

# DISASTER MANAGEMENT AND THE NEED FOR INSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF GHANA

S. ADINKU (MRS)

Balme Library, University of Ghana, Legon.

## Abstract

*This article attempts to draw attention to the need to consider disasters as a threat to effective institutional management. The focus is on recent incidents in some educational institutions, particularly the Balme Library Annex at the University of Ghana, Legon. Key definitions central to library disasters have been mentioned with emphasis on three critical areas - safety of staff/clients, materials and equipment and buildings. Subsequently, institutional commitment to disaster management is recommended. Some of these commitments are: understanding of the concept of disaster management; release of funds; the implementation of strategies—staff training and purchase of equipment; forging of appropriate linkages and assumption of leadership roles.*

## Introduction

The problem of library disasters may appear remote, particularly for those in the developing countries. But recent events such as fire outbreaks at many educational institutions as well as some corporate organizations such as Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC), Controller and Accountant General's Department, Trust House, Tema Oil Refinery (TOR), Parliament House, St. Louis College, an incident in the Balme Library Annex and many others have pointed to the fact that, after all, information and educational institutions are not insulated against such threats or destructions whether they are as a result of natural, technical or human induced disasters. Lifeline institutions such as schools and their libraries are national assets that no doubt contribute to national development. Though their contributions cannot be easily quantified, they, by no means play a very valuable role in our educational programmes. As such, the managers of the educational institutions should begin to ask themselves questions such as 'could it

happen here? What policies do I have in place to prevent its occurrence, or mitigate its effects?' The answer is 'Yes, it could happen, so be ready to prevent or mitigate it.'

## Definition

Carter (1991) defines a disaster as an "event, natural or man-made, sudden or progressive, which impacts with such severity that the affected community has to respond by taking exceptional measures". Such sudden events could be floods or fire outbreaks due to natural phenomena such as heavy rainfall or earthquakes respectively. These are natural hazards with disaster potentials when not handled well by man.

The word 'disaster' has been defined differently by various interests groups as well as professional dispositions. From the perspective of the librarian or archivist, the term covers a wide range of events. Anderson and McIntyre in Harvey (1993) limited their definition to an "unexpected event with destructive consequences to their

(library) holdings. It may be a small-scale incident or a full-blown emergency, but in either case it requires prompt action to limit damage". This narrow definition, though important, may seem to portray that the librarian is most concerned about materials and equipment, but injuries to staff could lead to disruption of services. Fortunately, Eden and Matthew (1996) offered a working definition of disaster that has a wider coverage and is more explicit; "any incident which threatens human safety and/or damages, or threatens to damage a library's building, collections (or item(s) therein), equipment and systems".

The above definition mentions three critical areas that the library manager should be concerned with. These are the safety of the staff/clients, materials, equipment and buildings. The destruction of any aspect would definitely affect the provision of service in a library. In the library context, disasters can be divided into three categories according to intensity of impact and time dimension. These are "sudden, slow, developing or creeping". The "sudden" could be a collapse of a building due to an earthquake, or a fire outbreak or to faulty electrical gadgets, explosions or arson; the "slow" – could be water/rainfall leakages in libraries, or a burst pipe located in a library stack; and "developing" or "creeping" could be as a result of deterioration of library materials due to mould formation or others.

These are complex levels of situations that require management functions. Therefore, in managing these hazards account is taken of the fact that disaster management is a dynamic process. A process, that involves traditional management functions such as planning, organizing, staffing, leading and controlling. It is also teamwork that involves many organizations that must work together towards reducing the risk of the hazard.

## **Disaster Management**

A definition of disaster management according to Carter (1991) is "an applied science which seeks, by the systematic observation and analysis of disasters, to improve measures relating to prevention, mitigation, preparedness, emergency response and recovery." Practically, disaster management is in the continuum, taking into consideration all the important concepts that need to be followed when one is talking about disasters. These aspects are applicable in all disaster situations.

It must be said that the concept of disaster management in librarianship is not new though its application is largely overshadowed by much emphasis on the general preservation of library materials. This may be explained on the assumption that such sudden events are rare when compared to the deterioration of library materials as a result of the slow or creeping situations such as mould formation. Nonetheless, whether these events are rare or not, the fact still remains that they do happen.

