



Disaster Risk Management - The Kenyan Challenge

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Preamble:

“Risk does not begin and end on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange. The vastness of the subject matter is daunting. Risk touches on the most profound aspects of psychology, mathematics, statistics and history. The literature is monumental; each day’s headlines bring many new items of interest. But I know we are not unique, everywhere in the world risks abound.”

“AGAINST THE GODS the remarkable story of risk” by Peter L. Bernstein, 1998

The real challenge is what can we, as a nation do to avert, prevent them, or in the unfortunate event that they occur, how can we mitigate their impact on the economy?

Introductory remarks:

Disaster in Kenya, as indeed anywhere else, is not one of those happenings we can wish away. It can strike anywhere any time. Some of it is man-made but most of it is natural. The natural are sometimes induced by man in one way or another. For example, when we harvest trees without replacing them, this diminishes the forest cover and can lead to soil erosion, whose advanced form is land slides. Either way disasters in their different forms and sizes present challenges to the way we live our lives or not, perhaps, even how we die. Disasters in our country have reached crisis stage. ‘In Chinese language, crisis means danger, but it also means opportunity’ Les Brown, motivational speaker in “the power of a larger vision”

Why I am interested

Whereas Kenya experiences man made and natural disasters, there are more sinister challenges of the man-made variety. These loom on the horizon and, from time to time raise their ugly heads, taking many Kenyan lives in their wake, and property destroyed. These are post election violence and terrorist attacks, both related to politics, internal and external.

In January 2008, soon after presidential and national assembly elections Kenya plunged into bloodshed. One Kenyan went for another, people who had been living together as neighbours suddenly turned on one another. Some of the more glaring outcomes were:

- About 1,300 Kenyans died.
- Property worth billions of shillings was destroyed.
- Thousands of Kenyans fled their homes/farms/houses.
- To date Kenya has Internally Displaced Persons (IDP). It has become a buzzword, almost fashionable if it were not so sad and grave, and a disgrace to democracy.

During the short rains in September and October we experienced floods, land slides, crop failures. Ironically, in the previous months, we had just gone through drought, crops had failed, livestock died, sadly some people died, some through vagaries of weather while others as a result of inter-community friction. The net results were:

- Kenya is primarily an agricultural economy sector employs over 80%. Only 20% of the land is arable, the rest is arid and semi arid land, occupied by the nomadic Kenyans. So when there is drought or floods, we get challenges that spark inter-community conflicts. Food shortages lead to higher food prices, a kilogramme bag of maize meal rose from barely affordable Kes. 52.00 to 120.00 in less than two months. In any case the food is not necessarily always available.
- The global financial crisis affected our economy very adversely. Fuel prices rose from Kenya Shillings 60.00 per litre to 112.00.
- Ironically Kenya's parliament voted against a law that would have compelled them to pay taxes.
- As if in anticipation of citizen reactions the MP's passed the media law that would gag freedom of the press.

METHODOLOGY

1. Review literature available on disasters in Kenya over the last decades.
2. I will ask Kenyans what they understand by the terms disasters and risks.
3. I will ask the Kenyan authorities – central government and local governments, what plans they have.
4. I will ask Kenya Red Cross what their plans are, their challenges and opportunities they see for Kenyans.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES OF MY STUDY

- Petition for and inform the need for the establishment and development of an Integrated Disaster Risk Management Centre in Kenya
- Enhance a national contingency management bill to cater for the increased frequency and variety of disasters in Kenya
- Set up a national awareness campaign of potential risks in Kenyans' daily endeavours, including Early Warning Systems, perhaps with support from those who have had to deal with similar, like the European Union, and devise ways and means to mitigate them when they occur. Better still work on well tested methods of preventing their happening in the first place.
- Decentralize the whole issue of management of disasters considering that they can occur anywhere in the country and a response from Nairobi is not useful if it takes hours to reach the point of reference

LESSONS LEARNT

I am curious to establish what lessons we have learnt to inform the way we manage disasters in general and natural disasters in particular. Disasters are getting more frightening and intense. The advancement in technology should be useful in dealing with disasters. Given the recent events in 2008 alone, we need to commit much more resources to research and development to deal with disasters however they are caused.

We should work towards being able to continue with our lives regardless of the risks and disasters that come our way as individuals and as a nation, by designing a strategy and policies that have worked elsewhere.