Book review


Community emergency preparedness: a manual for managers and policy-makers is a comprehensive manual designed to assist those concerned with preparation for emergencies at local level. It is intended principally for local organizations and managers responsible for emergency planning and national and international officials involved in emergency management. It also intends to explain the process of policy development, vulnerability assessment, emergency planning, training and education, and monitoring and evaluation for use in a wide range of emergency management applications.

There are six chapters in the book devoted to six key areas in emergency preparedness. The first chapter provides the reader with a conceptual framework on the broad issues and terminology often used in emergency and disaster settings. The chapter also includes what is meant by emergency preparedness and humanitarian action and how they are linked to development planning in the overall emergency continuum of prevention, preparedness, response and rehabilitation in disaster situations.

Chapter 2 deals with policy issues in emergency preparedness. It addresses some of the important aspects of policy formulation and planning for emergency management. The chapter also provides an outline of an institutional framework required for formalizing policy for emergency management. However, it seems reasonable that since the book’s main focus is not to educate readers on steps in formulating emergency preparedness policy, only nine pages are dedicated to this issue in emergency management. The chapter could be further enriched by detailing the processes and sequential steps required, ideally, for development of a national as well as local level policy for emergency management.

By far, the largest chapter is that on vulnerability assessment. Key areas discussed are process of assessment, hazard identification, hazard prioritization and analysis of vulnerability through studying the effects of hazards in a community. The chapter presents various models for risk assessment, hazard ranking and for determining and measuring the effects of hazards on individual lives and communities. This seems to be relevant only in those settings where there is a culture of information gathering, collection and dissemination in-built within the health information system of a country. However, it would be a challenge for developing countries facing recurrent natural disasters and emergencies to adapt and develop some form of quantifiable model of their own, using the model described in the book as a reference. This could assist them in understanding the determinants and factors contributing to the community’s vulnerability to disasters and emergencies in those countries.

Chapter 4 deals with emergency planning and describes the dynamic process involved in planning a community emergency response and evacuation plan. One or two algorithms describing the information cascade and the step up procedure for activation of command, control and co-ordination chain in emergency situations would have been more relevant for readers in conceptualizing this important issue in search, rescue and evacuation.

Chapter 5 describes training and education in emergency settings in only four pages – but this is not the main focus of this book. Chapter 6 starts with monitoring and evaluation of emergency preparedness programmes, but is mostly concerned with describing the management of a project on emergency preparedness rather than elaborating on tools and indicators for programme monitoring and evaluation.

The book concludes with four appendices, which include steps in project management, various scales of natural disasters (e.g. volcanic eruption, tsunami, landslide damage, cyclonic storms, etc.), an emergency preparedness checklist and some valuable tips on personal protection in different types of emergencies.

One of the most valuable aspects of the book is its selection of various topics and subjects. There has been a great need for standardization of the variety of information and diverse knowledge available on the subject matter discussed. One of the outstanding contributions of the 1990s International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR) has been its role in promoting the understanding and application of scientific knowledge and technical skill in the reduction and mitigation of the public health consequences of natural disasters and emergencies around the world. At the end of the decade, by publishing this book, WHO has reflected the organization’s commitment to assume itself as the lead technical agency to advise national authorities on how best to apply the internationally agreed public health practices, standards, knowledge, skill and expertise in addressing the adverse health consequences of disasters and emergencies, through ensuring that appropriate systems, procedures and resources are in place in the disaster-affected countries in
order to provide prompt and effective assistance to disaster victims, thereby facilitating health relief measures and rehabilitation of services.

Overall, the book is to be recommended for health managers as well as those involved in management of emergencies, including those who have an interest in emergency preparedness and response. I hope that the manual plays a crucial role in making national authorities more resilient during a crisis and enhances their capability to absorb humanitarian assistance without being overwhelmed by it, and then, once the crisis is over, to move towards recovery that takes full advantage of the lessons learnt. That is the challenge.

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