The problem becomes more serious when almost every year floods and rainstorms destroy a number of schools in Ghana. For example, in 1999 alone more than 26 educational institutions experienced either floods or fire disasters (Adinku, 1999). Statistics from NADMO (2002) indicate that between 2000-2001, a total number of 171 schools were destroyed by floods alone. In all these, a lot of library materials, documents and buildings were destroyed whilst school attendance came to a halt. Estimated cost of damage always run into millions of cedis. If one considers the enormous amount of government revenue that goes into the support of educational institutions, as well as the fact that two and a half percent of the Value Added Tax (VAT)

go into funds for education, it is rather imperative that these national assets be protected from disasters. Billions of cedis go into rehabilitation of schools. Some of the rehabilitation is due to destruction from rainstorms as well as long years of neglect or lack of maintenance since they were constructed.

Over 80% of schools in all the regions are now being rehabilitated at a cost of 6.2 billion cedis. These rehabilitations are funded with support from the Ghana Education Trust Fund (GETFund) (Graphic, 2002). The importance of these institutions have been further emphasized by the launching of several educational endowment funds, all in support of the enhancement of education in the country. All state libraries especially the Balme Library of the University of Ghana, Legon also benefit from the GETFund.

### **The Balme Library Electronic Resources/Programmes**

The Balme Library is one of the institutions that play a very crucial role in the dissemination of information in the University of Ghana and the larger community. In fact, in the absence of a National Library, the Balme Library assumes the position of a National Library and as such serves as a depository and repository library in the country. It therefore serves the international community as well. Currently, the library serves a student population of about 19,000. This central task involves the acquisition of different types of materials in form and format which have the properties that in the presence of certain elements can cause or accelerate disasters.

In recent years as a result of information technology, innovations have been introduced into almost all operations and procedures in library management. The automation process led to networking and as expected the acquisition of several computers. The Balme Library has about

75% of its working area networked (Newsletter, 2002). This network facility is linked to the other four state universities in the country. These are: Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi; University of Cape Coast; University of Education, Winneba; and University for Development Studies, Tamale. This is largely to improve the organization and information retrieval system for both staff and users and also to fall in line with global trends in librarianship.

As a result of this network, the following projects are presently being undertaken in the library: Interlibrary Lending and Document Delivery (ILL/DD); Programme for the Enhancement of Research Information (PERI); The Information and Technology Laboratory (Computer Lab); The Electronic Support Unit; and a Cyber Café located on the Ground Floor of the Balme Library Annex. The Cyber Café is networked to serve 106 computers and a workstation. An average of 200 users visit the café everyday to check e-mails and search for information.

The Balme Library Annex, though built purposely to provide reading space for 2500 students in order to alleviate the space problem in the main library building, is currently being used for other purposes. For example, the Academic Section of the University of Ghana uses the other floors as examination centres and as many as 900 students sit in one room. Other projects such as: The Malaria Project; The Distance Learning Education; The Peace/Conflict Resolution Programme; and the International Students Exchange Office are located in the Annex. These are all very important information resources and programmes that are donor funded. The nature of these projects and programmes demands that they be protected against disasters so that they can be sustained even if donor funding ceases.

## **Hazards and Risk Assessment**

In view of the above, Adinku (1999), sought the assistance of the statutory body in charge of management of disasters, the National Disaster Management Organization (NADMO) with the permission of the Balme Library to conduct risk assessment to ascertain the potential hazards of the Balme Library and its Annex. It was also to determine the disaster response of the Library and to draw the attention of management to the need to have a disaster management plan. This move was based on the certainty that the process of automation in some cases serves as recipe for disasters when appropriate measures are not put in place.

First, the risk assessment revealed the possibility of such disasters occurring as a result of earthquakes, fire and floods.

The whole of Legon lies not far from the two major faults in the systems in the country (i.e. Akwapim and Coastal Boundaries). This area therefore, has the potential of being affected by earth-tremors. Whereas the main Library is built up to standard with several emergency exits and balconies, the architectural design of the new building (Annex) has no balconies and only one exit for a three-storey building. Balconies are not only for decorations but are also very vital in disaster response. They serve as protection for materials against rainstorms and as a landing-pad for trapped victims where fire-service rigs or personnel can rescue them.

