

Amber French

10-29-2012

Research Report – Red Cross

The American Red Cross is a system that affects people all over the world and in turn, is affected in itself by the same individuals and families. When speaking of a system, it is important to understand the depths and complexity of what contributes to creating and sustaining it. A system includes interrelated parts that create a whole entity, such as a person, plant, machine, or agency. In this paper I am going to be speaking directly about how the American Red Cross is a system, in terms of its development, sustainability, inputs and outputs.

The Red Cross first became a volunteer based organization in Switzerland in the mid 1880's by a very wealthy man in Geneva, Mr. Henri Dunant. After he had witnessed thousands of soldiers left to die after war he decided there needed to be a volunteer based committee to aid the fallen soldiers and care for them until they recovered. Over the next few years the idea spread rapidly across the globe, and in 1881 Clara Barton and a few of her friends founded the American Red Cross. Due to the immense need people saw for the Red Cross and the power they felt that could be put behind it, The Red Cross took off around the world and became a world-wide source of support and aid for soldiers in need. (American Red Cross, 2012)

As the need for support and aid to wounded soldiers grew more demanding, the American Red Cross expanded their mission. First aid, water safety, and public

health nursing programs were added prior to the First World War. As the war progressed there was extreme growth in the American Red Cross as well. The number of chapters within the United States grew to nearly 4,000 and the number of volunteers grew to over 30 million. Shortly thereafter, service began to include veterans, safety training, accident prevention, home care for the sick, and nutrition education. It wasn't until the Mississippi River floods in 1927, severe drought, and the Depression, that major disaster and crisis relief were being provided. (American Red Cross, 2012)

World War II brought new national needs for services to the nation. Due to this increase and the growth of the nation, the American Red Cross's system grew once more. Beginning in the 1990's, the American Red Cross expanded their services "into such fields such as civil defense, CPR/AED training, HIV/AIDS education, and the provision of emotional care and support in the wake of disasters." (American Red Cross, 2012) The system of the American Red Cross has grown immensely over the years as the need for their services has increased and expanded.

Within the context of a system the need for services from the Red Cross can be considered the 'input' and what perpetuates the system. Without the need for their services the Red Cross would lose funding, volunteers, and purpose. There would be nothing left to keep the system in motion. As history shows, however, there is a great need for the services of the Red Cross internationally, and there is also a great need for the American Red Cross here in the United States. The

American Red Cross is one of the “principal sources of assistance to disaster victims. Volunteers provide essential surge capacity and links to community resources,” allowing individuals and families easy access to a variety of local immediate and long lasting services. (Waugh & Streib, 2006, Pg. 2) The mission of the American Red Cross shows dedication to supporting and helping people who are experiencing extreme hardships; it states “the American Red Cross prevents and alleviates human suffering in the face of emergencies by mobilizing the power of volunteers and the generosity of donors.” (American Red Cross, 2012)

Working with communities is the broad spectrum of who the Red Cross really helps. Families of soldiers, soldiers at home and deployed, individuals and families experiencing disasters or crises, and those affect by natural disasters all benefit from the American Red Cross system in a variety of methods. All volunteers and staff put forth efforts to ensure that the American Red Cross, "can make available to primary care providers disaster-preparedness information and brochures developed to help adults, children, and families affected by natural, man-made, and technological disasters.” (Hamilton, 2004, Pg.1) Because of the need, this system is working to provide communities with any means of support and assistance that is made available.

Since the need is there and the demand can dramatically increase at any time with a major natural disaster, such as earthquake, hurricane, or tornado, it is important the American Red Cross also maintain their credentials for responding to emergency disasters. This will also maintain the continuance of the system

ensuring there is a way for an output to take place. In order for emergency response to be effective, there is much organization and planning involved ahead of time. It is ideal to “involve coordinating multiorganizational, intergovernmental, and intersectoral response and recovery operations.” (Waugh & Streib, 2006, p.4) Federal Emergency Management Association (FEMA) is one organization the American Red Cross must remain informed with and collaborate with during any national emergency. This is important to understand because it shows that the American Red Cross, though a system within itself, also holds a part in the larger system of emergency management.

The American Red Cross as a whole system can also indirectly affect many of the other systems around the world. It is important to keep in mind that when a volunteer or staff member of the American Red Cross assists an individual or a family, they are then ensuring the safety of that person(s) and making it possible for them to continue on with their lives, therefore allowing them to remain part of multiple other systems. This is true in any case, when one part of a system is affected, the system as a whole is affected.

