

Seismic Research Centre

The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad & Tobago

Finding Common Ground: Developing Sustainable Networks of Women Scientists for Addressing Issues of Environmental Hazard

Santiago, Chile 2012/11/12-14



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Cultural Aspects of Disasters: How Cultural Norms Influence Mitigation



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What is a Disaster? – Event that overwhelms societal coping mechanisms

“Societal” \Rightarrow multiplied individual tragedies = Disaster

\therefore Effective Response \in understanding the society



Disaster Response: Important Societal Components

Societies – Hunter-Gatherer, Nomadic, Tribal, Pastoral, Agricultural, Feudal, Industrial, Knowledge-based

Context – Secular, Religious



Disaster Prone Societies in the Geological Context

Vulnerable Societies – Hunter-Gatherer, Nomadic, Tribal, Pastoral, Agricultural, Feudal, Industrial, Knowledge-based are all vulnerable depending on the particular geological hazard. All are vulnerable to the effects of volcanic activity. Agricultural to Knowledge-based more vulnerable to earthquakes (collapsing buildings...

Secular/Religious – may contribute to vulnerability by promoting risky behaviours.



Given Context – Appropriate Response for Scientists

What is the Context? – Take time to know and understand

In the event of a rapid onset disaster there may not be enough time to fully know and understand.. If we are serious about helping, then we meet and treat with respect. Engage with humility. Find out who in the community is well-respected and have the ear of the community and work with and through them.

Whatever the message to be communicated, the community leaders must first be persuaded. It is counterproductive to ignore established communication channels.



Scientist in the Religious Context

In general, scientists and the religious are antagonistic. The preconception that those who are religious must of necessity be feeble in the brain is very narrow thinking and actually sends that message, which then defeats our cause. The sense of superior knowledge and intellect usually paraded unapologetically does not win friends and influence people.

Of course, the religious may present certain challenges e.g. God is a West Indian and those bad things won't happen to us; or it is God's work and you are fighting against God.



Learn to Work with the Material Available

Find a way to allow people to give themselves permission to accept advice and act on it e.g. Cite examples where it is accepted that God is in clear control, but human intervention is not only welcome, but expected. One that I have used is the practice of pre-natal care and medical intervention when the baby is in a breach position; the intervention going so far as caesarean sections.

While this strategy will not win over everyone all at once It may be the opening that wins confidence and trust; the blow that opens the first fracture in the barrier.



Scientist in the Secular Context

On the other hand, it may be considered that scientists are more at home with the secular minded. But here too there can be challenges. There is the “Preventative Maintenance” philosophy and the “Breakdown Maintenance” philosophy. We advocate the former, but many in this group subscribe to the latter. Strategy to persuade to the “Preventative Maintenance” model are essential.



While there is no approach guaranteed to succeed, Various points may be made, guided by those respected in the community e.g. the cost, total cost, of no preparation.

Conclusion

This serves as an introduction to the issues that can and do arise in trying to promote preparedness. The main point to get is that confrontational is not usually a good strategy e.g. if the audience believes in creation there is absolutely no reason to speak about the Earth taking millions of years to be formed; this only serves to distract attention from the message to be sent. Taking time to learn about the target community and allowing that to

guide the conversation can go a long way in tempering resistance

.



Research on the Subject

Research into the role and influence of faith based systems by Caribbean investigators is growing e.g.:

Pastoral Care in Disaster: A theological reflection – Joan Anne Delsol Meade Ph.D. Thesis Edinburgh University 2006 is a good place to start and to pick up the reference trail.



THANK YOU



RCN - Santiago, Chile 2012/11/12-14