

Resilience and opportunity in crisis: Israeli civil society approaches

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Ordinary citizens and civil society organizations can play a central role in the face of crisis and recovery from wide-scale disasters, providing they are mentally and physically prepared and possess the appropriate concepts and tools. Israel is a living laboratory for research and practice in coping with stress, crisis and trauma. Its society is more disaster-conscious and prepared than most, through lessons learned and approaches honed over decades of real-life challenges.

The Israel Global Initiative¹ was established to research and analyse the unique models and methodologies developed in Israel that can contribute most to international development. It has identified five distinctive features of the Israeli approach to disasters: the interaction between crisis and routine; creative and flexible thinking; harnessing the human factor; viewing crisis as an opportunity; and taking collaborative action.

Many societies approach preparedness by setting up specialist disaster response teams, drawing up complex disaster response protocols, and sometimes establishing fully-equipped disaster response centres. While valuable, this approach suffers from the unpredictability of disasters: they rarely come announced. Plans and structures may sit idly for years before, and when the crisis occurs people may have forgotten them. In Israel, the view has long been that the best way to prepare for disasters is to ensure that civil society and state organizations build readiness into their routine. The response is not delivered merely by designated disaster-related agencies, but multiple other actors can react swiftly and competently. Furthermore, the response involves the community, which has the most relevant local knowledge and is typically in the immediate vicinity when crisis erupts.

Imagine a chaotic scene with people dead, wounded and in panic. Determined operators, wearing fluorescent jackets and



Image: Brit Olam

Creative approaches can be adopted to treat emotional harm inflicted by disasters



Image: Tag International Development

Disasters affect individuals, families, communities, state, civil society and commerce – so disaster response needs to be comprehensive

clutching first aid kits, calmly and efficiently separate the dead from the injured, treat the most severely hurt, and bring shock victims to safety before the ambulances arrive. None of those people are employees of Magen David Adom (MDA)², Israel's ambulance service; they are its dedicated and professional volunteers — doctors, teachers, grocers by day and lifesavers when duty calls. Only 1,200 of MDA's 14,000-strong workforce are paid staff. Its volunteers are trained to the same cutting-edge standards as the employees and undertake the same tasks. An Israeli who needs an emergency ambulance will be met by a highly trained and experienced paramedic, but will have no way of discerning whether this is an MDA employee or a volunteer. In fact, Rescuers without Borders³ has trained journalists in first aid and emergency rescue procedures, as they are often among the first to come into contact with distressed populations.

A unique operational model is the Israeli network of local resilience centres coordinated by the Israel Trauma Coalition,⁴ which prepares municipalities for crises and helps them to cope with emergency situations in real time. It combines clinical response to individual psychotrauma, team training and support for care-giving volunteers and professionals, and coordination of emergency response plans in partnership with local municipalities.

Flexible thinking is key. Disasters rarely appear as expected, and being drilled to respond to an exact formula becomes a liability when the real crisis conflicts with the planned-for scenario. Israeli organizations have discovered that, rather than teaching rigid responses, it is best to enhance leadership and resilience so a suitable response can be formulated to the specific challenge once the situation emerges. When conventional wisdom and pre-packaged formulas are bracketed in favour of creative responses by resourceful responders, ingenuity can emerge from unlikely quarters. Israelis have become widely recognized for their improvisation, encouraging proactive and imaginative leadership in the face of a crisis.

Israeli emergency response organizations have revolutionized their thinking, advocating that chaos be managed instead of organized. Rather than organize stretchers into lines or ensure responders abide by strict hierarchy, the preferred approach is to jump into the situation and deal with it as one finds it. When a crisis breaks, MDA staff will head directly to the disaster scene and start acting.

Creative approaches are also adopted to treat emotional harm inflicted by disasters. For example, Inspiration — Arts for Humanity⁵ harnesses artistic expression, social activism, leadership development and community engagement



Image: Tag International Development

Israeli expertise is applied in post-conflict situations, such as helping the victims of war, tsunami and flooding in Sri Lanka

as a platform for social change. One of its programmes, the Muse International Arts Educational Center, identifies artistic potential in refugees, internally displaced persons and disadvantaged teenagers from across Uganda who would otherwise never have the opportunity to receive an education.

While professionalism is vital, the value of well-prepared and empowered citizens has often been underestimated. Statutory authorities, such as the various emergency services, bring capacities that only a well-established and experienced force is capable of, but this sometimes leads the rest of the population to become complacent. The bigger the disaster, the less the official organs of the state can cope alone; the ordinary citizen becomes the hero. For the regular person to deliver the greatest value in time of crisis, he or she needs the requisite skills and to be plugged into a system that allows for an effective response. Volunteers are trained and retrained, regularly using and rehearsing their skills and working within structures that prove themselves when trouble begins.

Resilience strategies are closely associated with the ability to create a continuum of care in the psychotrauma field, incorporating preparedness architecture and effective response procedures. Israeli universities — such as Ben Gurion, Tel Aviv⁶ and Tel Hai⁷ — specialize in applying the principles and practice of social work to the disciplines of trauma and crisis. Social workers and allied care professionals are equipped with the requisite skills for crisis situations from individual accidents to major incidents. Personnel are trained to provide immediate mental health intervention at the site of disaster or emergency situations, which reduces the risk of post-traumatic symptoms and aids victims' speedy return to their regular level of daily functioning.

