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Emergency situations, adaptive management and national health strategies

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Abstract

Terrible natural disasters or dangerous human activities endanger the life and health of the population. The increased frequency of these events prompts the population to exert greater pressure on public managers to rethink, to innovate, and to adapt management in the field of health to the ever-changing environment. The National Health Strategy and the National Strategy for Preventing Emergency Situations are the instruments that manage the life and health of the population in dangerous situations. Managers in the fields of health and emergency situations could develop new ways to manage strategies and public institutions by applying adaptive management in order to better protect the life and health of the population. The aim of this paper consists in presenting that, by applying strategic and adaptive management in the public sector in the fields of health and emergency situations in Romania, public managers can better serve the needs of the citizens.

Keywords: public administration, national health strategy, emergency situations, adaptive management

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1. Introduction

The life and health of the population is threatened by the increased frequency of natural disasters, but also by dangerous human activities. The public institutions in the fields of health and emergency situations must adapt to the new realities and learn from the actions of other countries that have dealt with similar emergency situations in order to change their actions to achieve a better result.

In the beginning of this paper, disasters, management, and emergency situations are defined and a few examples are given of dangerous events that took place in Romania. Further on, we analyse whether adaptive management can be used in emergency situations. A very important part of this paper is the presentation of the strategies in the fields of health and emergency situations and their weak points. The paper finishes with a conclusion regarding adaptive management and its use in emergency situations.

Through the presentation of a theoretical and practical approach to strategic and adaptive management, the paper aims to help public managers to rethink, to innovate, and to adapt health and emergency situations management to the ever-changing environment.

2. Emergency Situations

As was previously stated, the life and health of the population is in peril from terrible and dangerous situations, whether natural or manmade disasters. Examples of hazard types are natural hazards (earthquake, landslide, tsunami, cyclone, flood, or drought), biological hazards (epidemic disease, infestation of pests), technological hazards (chemical substances, radiological agents, transport crashes), and societal hazards (conflict, stampedes, acts of terrorism) (Jonathan, 2011).

A disaster is an event that takes place when danger meets with the impossibility of the community to answer accordingly to an event that disturbs daily activities, exceeds the community's potential to cope, and has a tremendous impact on people, the economy, and/or the environment (deaths, accidents, disease, disabilities, ruin of buildings, damage to the whole environment, etc.).

Disaster management has three steps: before the disaster (when, through prevention, the potential risk can be diminished, acting on the causes that provoke disaster); during the disaster (when, through immediate action and speedy professional health service, the number of deaths is reduced and when the victims are assured of a fast and lasting recovery); and after the disaster (when recovery and rehabilitation take place and when, through lessons learned, another disaster can be prevented).

Emergency situations represent the "range of defence activities of the local communities to protect infrastructure and property against non-military threats. These actions are part of the general protection activities of the citizens and are subsumed within internal security regarding both citizen safety and public security, therefore including protection against disasters and the protection of the environment" (Romania, Department for Emergency Situations, 2008). The management of emergency situations represents "the implementation of policies, procedures and practices having as an objective the analysis, evaluation, treatment, monitoring, and re-evaluating of risks in order to reduce these emergency situations so that the communities and citizens can live, work, and satisfy their needs and aspirations in a physically and socially lasting environment" (Romania, Department for Emergency Situations, 2008).

Romania's Department for Emergency Situations is a public institution subordinated to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and coordinates the prevention and management activities of emergency situations, offering first aid and emergency medical assistance.

There are several examples of disasters with devastating effects that took place in Romania, including the 7.2 Richter scale earthquake on 4 March 1977 which saw 1,570 deaths and 11,300

wounded; floods in 2010, where 23 people died and there was 700 million euros of damage); and fires in 2015 in Bucharest, where a fire at the Colectiv Club resulted in 64 deaths.

3. Adaptive Management

Adaptive management, “often characterized as ‘learning by doing’, is a formal iterative process of resource management that acknowledges uncertainty and achieves management objectives by increasing system knowledge through a structured feedback process” (Allen, Fontaine, Pope & Garmestani, 2011). Adaptive management is based on the premise that the entities involved in emergency situations can learn to adapt to complex environments, like a disaster, and that the policies in the field of management should not be rigid, because there is a need for fast and efficient adaptation to the rapidly changing background. The adaptive management system represents an adequate approach due to the fact that it involves learning through feedback, reallocation of funds and attention, reshaping relationships with the involved parties, and prompt actions (Meacham, Sarkis & Dembsey, 2008).

