

REGIONAL REPORT – ROMANIA – SEPTEMBER 2007



When Disaster Strikes” Project
 or
 How could hazards be Projectized through PMBOK’s Project Risk
 Management Knowledge Area?

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Earthquakes and forests on fire, landslides and hurricanes, tornados forming with no warning sign out of the blue and extreme heat culminating with many casualties and crops failure, heavy storm rains and massive flooding, radioactive discharges accidentally from a nuclear plant or a train with chemical wastes derailling in the vicinity of urban area, highway bridge collapsing with cars on it. This is part of our real life, events that happened in the past and surely will occur again in our unsafe future.

The idea for this article came out on a stormy morning when looking down through the window as heavy rainfall was sweeping off the streets that minutes ago were hot. TV news coverage teams have competed with each other to report on the massive floods in the country after weeks off extreme heat. It is sure that nature has a deadly inclination to rapid and dramatic changes of climate, and no one can predict with sufficient accuracy what is going to happen next.

The result: people must be prepared to cope with the aftermath of natural phenomenon rather that trying to anticipate them. Not being a fatalist approach at all, we have to focus on “knowing the known” and not on guessing the “unknown”.

What is the main effect when such a large scale disaster strikes: massive population removal from the affected areas, a great disturbance on the social life for thousands of individuals who are forced to leave their shelters and migrate. Where Governments should have arranged for



Romania could lose much of its agriculture this year to heat.

temporary solutions, economies are severely impacted for years before full recovery. A sustained effort is required from others to comfort the affected area by financial support and in the form of food, medicine, and logistics.

The human race has a keen inclination for construction and progress, for development and technological advancement. In our race for supremacy on Earth and aiming to a better life, nature has struck back in recent years extremely aggressively. Facing these disasters originating from natural phenomenon, the human race is in search for survival options and mechanisms to alleviate the aftermath of nature's killing behavior.

It is high time for us to start thinking of better preparation plans for accommodating comfort in our lives when disaster hits. Fighting with natural hazards could be seen as a Project although those called to implement specific repetitive actions might say that they have done it so often that it looks rather as an operation than a variable project. Even though the operations are planned and allocated with resources, projectizing the Emergency Situation better addresses the key issues when disaster strikes: fast and appropriate responses of the Risk Owners toward saving lives.



Dragging water bottles in the Romanian countryside.

Governments and other NGO entities wherever in the world are called to implement specific measures to cope with large-scale disasters when they strike. Emergency Situation Committees can be found almost everywhere and they exist to: plan for the risk management, to trigger specific pre-established sets of actions, and to help

communities returning to their social life in post incident.

The post-Katrina hurricane and Americans expertise and experience in dealing with emergency situation are still alive and good examples for many Europeans. It was a very highly profiled large-scale disaster that by its magnitude and power affected a huge number of people. Something similar is likely to occur almost everywhere on the globe. How prepared are the governments to react is still a question with a wide range of answers.

Sometimes like in Romania there is no need for a huge hurricane to reveal the weak points in Emergency Situation Risk Management Plan. You might only need here a few weeks of intense heat like during this summer to understand that, while on paper the things are ready for action, in fact some failures in **Risk Response Plan** and inadequate reaction of **Risk Owners** make all look poorly planned. The ultimate response is not calling the Salvation Army or National Guard but to have civil **Risk Owners** empowered entities and funded beforehand to deal with the disasters or crises when they arise.

It is true that the Planning phase of Emergency Situation Risk Management is always in politicians' obligation and the Government by its components tries to take good care of attentively planning the Risk Management. It is also true that the Plan is further broken down into some small sub plans and given to the corresponding entities which can be Fire Brigades,

Anti-Nuclear, Biological and Chemical warfare Units, city halls and local governors. At those sub-levels, they should start putting together **Risk Registers**, a permanently open document because new risks occur every time and we should be able to identify a new one and to classify it correctly.

We are quite good up to this point: we have managed to develop **Risk Management Plans** we then went further breaking them down into small sub plans for smaller entities. We have available **Risks Registers** developed from historical information and updated with our recent years experiences, we share our fears and concerns with those who have experienced similar troubles lately. We learn from them how to be ready to protect our lives. But in fact we fail often because we only copy plans conceived by others with no relevance to our likely situations. What happens from this point, on a tactical rather than strategic level, is somehow unknown and this can be easily seen by means of resources failing to reach the stakeholders in need at a certain moment in time.



Qualitative and Quantitative Risk Assessment is probably never done, or in the best case these analysis are performed only to justify resource allocation as part of Response planning. It is believed that by means of these assessments a sizing of certain resources should be obtained: it is not unimportant at all to know how many will suffer from an extremely hot summer or how many will have to be moved out from their places in case of a hurricane or earthquake.

Based on this information we may then allocate potential financing directed to temporary housing, food and medicine, materials and other logistics spent during the salvation.