In addition, staff working in the library have not been trained on what to do before, during and after a disaster. Most of the fire extinguishers available in the main library are not working (Adinku, 1999). There are fire alarms but no fire extinguishers in the new building. The report on the findings was presented to the Balme Library and University Administration. It was suggested

that all the above defects be corrected before the Annex is put to use. Unfortunately, this was not done. In addition, the awareness created by NADMO also led to a further research conducted on academic libraries to see their disaster readiness. This research revealed that none of the twelve academic libraries surveyed had any plan in place to prevent or mitigate the impact of disasters except one, which had a priority list for disaster recovery (Akussah and Fosu, 2001).

Obviously, the above scenario poses serious implications for the library and central administration respectively. Some of these implications are that in case of a fire outbreak or a power fluctuation and outage students/clients would be forced to use the only exit available. The stampede and panic among these people, needless to say, could lead to loss of life or serious injuries and loss of revenue and damage to equipment. Recent events buttress these fears of the author. In November 2001, a group of students numbering about 800 were writing their interim assessment paper on the second and third floors of the Balme Library Annex. Sparks started coming out of a faulty ceiling fan and the students panicked. In the confusion, one of them jumped from the second floor. He had a fractured arm and many were hurt in the process of trying to escape through the only exit. Floods followed this incident, after a six-hour rainfall on 9<sup>th</sup> January 2002, services of the Cyber Café were brought to a standstill for more than four hours. Apart from possible damage to equipment, valuable productive hours were wasted. These are incidents that must act as eye-openers to the administration that anything can happen at anytime and the lives of both staff and clients are at risk.

The author believes that it is not enough to identify hazards and accept that such hazards exist and not do anything about

them. This is especially so where the safety of staff and students, materials and valuable equipment (non-structural elements) are concerned. In fact, the management of disasters in our institutions of learning calls for a balancing act of planning, organizing, staffing, leading and controlling the three "m's"- man, money, and materials. This is an apparent call for institutional commitment to achieve objectives with or without disruptions, whether minor or major incidents.

### **Institutional Commitment**

What then is institutional commitment as it relates to disaster management? Why institutional commitment? In the context of this article, a definition would be attempted based on the convictions that after the disasters have happened, a lot of activities are undertaken to ascertain the causes, the impact and what should be done, that is, the provision of relief and reconstruction. Though these assessments are done, in some cases, these reports are left on the drawing board to collect dust until the next event occurs resulting in ad hoc measures being taken to salvage the situation. These ad hoc or reactive measures only go to compound the problems, while uncoordinated activities are carried out. Naturally, this leads to unnecessary delays in taking decisive actions to mitigate the effects of disasters. It is believed that it is high time managers of our institutions become proactive and take every little incident as an issue to deal with to ensure smooth and effective administration.

Institutional commitment is therefore the recognition and willingness on the part of any management staff of administration to guarantee that policies are written, and the implementation strategies in such policies are enforced to ensure that disaster management practices are solidly integrated in the institution's administration. The commitments envisaged should include

these areas: commitment to understand the concept of disaster management; commitment to the provision of funds; commitment to the implementation of strategies, e.g. purchase of equipment, training of staff; commitment to forge linkages; and commitment to assume leadership roles.

Very often, issues in connection with disasters or their management are treated lightly by managers because of lack of understanding of the problems and the reactive attitudes towards their occurrence. Managers often lack the understanding to appreciate the fact that there is a problem and the assessment and analysis of such events rather reveal the weaknesses and strengths in an organization. This revelation can assist in the development of appropriate strategies in a way that projects and programmes can take off in a harmonized manner. Most especially, the strengths and capabilities associated with these distinctive competences once developed become the logical cornerstone for successful strategy implementation as well as sustaining the actual disaster management plan.

This commitment must be related to the three main phases in the disaster management cycle. These are: Pre-disaster Phase, The Emergency Phase and Post-Disaster Phase. Knowing the disaster cycle is important in the management of disasters. This would help to identify the problems and the various activities that should be carried out at every stage in order to ensure prevention, ensure preparedness to mitigate and immediate response and recovery.

