

Comments on Extreme Event Decision Making Workshop

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I propose to approach Extreme Event Decision Making from the perspective of different stakeholders and their mutual influence on each other. Their process of decision making (their perception, goals, limitation) could be studied separately and their interaction and communication process analyzed to suggest ways of improving it.

The different stakeholders to consider are

general population
government
agencies with the aim to prevent and act during catastrophic events (firefighters, military)
media
local self forming groups

I am only going into detail just regarding some of these stakeholders.

General population

1. risk communication

The most important feature of EE for the general population is its stress inducing capacity. Earlier views in psychology predicted that information and knowledge about threat is preferred and causes stress reduction. A number of findings showed later a different tendency: people prefer to maintain good emotional state by being unfoundedly overoptimistic. Furthermore blunting, distraction from objective sources of danger, actively avoiding information is a preferred mode of functioning, while information about danger often turns out to be stress inducing. Research also showed that large amount of preparatory information increase people's emotional and behavioral distress before, after and during the situation. Information also works differently for people with different coping style: some people become aroused with more, some with less information. (Miller and Green)
In cases when stress is controllable, information seeking mode is more appropriate, so people should be able to distinguish between controllable and uncontrollable events and use information appropriately.

This line of research was done with patients waiting for a dangerous surgery but not concerning extreme event, although the relevance is obvious for risk communication. The information processing of risk can depend not only on the threatening potential but also on the sources, the event itself, official statements, the media, other people can have different impact.

2. panic vs. organized behavior

How people behave in the extreme event situation often has a large effect on the outcome of the situation. People sometimes react to those situation overemotionally, stricken by panic, sometimes in a well organized, even altruistic way. Little is known about what determine such behavior. Etzioni proposes a continuum of logical empirical versus affective normative factors determining decision making in different situation which could be relevant here.

3. perception of low probability high consequence events

Research showed that people tend to underestimate small probabilities. This tendency prevent them to take measures against it (e.g. protective behavior, buying insurance)

4. expectations of preventing extreme events or compensating for losses

People tend to expect exterior sources (government) to prevent bad effects or compensate for losses even if they didn't take the right preventive actions. How responsibility do they take, and how much do they think government is to blame for losses?

Government

How much of a priority prevention is in the goal hierarchy of governments? The recent and repetitive floods in Tisza river in Hungary showed that government concentrate in saving face and restoring and not in prevention. In spite of its long term effectiveness prevention is not a preferred goal for governments, probably, because the result of prevention -the non occurrence of a harm - is not a spectacular achievement. It would be important to change this perspective.

Local self organizing groups

Self organizing group grow out of extreme event situation. As an example, people can decide to distribute information about catastrophe through e-mail, form rescue groups, etc. What is the process through which this kind of group form, do they interfere or interact with institutions, what are their goals and impact on people are questions to investigate.