To determine whether adaptive management is adequate to diminish the effects of disasters, and to plan the proper emergency answer and its implementation, McGrevy (2016) applies adaptive management principles in the case of the attacks on the World Trade Center and in the case of the Station nightclub fire in Rhode Island. McGrevy (2016) shows that regulations have a high degree of uncertainty, and that the entire process can be characterized as a complex system of adaptation. He notes that a large number of institutions took part in these emergency operations, which can sometimes be incompatible with one another; moreover, there is no unity in command in these interventions, no cohesion, and this leads to confusion. In the field of emergency situations, there is a high level of social learning both during and after the event: using adaptive management does not exclude the current capabilities but is in fact based on them in order to increase response efficiency. Real-time monitoring of the events during an emergency situation is possible when taking into consideration the tremendous progress of science and technology (Meacham et al., 2008).

The analysis conducted by Meacham and colleagues (2008) in the case of the attacks on the World Trade Center and in the case of the Station nightclub fire in Rhode Island is also valid for the emergency situation that occurred at the Collective Club in Bucharest. Here, the emergency intervention consisted largely of uncoordinated actions and certain discrepancies therefore appeared. Furthermore, the improvised actions taken by the authorities and the inconsistent norms and regulations on giving emergency aid at the scene of collective accidents, calamities, and disasters (Romania, Department of Control of the Prime Minister, 2016) led to the deterioration of the situation.

In conclusion, the concept of adaptive management has “begun to be considered for disaster management and emergency response” (Meacham et al., 2008).

4. The National Health and Emergency Situations

The strategy from the point of view of Tabatoni (cited in Hințea & Mora, n.d.) is a decision choice that directs the activities and structure of an organization in the long term. Strategic planning, according to Bryson (2004), represents a structured effort to identify and document basic decisions and appropriate measures, and strategic management is aimed at generating strategic results.

To ensure the strategic orienting of the activities and structures of the Department of Emergency Situations and of the Romanian Ministry of Health, long-term planning is in the form of a series of legal documents: the National Strategy on the Prevention of Emergency Situations; the National Health Strategy 2014–2020; the Action Plan for the Implementation of the National Health Strategy; and an array of other documents. In Romania, strategies are fixed and rigid, and are approved through laws; consequently, they can only be modified through law.

Strategic planning is linked to the notion of the margin for manoeuvring. This margin is necessary in health and emergency situation strategies, because in cases in which strategies are approved by law, like in Romania, the range of actions for public managers in emergency situations is limited, given the fact that disasters do not act according to the rule of law. Public managers in hospitals and the medical staff cannot breach the legal framework even if the situation demands it. Management errors that have occurred in emergency interventions and when treating the victims of emergency situations like that at the Collective Club highlight the vulnerabilities of the strategies in the field of health and in emergency situations. Vulnerabilities include that there is no single common strategy for all the public institutions that act before, during, and after the disaster, both on the medical side (prevention of disasters, during the disaster, and post-disaster) and in terms of managing the disaster during the emergency situation: a margin of manoeuvre is not stipulated in strategies; strategies are not modified or adapted after every major event, so strategies are not current because they do not contain lessons learned from events that occurred.

5. Conclusions

The increased frequency and gravity of natural or manmade disasters that have taken place in Romania (for example, the 7.2 Richter magnitude earthquake of 4 March 1977 that resulted in 1,570 victims; the floods in 2010, in which 23 people died; or the fire in 2015, where 64 deaths resulted from a fire at the Collective Club) have impelled the population to exercise growing pressure on public managers to rethink management in the fields of health and emergency situations and to apply adaptive management, a type of management, which is compatible with the ever-changing and unpredictable environment. Therefore the concept of adaptive management has “begun to be considered for disaster mitigation and emergency response” (Meacham et al., 2008).

The emergency situations that have occurred in Romania have brought to light the fact that the national strategies in the fields of health and emergency situations are adopted through laws and can only be modified through laws, a fact that slows the process of adapting strategies to the new realities. It was also found that the strategies have no margin for manoeuvring, which does not allow public managers to adapt their actions to the reality in the field and still be inside the boundaries of the law.

Adaptive and strategic management in emergency situations is a highly important topic on the public agenda in Romania in the fields of health and emergency situations. These subjects must be thoroughly analysed and such management must be applied in public institutions in order to transform them from rigid institutions to flexible ones that can adapt to the current needs of the citizens and better serve the needs of the population.

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