

Sound Practice No.1

Urban Search and Rescue Practical Exercise (USARPE)

Overview

The evolution of the armed conflict in Colombia has made the urban areas highly vulnerable to terrorist acts. In February 2003, the city of Bogotá experienced a direct attack on its ruling class, through a terrorist act against the social club "El Nogal". The city's response capacity during this event showed deep flaws, especially in terms of its organizational model and protocols.

In the political realm, Antanas Mockus' administration established life protection as one of its pillar policies. As a consequence of this priority, the city's Disaster Risk Reduction and Emergency Response Office - DPAE, as the Disaster Risk Reduction and Emergency Response System - SDPAE coordination entity, started an emergency response strengthening process, through the implementation of procedures, protocols and organizational models that were tried out six months later, in a practical exercise with an emphasis in Search and Rescue Procedures, given the seismic and terrorist high risk in the city.

Although it was intended to be a local experience, following the dramatic consequences of a seismic event in Bogotá and its ability to overflow the city's and even the nation's capacity, the city decided to involve national and international USAR groups as well as an UNDAC team from United Nations.

The exercise used an innovative methodology in terms that it worked with real scenarios without scripts for the rescue groups. Another innovation was around the fact that the scenarios were developed within the city's perimeter and regular life, generating public involvement and awareness. Therefore, for 50 continuous hours in 25 different locations within the city, with the participation of national and international USAR groups from México, Perú, Ecuador, Pereira (Colombia), Ibagué (Colombia) and Cali (Colombia) among others, the city was able to test its

response capacity and identify aspects to be corrected.

The benefits of the practice to the SDPAE started from the planning process, in the sense that, given its proportion, it demanded a high coordination among the entities that conform the SDPAE, which ended on an improvement of the system's articulation as well as building leadership acknowledgement for DPAAE.

The USARPE, produced evaluation documents that state the operative and organizational weaknesses of the SDPAE. Following the conclusions made after the exercise, there has been a collective evaluation work involving local, national and international rescue groups as well as local institutions, regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the SDPAE. Communications, logistics and institutional coordination were identified as the most critic aspects of the city's response capacity.

The SDPAE has experienced the vital necessity to clarify and disseminate procedures, functions and organizational models. The general awareness that arose from the exercise and the identification of the different practices to be improved gave the city guidelines on the future of its policies and action plans.

In accordance to this, the new city's administration has established the implementation of a General Response Plan after a Seismic Event in Bogotá as one of its main programs against poverty, hunger and exclusion. The project is at the moment being formulated with the support of the UNDP, and it intends to be a model not only on the national level but in a subcontinent level.

Another important aspect to be mentioned is that the experience of the USARPE increased the private sector's attention, which produced a bigger involvement and the creation of the bases and framework to establish partnerships in order to best prepare the city for a big event and to start a culture of risk shared responsibility.

Agencies involved



There were 65 institutions and organizations involved in planning and developing the USARPE. There were 22 institutions from the SDPAE, 23 from the National Network, 10 multilateral and international organizations and 10 private organizations. Each of the institutions of the SDPAE had specific duties in their area, in terms of planning the exercise, as well as in the emergency response activities. They were responsible for designing the scenarios, identifying the procedures to be evaluated and establishing the evaluation parameters on their field. Part of this group were the Health Secretary's Office, Fire Rescue Department, Civil Protection, Utilities Providers, Transit Secretary's Office, Urban Development Institute, Metropolitan Police, Colombian Red Cross, XII Brigade, Security Department, Office of the Public Prosecutor, Forensic Medicine Office and Social Welfare Department. A coordination committee was created with representatives from all the SDPAE institutions, where all the scenarios were discussed and agreed upon, and interinstitutional efforts were added.



On the National Level the exercise had the participation of the regional and national disaster offices and operative groups from 6 different regions. The Foreign Affairs Ministry, National Security Department and Taxes and Customs Department were involved in the reception of the international groups and equipment. National Police and Armed Forces supported national security and transportation. On the International Level United Nations participated with an UNDAC team conformed by 10 people, there was also an OFDA LAC delegation and representatives from Metro Dade Fire Rescue who were international response coordinators, security observers and evaluators. The United States Embassy supported the experience through international groups' transportation. Finally there were four International USAR groups from Ecuador, Perú and México and the collaboration of these countries' embassies.

The Private organizations mainly handled information and communication technologies and insurances. The Chamber of Commerce facilitated the space for the Operations Base where the Operative Emergency Command, the Exercise Coordination Center and the OSOCC were functioning. It also served as accommodation facilities for the USAR groups.

Intended Outcome

The experience attempted to confront the SDPAE to a possible disaster situation in the city, in order to appreciate its response capacity and evaluate procedures and protocols. The main intended outcome had to do with enhancing the city's capacity to respond to a big seismic event, or to the occurrence of multiple and simultaneous emergency situations, after a practical confrontation of its current capacity.

