

Letter to the Editor

Natural disasters: A view from afar

Natural disasters, armed conflict, and terrorist action each provide an opportunity to reflect on the adequacy of local, national and international aid. No matter how well intentioned, responses to an emergency are rarely perfect and lessons must be learned to permit future improvement. Despite extensive planning, when disasters occur the magnitude and speed of events rapidly overwhelm. The events leading to, and following, these tragedies are largely unpredictable. Advance planning is not an exact science.

In this Journal, [Luis Diaz \(2005\)](#) recently commented upon the catastrophic events caused by Hurricane Katrina. Presented in juxtaposition to this was a list of the key requisites to success in waste management. Though applicable primarily to developing countries, they are relevant also to areas affected by major disasters, wherever these may occur. To his list, I would add two additional points that are invaluable to the rapid delivery of aid and prompt return of normal infrastructure services after major disaster. Speed of response and flexibility are, in equal part, essential for the delivery of effective emergency aid. Sadly, flexibility can be at odds with legal and other constraints governing environmental, health and safety, and other legislation. But where legislation imposes restriction on humanitarian aid, there must also be scope for discretion.

The legislation exists for a reason. Even when faced with a major emergency, there are some would question deviation from a legislative framework that under normal circumstances would be considered unacceptable. This fails those in need.

How might we resolve this largely political issue, and what does this tell us about the management of hazardous wastes in the immediate phases of disaster relief? At times of major emergency, existing legislation may create insurmountable difficulties. Speed is essential, although bureaucratic hurdles may delay implementation of an effective response. The effective management of hazardous and other wastes will assist other logistics operations including search and rescue, the repair and restoration of essential services, relocation and subsequent repatriation, and will protect the health and hygiene of those affected by or dealing with the emergency. In such circumstances, is legisla-

tion that specifies standards for disposal, emission limits and other controls necessarily applicable? Perhaps it will impede the recovery efforts. If the latter is true, then there must be some mechanism to set aside legislation, promptly, and in a controlled and time limited manner, to deliver essential aid with all speed.

There are tough questions to be answered. Can corners be cut when emergency action is needed? Should this action be permitted, and formally sanctioned? At what stage is it right to circumvent the obligations of established legislation, and who should make the decision to take this course of action? Executive action is required, backed by sound professional advice. Decisions must be taken quickly, and implemented without delay. To reduce or eliminate inertia, those taking part in the decision making process must be protected from the consequences of breaching existing laws. The political fallout from decisions made in haste can be particularly unpleasant, encourage hesitation, and do not serve those in acute need. The answer to this conundrum is far from clear, although strategies must be developed that will be of value in future emergencies. Competent legislation must include a timetable for the review of executive action, and for the restoration of normal legislative obligations as soon as circumstances permit. Looking from afar, the resilience and strength of those affected by the full horrors of Hurricane Katrina is obvious. The world can be a particularly dangerous place. Embedding flexibility into future legislation, in order to permit the temporary setting aside or suspension of environmental and other policies, may free those responsible for the immediate delivery of disaster relief from the political and legal pitfalls that may occur when established legislation impedes the effective flow of emergency aid.

Reference

- Diaz, L.F., 2005. Natural disasters: lessons learned from Katrina. *Waste Management* 26, 1.

J. Ian Blenkarn
18 South Road, Ealing, London W5 4RY
United Kingdom
Tel.: +44 20 8569 8316; fax: +44 20 8847 5994
E-mail address: blenkarn@ianblenkarn.com