Probably the most ignored processes are those related to the **Risk Response Planning** and allocation of **Risk Owners**, entities, organizations or groups of people trained to suddenly recognized when a specific risk assigned to them has occurred.

If not done properly we may do more harm than good: for instance it might not be a good idea during the hot season to place Red Cross tents in the hot cities and in the same devastating heat conditions of 45°C (113°F) without air conditioning or water for first aid. People of high age are often crowded in these spots without any good results. Mid trained medical nurses endowed with blood pressure testers only welcome them. Obviously that was not the expected Response for a triggered risk event. More than that, the **Risk Owners** are split between meteorologists and local city hall departments. Any **Risk Owner** must be vested with an active responsibility since it is one pulling the alarm signal and making all others aware and standing up.



One year ago we experienced the opposite conditions of this summer: large flooding on a large territory. The results: shelters and dwellings destroyed, crops damaged, people dislocated from their places and moved to dry or higher places. The costs remain probably unknown but

surely significant for the taxpayers since Army troops with safety boats and helicopters were scrambled to rescue the people nearly drowning.

It is sure that an Emergency Situation Risk Management Plan for flooding existed. But what happened after the waters withdrew revealed that only part of the problem was approached, that of rescuing people without paying attention to the second part of the problem: **Risk Owners, Risk Response Planning and Risk Response Control**.

Lacking the proper Response Planning has forced rescued people to seek shelter at their relatives and not a special place reserved and assigned for this scope by the Government. With few exceptions where a country school, canteens or containers bought at those very moments by the Government or private sponsors, there was no special place assigned to house the refugees. Again, the major rupture is somewhere between Emergency Situation Risk Planning and the effective measures when things happen: **Risk Response Planning and Risk Response Control** as well as the reaction of **Risk Owners**.

A change has been noticed this year when the National Plan for Fighting Against Disasters has been endorsed by the authorities as part of the planning process. Emergency Situation Units assign a joint force combining Fire Squads and Paramedics as **Risk Owners** and they are called to act proactively based on early warning lights rather than waiting passively until after disaster strikes. They are called to cover any Risk Situation identified in the Risk Register, even though we may not find similar document under this name in the Planning files: fires, floods, earthquakes, chemical, nuclear and biological accidents, constructions collapse with people entrapment, extreme weather conditions, etc.



Venturing a new statement of doubt, it can be affirmed that we may spend resources irrationally or we may allocate scarce resources if the **Qualitative and Quantitative Risk Assessments** are not performed for every risk scenario. Who can say how large should be the place for housing the rescued people and how much food they need for a month post event? How can one say what size of financial contingency we might need in case of massive disaster hitting an urban area? Only running these two assessments scenarios can we get some figures of risk and, if converted than into monetary values, we may get the answer for the **Risk Owner**.

Where Government involvement ends and from which point in the process the entities get in the job is a question that should be answered by precise planning of Risk Management. It is not at all insignificant for a country with limited resources to neglect the Quantitative and Qualitative Risk Assessment since its funds are directed to social development with a small portion for counterweighing the disaster effects.



Romania has been hit several times by big earthquakes and lately we have experienced other extreme natural disasters: floods, extreme heat, landslides, accidental pollution from discharging poisonous pollutants in the rivers. There is no doubt that a change in approaching the Emergency Situation has to take place.

The first breakthrough was made by the issuing of the National Plan for Fighting against Disasters in a form of so known Project Risk Management Plan. The officials must also know that the planning process is not complete yet. If PMI's approach is followed, then they have to spend some other resources and time for the next processes within the Planning phase, those described above. These could be run by lower level government entities, private companies and specialists in Risk Management.

What also must be understood is the multiple dimensions of Risk Management Planning: it exists to help authority to save as many people as possible, to limit the physical dimensions of the disaster, and to get funds well in advance before the disaster strike to help for the reconstruction of areas and for people re-settling in.



From these concepts, I believe we should start with the Project Risk Management Planning if the PMI's philosophy is embraced by those dealing with the Emergency Situation. Caring about our lives and others' lives goes beyond any politics. It has nothing to do with any political doctrine, although the need for safety is somewhere below in Maslow's pyramid. But sometimes going back to basics is mandatory for reviewing the plan for the next steps.

The authorities should act in a coordinated way, prepared and having control of their actions. All these look as in project environment, very similar with the processes governing the project implementation.

Not willing to be accused of a biasing attitude and advocating for the PMBoK's exclusively, I am fully confident that any disaster can be projectized in terms of planning the response and sizing the resources of the said response. It is indeed a true project: it is chartered, planned, monitored and controlled and phased out when all become calm and normal, all the lessons are learned, historical information filed and disseminated to the stakeholders. What is peculiar is the Executing process group, a non-desired and unhappy part of this project. But when it strikes the valuable part, the rest of the process groups must be paying off.



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