programmes and access to basic services to find durable solutions in the post-disaster phase and to empower and assist people disproportionately affected by disasters." This is incredibly important as migration trends continue to evolve quickly as a result of crises, disasters and impacts from climate change.

To accelerate planning and organising activities in support of migrants and refugee populations, crisis leaders should follow the guidance presented by the Institute of Diversity and Inclusion in Emergency Management and Welcoming America. Their guidance, *Establishing and Maintaining Inclusive Emergency Management with Immigrant and Refugee Populations*, helps leaders identify and build a repository of resources and relationships with community-based immigrant and refugee service organisations. These may include refugee resettlement agencies, immigrant rights organisations, faith-based organisations or houses of worship, local businesses, among others.

Finally, be smart about it and adjust as more information becomes available. Starting today does not mean starting alone. Minority serving institutions, which in the US include Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Tribal colleges and universities, Asian American and Pacific Islander serving institutions and Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), can serve as strategic partners for research, recruitment and implementation of outreach and education programmes. This helps to ensure the agencies leading in times of crisis reflect the communities they are serving at the front lines and the highest levels of leadership.

For example, in the USA, students, faculty and staff from more than 30 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), which consist of domestic and international students, joined forces to hold the first in a series of HBCU Covid Awareness and Resilience Days (HBCU-CARD) – a day spearheaded by HBCU students that is dedicated to raising awareness and mobilising communities disproportionately affected by healthcare inequities during the pandemic.

Persistent, intractable force

The impetus for this effort is acknowledged: "Racial disparity remains a persistent, intractable force that continues unabated in and around historically under served communities in which many of our HBCUs are housed… Whether primarily by lack of access, to some hesitancy, or a healthy dose of mistrust towards the US healthcare system in general and the vaccination in particular, data show that African Americans are dying from Covid-19 at higher rates than other ethnic groups. Conversely, this group is getting vaccinated at lower rates."

Instead of going it alone, these institutions were smart about co-ordinating their collective resources and effect as natural first responders to serve as trusted messengers and advocates, not only to their peers, but also to close and extended family members, about how to safeguard their health – including mental health – against Covid-19. For those community members still wondering whether they should get vaccinated, the conversation they have with HBCU students, alumni or supporters could be the deciding factor.

Building partnerships with natural first responders is an ongoing process. Like the preparedness cycle, it requires investment in planning, organising, equipping, training and engaging your team and community. While policymakers and public sector leaders play a role in unlocking the full potential of nature's first responders, there are organisations and communities already on the journey to promote neighbours helping neighbours in a way that advances equity and keeps the lived experiences of historically under-served populations as the priority. CRJ

Online resources

- Human Cost of Disasters, *UNDRR (November 2020): undrr.org;*
- The UN Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030: *unisdr.org*
- *World Institute on Disability: wid.org;*
- *Institute for Diversity Equity and Inclusion in Emergency Management: i-diem.org;*
- Establishing and Maintaining Inclusive Emergency Management with Immigrant and Refugee Populations: *welcomingamerica.org;*
- *Historically Black College and University Covid Awareness and Resilience Day: huttc.org*

Author

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