Nearly 50 years after Israeli humanitarian Abie Nathan rented a DC8 plane to fly humanitarian aid to Biafra's starving children, Natan⁸ — the Israeli coalition for international humanitarian aid that bears his name — deploys professionals in the field to intervene in crisis situations in Israel and around the world, as this recent report⁹ attests:

“It’s midnight and the temperature is close to zero in Presevo, a small town on the border between Serbia and Macedonia. A thousand people are standing in the snow, waiting patiently and silently to go through a security check. Many of them are holding small children in their arms, trying desperately to keep them warm. Others are supporting older relatives who can hardly stay awake, as the line slowly moves forward. Some are pushing a family member in a wheelchair... The most interesting group for me to follow, however, was the Israelis: three doctors, a nurse, and two social workers, who flew to the transit camp for a three-week period, doing so on a completely voluntary basis. They took time off from their work places, left their families back in Israel, and came to a place literally ‘in the middle of nowhere’ to help and assist people who are citizens of a country with which Israel is still technically at war.

“So far, Natan has sent 34 doctors, nurses and social workers from Israel to help the Syrian refugees. Roughly half of these staff members were Israeli-Arabs. Most clinics have an entirely non-Arabic speaking staff, with a single translator to make up for the language difficulties. Since the vast majority of the refugees speak only Arabic, the presence of Arabic-speaking professional staff at the Israeli clinic makes a huge difference.”

When disasters occur, the world mobilizes to offer a compassionate response. Often, rushed aid is delivered and thoughtful planning is brushed aside. Thankfully, this



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is increasingly changing. It is now broadly recognized that we must use disaster situations to build back better. The window of opportunity created by a disaster must be used to leverage lasting positive impact, bridging the humanitarian-development divide. Israeli scholars and practitioners have been among the foremost advocates of viewing crisis as an opportunity, seeking to integrate longer-term development planning into a response to disasters and integrating disaster consciousness into development work.¹⁰

Civil society organizations, often with the support of MASHAV, the Israel Government's international development branch, have pursued this integrative approach. Tag International Development,¹¹ a non-governmental organization (NGO) that shares Israeli expertise with developing countries, has brought this approach to post-conflict situations such as when promoting agriculture innovation in eastern Sri Lanka to help the victims of war, tsunami and flooding, or working to develop beekeeping in Myanmar, which is beginning a recovery from decades of conflict and oppression. Likewise, Brit Olam¹² (Hebrew for global alliance), with the Arava Centre for Sustainable Development¹³ and the Missionary Community of Saint Paul the Apostle,¹⁴ is strengthening community resilience and disaster mitigation through an agriculture-based livelihood regeneration programme in Turkana, a semi-arid region in Kenya.

Disasters are most challenging when faced alone. While there are some fantastic examples of cooperation for disaster response, all too often the response is chaotic and uncoordinated. Wasteful duplication ensues, unhelpful competition between organizations results, and despite good intentions matters are made worse. Moreover, disasters are generally multifaceted, encompassing individuals, families and commu-

nities, affecting state, civil society and commerce — and the response also needs to be comprehensive. Israeli coalitions and partnerships have been formed — incorporating both relief and development organizations — that enable more effective responses than are possible when each acts alone. Emergency services and relevant agencies in Israel regularly conduct joint drills and exercises to ensure that in the moment of truth parties can act on instinct.

The Society for International Development of Israel¹⁵ works to galvanize Israeli society to broad involvement in international development and foreign aid through a platform for professional joint action and dialogue, including study, professional trainings, capacity-building and local and international networking. The Israel Trauma Coalition harnesses the collective expertise and experience of Israel's civil society and government organizations to leverage resources to initiate, prioritize and optimize services.

International partnerships with the Jewish diaspora have strengthened capacities. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee¹⁶ has a history of working with Israeli experts and organizations to respond to disasters around the world. Several Israeli NGOs have developed deep experience in recruiting, educating and employing volunteers for international service. For example, volunteering-based charity Tevel b'Tzedek¹⁷ (Hebrew for the Earth with Justice) has operated both pre- and post-disaster in Haiti and Nepal leveraging young professionals from Israel and other countries.¹⁸ Tevel focuses on education, building the capacity of volunteers and inculcating in them a strong sense of values.¹⁹

The rate and scale of disasters is increasing and we need to think smarter about disaster response. It must begin long before the warning bells start ringing, through integrating disaster resilience into the fabric of society and its organizations. As crises are inherently unpredictable, we need flexible thinking exercised by well-prepared but innovative responders who are ready to face the disaster that occurs rather than the one they have planned in their scenario sessions. Disasters can happen anywhere and preparedness needs to include the ordinary citizen who can do extraordinary things when required. The horrific scale of many disasters may be attributed to lack of development and in the aftermath of catastrophes a key focus needs to be on preventing or mitigating the next disaster. As tragic as disasters are, they do offer an opportunity to rethink town planning, infrastructure, housing, emergency services and multiple other aspects of the private and public sector.

Whether planning for a potential disaster or responding to its aftermath, collective action is crucial. At all levels, from community cohesion to international agreements, our ability to manage major incidents is transformed when we learn the art of cooperation. Well-established mechanisms that include experts, agencies and organizations enable an effective and harmonious response that exponentially increases the ability to save life, mitigate injury and reduce suffering. As a nation and as a society, Israel has paid significant attention to these matters and has a valuable contribution to make to an increasingly precarious and disaster-prone world. The Israel Global Initiative calls for this knowledge-sharing to be intensified for the sake of a safer and more compassionate world.