

## **Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Management**

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Humanitarian crises typically occur in areas of grave underdevelopment or impoverishment and trap large numbers of people in environments torn by war, famine and disease. Bosnia, Chechnya, Rwanda, and Somalia are examples for such crises, which are characterized by targeted attacks on civilians, mass population dislocation, widespread human rights abuses, great human suffering, and dangerous operating conditions for relief organizations and practitioners. Humanitarian crises are similar to other (natural) disasters in that need greatly outstrips resources. They differ in that the very situation that causes the suffering in complex humanitarian emergencies often undermines the ability of professionals to respond (as a result of lack of access to populations in need, the presence of warring parties, etc.).

The last decade of the twentieth century witnessed an increase in intrastate conflict and a subsequent rise in humanitarian crises. Medical and public health response to humanitarian crises and other disasters have become an integral part of the international relief landscape.

Opportunities for exceptionally rewarding professional experiences are abundant in disaster and emergency relief. Several factors make the need for medical and public health professionals to seek training in this emerging field necessary and timely.

1) First, international emergency response – whether in the setting of complex emergencies or natural disasters – is complex and multi-faceted. Effective practitioners must be well-versed in the techniques of medical and public health response in settings that lack adequate resources. Practitioners must also develop an understanding of the ramifications of military and political interventions, and must be able to negotiate the subtleties of the international response system with increasing sophistication and skill.

2) Second, the standards and practices of emergency response are in a nearly constant state of improvement and flux. Practitioners must be grounded in the basics, with the latest methods and practice skill sets at their fingertips. A well-established literature on natural disaster management and response is now augmented by a growing body of literature on complex humanitarian disasters. Beyond a working knowledge of the fundamentals, practitioners should be aware of the theories and on-going debates about the practicalities and ethical dilemmas that pervade the field.

3) Third, practitioners are increasingly asked to work in difficult circumstances, and are expected to accomplish much with few resources. The ability of the international relief community to respond to disasters and humanitarian crises has often, in recent contexts, been stretched to the limit. The challenge is for practitioners to act not only with speed but also with documented efficacy. To meet this challenge, successful practitioners must develop a competence and preparedness in a wide range of areas.

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