Understanding how the American Red Cross system is interrelated to other systems also includes understanding how this agency intends to maintain their involvement while perpetuating their system through accessing and building on their strengths. The American Red Cross follows seven “fundamental principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity, and universality.” (Groscurth, 2011, p.5) These principles form a complex and

individualistic method of ensuring fair treatment to all who acquire services and provide specific and unique guidelines for determining the identity of the American Red Cross system. It is also the case that “since the events of September 11, 2001, the American Red Cross has examined its role in disaster and has developed strategic initiatives to increase volunteer capacity, provide up-to-date training, and develop greater collaboration with federal, state, and county agencies.” (Hamilton, 2004, Pg.2)

In September 2012, The American Red Cross found it important to maintain their relationship with communities around the country in a more indirect manner and released a free hurricane application (app) for mobile devices. This app can provide users special features such as locations of Red Cross shelters, tool kit with flash light, strobe light, and audible alarm, steps and checklists to create an emergency plan, and even preloaded information that allows you immediate access to critical action steps without mobile connectivity, as well as many more safety features. This app is serving the American Red Cross system as a perpetuating output which is constantly providing services to those who need it. It is only one of many ways the American Red Cross is currently reaching out to the community, helping people on a less direct level while preparing to respond to emergencies. (American Red Cross, 2012, p.1)

Though the strengths to this system are great, one cannot forget the limitations holding it back. Budget restraints are vast when it comes to the American Red Cross as each chapter is not given any funds from the government.

Chapters of the American Red Cross are required to raise their entire budget and rely strictly on donations by local businesses and community members. This can be incredibly challenging or incredibly worthwhile for the finance director currently employed at each chapter location. It is essential these individuals have a particular set of skills that will provide them with the ability to either maintain or increase the budget for their chapter. It is the responsibility of the finance director to ensure there is enough being done to promote donations being put toward the annual budget and future disaster relief. Whether or not funds are in place in turn determines if the volunteers and the chapter will have enough resources to help their community. This limitation has the highest capability to shut down the American Red Cross system at any given time.

There are also criticisms the Red Cross is faced with very frequently. A common worry in today's society is where donated money will be going. Donations may be made for the purpose of a specific disaster, such as super-storm Sandy, but many individuals are wary about exactly how much is getting put toward disaster relief. After September 11th, 2001, the American Red Cross came into some problems after the public found out that some of the victim relief money was being used for other "Red Cross needs." (American Red Cross Troubles, 2005) Examining this perspective from a systemic standpoint, I can understand the need to use some of these funds to provide chapters of the American Red Cross with essential materials such as office materials and future response materials, such as emergency vehicles. It is important to the system that funds are put back into the agency to

maintain its ability to perpetuate. However, though the idea may have seemed great, the vast majority of community members did not agree with it. In turn this damaged the trust in the American Red Cross therefore making it more difficult for the system to work forward in responding to disasters.

The local, national, and international trust in the American Red Cross also affects its system sustainability. With trust comes donations, but if the community is seeing something other than the good that is being produced those donations will begin to disappear, along with the resources available to the American Red Cross. It is equally important to maintain the image of an organizational system as it is to ensure there are enough inputs to the system to perpetuate it. When analyzing this relationship it can be determined that the image and trust in the system can be thought of as what starts the pattern of system continuance. It gives donors the idea that funding this agency will be beneficial to communities worldwide, proves that there is a need for the services, and then allows the agency to produce outputs and respond with available resources. As the trust in the American Red Cross builds up, the available resources grow similarly, and therefore perpetuating the system once more.

Since the Red Cross began in the mid 1880's this organizational system has continued to expand. The increasing need for services, building trust with the community, and increased community awareness have all contributed to creating and perpetuating this system. The American Red Cross has then been able to maintain and continue on through donation efforts, volunteer work, effective

disaster relief near and far, and community development. This organizational system has many factors that allow it to continue proving effective and worthy of each communities trust and sponsorship. As more disasters happen around the world, more wars continue to put people in danger, and more local crises affect the lives of individuals and families the American Red Cross system will continue to grow with the demand for services.

References:

American Red Cross Troubles. (2005). Retrieved from:

http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/health/july-dec05/redcross_12-14.html

American Red Cross. (2012). Red cross hurricane app brings safety information to smartphones. *Professional Safety*, 57(9), 19.

American Red Cross. (2012). Retrieved from: www.redcross.org

Groscurth, C. R. (2011). Paradoxes of privilege and participation: The case of the american red cross. *Communication Quarterly*, 59(3), 296-314.

doi:10.1080/01463373.2011.583498

Hamilton, S. E. (2004). Where are we now: A view from the red cross. *Families, Systems, & Health: The journal of Collaborative Family Healthcare*, 22(1), 58-60.

Holguin, Jaime. (2009). Disaster strikes in red cross backyard. Retrieved from:

http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-18563_162-516700.html

Medina, Carolyn. (2010). The red cross: Always there in a time of need. *Texas Public Health Journal*, 62(2), 41-42.

Waugh, W. L. & Streib, G. (2006). Collaboration and leadership for effective emergency management. *Public Administration Review*, 66131-140.

Doi:10.1111/j.1540-6210.2006.00673.x