Given the high seismic risk and its ability to overflow the city's capacity, the exercise also aimed to familiarize national and international groups with the local conditions, and assure an efficient international response, in case of a disaster in Bogotá.

The idea was to generate an evaluation, harmonization and reflection space following a practical exploration. The SDPAE was able to identify flaws in its response procedures, elements registered in an evaluation document that not only shows positive aspects, things to improve and recommendations but establishes a replicable model for developing alike experiences in mega cities.

In this sense, the District's Operative Committee under the coordination of the Disaster Risk and Emergency Response Office DPAAE, identified ten aspects which needed to be improved over the next four years in order to be able to cope with a seismic event in the city:

- 1) Disaster Preparedness and Planning Assumptions: estimated losses and damages to life, properties, good governance, quality of life, infrastructure and functionality.
- 2) Disaster Preparedness and Response Organizational Models, Protocols and Procedures concerning the affected area, the local command and its interaction with the national and international level, the political arena and

- interinstitutional interaction.
- 3) Institutional Capacity Building
 - 4) Information and Communication Systems
 - 5) Inter- Agency, private and community training with an emphasis on the interoperability between local and national coordination in terms of tactical and political aspects.
 - 6) Legal development to assure an effective response.
 - 7) Logistics Plan
 - 8) Equipment
 - 9) Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Strategy and Planning.
 - 10) Public awareness, education and media management

Several groups benefit from the exercise. On the first place, all the local, national and international groups were able to try out their skills. On the decision-making and technical realm, it turned out to be an opportunity to build, try and evaluate ways of organization and interaction among the actors involved on the emergency attention. Regarding the general population in Bogotá, the social awareness gained by the experience generated disaster preparedness practices and a strong disaster risk reduction commitment from the new city's administration.

Monitoring and documentation



No precise indicators have been formulated. There are 9 basic lines mentioned above, from which the SDPAE is establishing its action plans. These lines are the basis of a project that is currently being formulated in which the indicators are being stipulated more clearly. Nevertheless there have been accomplishments in the past months regarding communication systems, training, legal development, and loss and damage scenario.

The SDPAE has produced a document that describes all the steps taken toward developing the experience, pointing resources needed, work schemes, positive aspects, things to be improved and recommendations for future exercises for all the planning and response functions.

Sustainability

The Disaster Risk Reduction and Emergency Response Office - DPAE, based on the lessons learned after the USARPE went through a re-structuring process that involved not only its disaster preparedness and emergency response area but its technical and community management areas. This new scheme included the creation of a transversal coordination that manages information, education and public relations. Through this transformation the Office seeks to improve its coordination capacity and reach the response capacity needed.

Following the difficulties encountered during the USARPE in terms of Operative Emergency Command and the decision making process, DPAE started a campaign among all the institutions conforming the SDPAE in order to adopt OFDA's System Incident Command. Several training sessions have been developed.

Regarding communications and logistics, areas identified as the most critical in the city's response capacity during the exercise, the approaches are being changed. After working with just one VHF band, the emergency communication network that connects all the SDPAE institutions acquired 4 more bands managed by DPAE. As a parallel resource, each institution has purchase TDMA technology with private providers that support the city's emergency communication network. At the moment DPAE is evaluating the use of handhelds with satellite for data transmission from the impact zone.

Concerning logistics, the schemes, procedures and resources are currently under an evaluation process that expects to improve timing and use of means, through the implementation of an efficient information system and SDPAE resources articulation.

Decree 723 that creates and regulates the SDPAE is being modified in order to better stipulate shared responsibilities among various institutions.

In addition, there is a group of risk analysts under the coordination of a national expert, going through a revision of the information available to establish the seismic loss and damage scenario for which the city is going to prepare.

Finally, as an ambitious and articulate process, with UNDP's collaboration, the city is currently formulating a General Response Plan after a Seismic Event Project, which will provide the elements and procedures to prepare the city in the face of a major seismic event.

Innovation and potential for replication

This practice is new. It can be replicated based on the documentation previously explained. However there were certain conditions that were favorable to carry out the exercise.

First of all the city had an institutional framework on the SDPAE that helped to articulate all the institutions involved in the attention of a disaster, there was also a high political commitment as the administration took life protection activities as priorities.

Another important aspect has to do with the fact that it was the major's office itself, through its disaster management office that was pulling the exercise, which made it easier to find support, commitment and sponsorships.

Finally it is worth mentioning that given the urban transformation that the city is going through, following great investments on urban infrastructure, there are constantly several buildings being demolished, which gave the city freedom to create various scenes.

Knowledge Base Coding Reference:

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