Chapter 7
Assessing Public Sector Learning Following a Natural Disaster

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ABSTRACT

Disasters are extreme events that usually requirg01e multiple stakeholders' involvement. Public, private, and third-sector actors; local, national, and international parties need to form a well-functioning multilevel network of disaster management and rescue to be able to cope with large and unexpected disasters. The lack of well-coordinated efforts, well-coordinated staff, and well-coordinated organizations is generally one of the main causes of failure to cope with major disasters. This chapter describes disaster management as a multilevel governance activity. It will illustrate the practical side of multilevel governance by emphasizing specifically the multilevel learning process of multilevel governance actors during times of crises. The authors review literature on organizational learning and network learning, both in normal times and during crises, and they assess learning following two major earthquakes

that struck Turkey in 1999, separated in time by only 89 days. Five propositions are made regarding multilevel learning in times of crises: 1) Level of learning: there are three levels of learning (organizational, interorganizational network, and policy) during and after a crisis that are relevant to improved interorganizational network performance in future crises; 2) Depth of learning: the depth of learning (single-loop or double-loop) varies based on the stage of the crisis or disaster faced by network actors; 3) Method of learning: the methods of knowledge acquisition will vary based on the role or function of the organization or organizations within a network prior to the crisis event; 4) Learning dependency: learning at one level may be highly dependent on factors at other levels; and 5) Learning environment: there are a set of conditions that need to be met in an environment in order for a crisis to trigger learning in organizations, networks, and at the policy level.

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Crises are an "unpopular, largely negative phenomenon in management" (Kim, 1998). Perceived threats are the driving force behind crises which are defined as "an environmental event that has impending negative or harmful consequences for the entity" (Staw et al, 1981, p. 502). A crisis actually occurs when an organization's responses seem inadequate to resolve a threatening problem (Barnett & Pratt, 2000). This is most often true following disasters, which "signal the failure of a society to adapt successfully to certain features of its natural and socially constructed environment in a sustainable fashion" (Oliver-Smith, 1996, p. 304). Major natural disasters such as earthquakes, while they vary in scale, usually threaten the general welfare of the effected people by generating problems and conditions that are difficult to anticipate and address (Comfort, 1995, 1999a; Schneider, 1992, 1995; Donahue & Joyce, 2001). Despite the involvement of individuals, communities, charity organizations, and private companies in disaster response and recovery activities, their efforts are often woefully inadequate to ease the enormous burdens on the people who experience them (Schneider, 1995).

This paper explores the ability of public organizations to learn from crises, specifically a major natural disaster. It recognizes the unique placement of public organizations in the disaster management community and shows how a public organization learns both as an organization acting independently and as an organization embedded in a larger network of individuals, communities, charity organizations, private companies, and other actors in the disaster policy subsystem.

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