In the Pre-disaster Phase, the commitment would mean that the library would constitute a committee made up of library staff and other experts. This committee would then liaise with appropriate departments to identify hazards in the library. This is risk

assessment, which is highly technical. It requires varied expertise and resources. After the risk assessment, the librarian or a member of the committee should be a regular member of the management meetings of the University. At such forum, all related departments such as Finance; Planning; Consultancy; Data Processing Unit; Development; Estate; Security; Hospital and Exchange must be represented. Issues from the risk assessment could be discussed dispassionately and the right analyses made. Clearly, the more these issues are discussed the more roles and responsibilities would be defined.

At these meetings, resources and other relevant organizations are identified. For instance, the Finance Officer could then understand and be willing to release the necessary funds for the provision of an emergency exit in the Balme Library Annex. The provision of this exit in that case answers the preventive aspect of disasters. This measure may only mitigate the adverse effect of disaster. So long as this is a human institution, there are bound to be problems or an emergency situation that may require preparedness procedures.

Preparedness is also an aspect of the pre-disaster phase. This entails acquisition and identification of almost all logistics needed to handle an emergency. It is also a procedure to promote linkages with the existing departments and other relevant agencies such as NADMO, the Ghana National Fire Service, the Ghana Police Service, and the 48 Engineers Regiment of the Ghana Armed Forces who are the main response team for disasters in the country. Apart from the above, the libraries/institutions need to tailor their requirements to the kind of materials that are likely to be damaged and find appropriate resources for it. For example, the library would need cold store facilities to immediately freeze items that have been salvaged to avoid secondary

cause of disaster such as mould and deterioration. In case of electronic resources, there is the need to have back-up CD-ROM and diskettes lodged with other similar institutions.

In this regard, existing library cooperation activities should therefore be explored to the fullest. Other resources in these agencies could be used to train staff within the libraries to become a frontline team in case of emergencies. It is also a stage for the library to draw up a priority list of materials to be salvaged and also to ensure regular staff training as it is important in managing emergencies in our institutions. Staff are to be trained to:

- i identify a hazard;
- ii what should be done;
- iii who should do what;
- iv whom to contact and when;
- v the use of equipment and how to handle such equipment; and then
- vi how to salvage/operate the priority list.

These staff could become part of the Rescue Team. These are necessary to avoid confusion because having worked in an institution the staff would know the floor plan and the priority list of materials to be evacuated before and after the emergency period. Confusion in an emergency can disorganize any operation. It is worse than not having any plan in place at all. The management function of leadership becomes very relevant during the emergency stage. Since this is the stage when all preparations made previously are activated; leadership is then a key element that gives direction and enhances effective coordination of activities; as well as the mobilization and movement of persons in disaster situations. Effective leadership helps to mitigate indirect impacts during emergency situations.

Finally, in the post-disaster phase, where it is assumed that all the injured are taken to the hospital, all library documents/materials salvaged should be prioritized and appropriate treatment given. The problems associated with the emergency stage become the basis for future development projects in any institution. Though other benefits exist, this is one benefit that can be derived from having in such a committee, people in the institution but from other departments such as Development and Estate. Subsequent planning for projects turn out to be less burdensome and less expensive for these departments. The institutions/libraries also benefit a lot by having all minor problems that hitherto were glossed over appreciated and attended to.

### **Recommendation**

It is recommended that the various aspects of commitment discussed are important and should be practiced in all educational institutions to reduce the following:

- i delays in recognition of problems which may be the potential hazards- roof/window leakages, faulty electrical lines and many others;
- ii delays in the decision to take appropriate action;
- iii the delays in the mobilization of resources- transport, personnel and other necessary facilities; and
- iv the level of confusion in the emergency situation itself.

### **Conclusion**

Finally, it is necessary to emphasise that library/institutional disasters can be very costly in terms of economic loss as well as information loss. Rehabilitation can take years and academic work could be adversely affected. Therefore, disaster management

issues should be administrative matters at the top level, as well as an everyday issue for bottom level personnel so that, the desired attention for effective handling of disasters in our institutions can be ensured.

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