

Global Trends: Complex Humanitarian Emergencies in the Era of Climate Change

Complex Humanitarian Emergencies (CHEs) are both challenging to prepare for and challenging to respond to. CHEs are defined by their complexity, their multi-party impacts, and the conflicts which often serve as precipitating events, as well as risk exacerbators.¹ A range of potential multi-dimensional impacts are attributed to these typically long-term crises.¹ Among them are the collapse of formal institutions, a breakdown of social order, mass population migration, and threats to vital food, water, sanitation, health care, transportation, and communication systems.¹ These impacts may directly undermine the very institutions and networks which would otherwise be tasked with disaster response while contributing to cascading need among increasingly vulnerable populations. They may also have reverberating impacts throughout our increasingly globalized world, as structural interdependence causes economic and then social instability in other areas.² Additionally, the conflict zones on which CHEs often play out are increasingly characterized as civil wars, where one or more sides may be hostile to outside humanitarian assistance.¹ CHEs have been responsible for considerably greater death and economic loss than natural disasters in recent decades.¹ They are responsible for incredible human suffering, they can be either the cause or result of other disasters or catastrophes, and they are increasing in frequency.¹

Concurrent global climate change and the resulting increased frequency of natural disasters should be expected to serve as catalysts for even greater instability in the systems on which we all, increasingly, depend. Take for example climate change-related sea level rise and its indirect effects—fresh water contamination, food scarcity, and inevitable mass migration. Such instability will undoubtedly lead to even greater frequency of CHEs. As Bissell notes, “there are very few examples of mass migrations in the past 500 years of human history that have been accomplished peacefully.”² Such conflicts have the potential to exacerbate and even stem further catastrophes, causing still further conflict. Even in our current daily news cycle we catch glimpses of that future.

If we are to ameliorate the worst impacts of cascading CHEs, it will be necessary to undermine the root causes of climate change, i.e. break our economic addiction to growth, achieve resource sustainability, and address the worst excesses of global inequality. This will require coordinated action between people and governments at all levels. It will require not just strategic and tactical maneuvering, but a fundamental shift in the values and goals embedded in the systems which are now existentially threatened. It is unlikely to be a smooth or painless process, but the alternative remains far worse. Consequently, I believe there is a role for both public health and disaster management in stewarding this change. To my mind, while it often feels otherwise, these actions are inevitable. What is still undecided is how much suffering will come to pass before they are taken.

References:

1. Skolnik, R. (2018). Natural Disasters and Complex Humanitarian Emergencies. In *Global health 101* (2nd ed., pp. 315-321). Burlington, MA: Jones & Bartlett Learning.
2. Bissell, R. (2013). What is a catastrophe and why is this important? In *Preparedness and response for catastrophic disasters* (pp. 4-22). Boca Raton: CRC Press/Taylor & Francis.