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Regional Responses to Disasters: Practice But Not Policy?

By Catherine Jones

Synopsis

July 2018 was a month of practical challenges for responders to humanitarian disasters in the wake of the collapsed dam in Laos, the ongoing challenges resulting in the loss of civilian lives in Myanmar, and the earthquake in Indonesia. It is timely to ask who responds and how these responses are coordinated and monitored.

Commentary

IN SOUTHEAST Asia, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) has emerged as a central concern of the states of the region and of regional organisations and frameworks. This has been the result of both 'natural' disasters and more complex humanitarian crises. Similarly in peacekeeping, an increased focus on protecting civilians and providing humanitarian assistance is shaping the types of training for peacekeepers in the region.

The relationship between these two sets of activities in Southeast Asia – those responding to humanitarian and natural disasters – are often the same people who are peacekeepers; the region has an opportunity to develop expertise and capacities in providing rapid responses. However, both of these forms of assistance present a potential risk to populations that are being protected or assisted because of the inherent power imbalance between those giving and receiving assistance.

Power Imbalance?

In both of these developments, gradual and incremental approaches to developing patterns of practical coordination, rather than strategic and policy-driven coordination can be seen. Across these two areas (humanitarian assistance and disaster relief,

and peacekeeping) there are opportunities to draw on the expertise garnered from operations and to seek to coordinate between civilian and military providers in generating responses to a range of disasters.

Furthermore, there is also an opportunity to inform an increasingly global debate, through the practices of the region.

A fundamental challenge for the region is not only how to develop and enhance intra-regional coordination but also to ensure extra-regional engagements are effective, efficient, timely, are cognizant of regional realities, and protect both the humanitarian worker and the vulnerable population. It is timely consider questions of oversight, governance, and regulations that provide operational frameworks for relief.

What Level Coordination?

Practices of coordination proceed at two-levels: policies and operations. Policies concerns the development of ideas and concepts that shape the way operations should happen. These norms then guide and inform what practices states pursue when responding to specific crises. Operational cooperation is focused on the practices and governance; when operations are undertaken at this level the focus of coordination is chiefly about the delivery of the response.

Within Southeast Asia responses are centered on practical help; this ensures the disaster responses are effective and efficient. Moreover, they try to develop a governance structure capable of coordinating this practical help in a crisis. In particular, the One ASEAN, One Response policy, is a key demonstration of the effort and ingenuity of the region in seeking to coordinate around issues of disaster management.

Similarly, the AHA Centre (ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance in disaster management) has developed mechanisms for disaster monitoring and response.

This is a standby arrangement (including the Emergency Response and Assessment Team – ERAT, and stockpiling of relief items). There are also some standing operating procedures known as SASOP (Standard Operating Procedure for Regional Standby Arrangements and Coordination of Joint Disaster Relief and Emergency Response Operations). This is to guide the responses and ensure they are coordinated in the event of any incidents.

How Useful?

These are all innovative and important steps. Nonetheless, the details and appropriateness of these guidelines raises some questions as to how useful they will be in a disaster setting. For example, in the SASOP, the AHA Centre will coordinate with the United Nations in the event of disaster management. It will make use of the UN Virtual On-Site Operations and Coordination centre, and will coordinate with – when necessary - the UN Disaster Assessment Coordination team, to assist in reporting and requesting processes.

Indeed, the SASOP makes clear the need for further work on these guidelines. The AHA Centre shall make arrangements with the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs' (OCHA) field coordination Support Section (FCSS) to extend help to the local authorities.

Hence, despite these regional innovations, there remain significant gaps between the policy creation and the operational practice. In effect the vague guidance in the policies results in a lack of sufficient clarity necessary for consistent and coherent operational responses, leading to ad hoc responses.

In consequence, the link between policy and practices needs further deepening so that the policies provide sufficient detail to guide the interaction between different helpers; especially between regional organisations and global contributors – deepening these policies should ensure that coordination and predictability of responses remains becomes less ad hoc.

Who Responds?

In the hydroelectric dam disaster in Laos in July 2018, a number of problems have been identified which relate to the causes but also to the provision of assistance.

In the case of responders across Southeast Asia, the armed forces tend to be the first responders to natural disasters, but their efforts are also complemented and augmented by NGOs and charities. This was seen in the responses to Super Typhoon Yolanda in Philippines, in the latest responses to the earthquake in Indonesia and in the provision of assistance following the collapse of the dam in Laos.

Responses by militaries can be professional and efficient, but they are also limited or hampered by poor information and coordination on the ground, particularly across military-to-civilian, and civilian-to-civilian (as represented by NGO and charities-to-government) interactions. As can be seen in the evaluations of the Super Typhoon Yolanda, the coordination between aid agencies and the Philippine military were problematic in getting assistance to those in need.

Similarly, in the limited transfer of information between Laos and Cambodia, there is evidence to claim that although the regional platforms are in place they need to be more developed. In particular, these developments need to be at the policy level.

Furthermore, in light of the challenges of coordination, militaries may appear to be a more appropriate responder in some instances, and would limit the coordination problems. What is perhaps needed is a greater critical reflection about who should respond, when and under what guiding principles and frameworks.

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