

The Collapse of Compassion



By Erwann Michel-Kerjan and Paul Slovic

October 7, 2010

Unless you have been living on a remote island with no phone, radio or Internet, for the past 2 months you know Pakistan is facing an up-hill battle. While floodwaters started to recede, still about one-fifth of the entire country is under water; 20 million people are affected. Yes, we said 20 million!

The United Nations, and its newly appointed Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Valerie Amos, have been trying to rally the international community to provide the necessary assistance, but the response has been very slow.

But why? Psychology and behavioral economics can help explain the challenges inherent to improving society's reaction to catastrophe risks.

Psychic numbing -- Inaction in the face of such a large-scale disaster is puzzling: economic rationality implies that we should care more about two people than we care about just one, and more about three than two, and so on. By the same reasoning, we should care *a lot* about so many people being severely affected by this disaster of unprecedented magnitude -- 20 million times more to be precise (if our reaction were simply a linear function). But we don't.

Experience shows that the valuation of life-saving in fact decreases, rather than increases, when we are faced with large numbers. That's because our capacity to "feel" is not only limited, it also diminishes rapidly. New research discovers a disturbing psychological tendency: people felt less compassion and donated less aid to a large group of people than to a small group, less aid to a pair of victims than to either individual alone... the problem is that action on our part depends upon feelings of compassion that may be hard to arouse and sustain over time, for large numbers of victims. We cannot "feel the meaning" associated with threats to 20 million people.

Disaster fatigue -- There is another reason why so few people have helped Pakistanis. The historical trajectory along which disasters happen also has a critical influence on our ability to care about the victims. After the Haiti earthquake in January, another major quake occurred in Chile just a few weeks later. Then, closer to us here in the United States, the major environmental disaster caused by the BP oil spill dominated the news for months. There is a limit to what our brain and our heart can handle. In economic terms, there is a decreasing marginal capacity to care about disasters and act. To say it simply, we suffer from compassion fatigue. If the Pakistan flooding had occurred before all these other extreme events, our empathy (and reaction) would likely have been much more pronounced.

We believe that many more extreme events will happen in the near future --floods and other natural disasters, new modes of terrorist attacks from Al Qaeda, technological accidents, and pandemics. It will thus be critical to better appreciate how human beings are likely to look at those catastrophes, and react (or not).

As our feelings may mislead us regarding the seriousness of such events, the critical question we all face is: How do we design better institutional mechanisms that are faithful in the face of large disasters to the high value we place on individual human life? Given the highly interdependent world we all live in now, not addressing this question will lead to uncontrolled consequences, with feedback loop effects on us sooner than we think.

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