

The Community in CERT

By Pablo Gonzalezⁱ

I recently had the opportunity to participate as an instructor in the *2018 U.S. – Mexico Community Emergency Response Team* training in Mexico City. The training was organized by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in collaboration with the Mexican National Center for Disaster Prevention (CENAPRED) and its National School of Civil Protection (ENAPROC). The Coordinator of the CERT Unit of the National Office for Emergency Management (ONEMI) of Chile was the leading instructor. And while in part I was invited in my capacity as of the Principal Specialist for Disaster Risk Management of the General Secretariat of the Organization of American States (OAS), I owe my participation to the Anne Arundel County and City of Annapolis CERT, where I proudly serve as a member and an Instructor of the Basic CERT course. So, my gratitude goes to Paul Bowling and Bruce Morgenstern, [AAACERT](#) President and Vice President, respectively, and all other officers who have made possible my participation in the AAACERT and have allowed me to continue my training in all aspects of CERT.

The training included the *CERT Train the Trainer* and the *Program Manager* courses; and the approximately 65 students included CENAPRED officers, members of the Mexican Red Cross, members of various municipalities' civil protection offices, as well as firefighters and paramedics from all across Mexico. All dedicated men and women who sacrifice time with their families, put aside their career and financial aspirations, and in many cases risk their lives every day to help other fellow citizens in Mexico; extraordinary human beings serving their communities and expecting nothing in return, but the satisfaction and self-realization of being part of a community.

And this brings me to the one issue that came up repeatedly during the week of training – what do we understand by community? When the students were asked what they understood by community, the most common answer was a group of people who live in a well limited geographic area or political-administrative unit – such as a municipality, county or city, a town or even a neighborhood. Some of the students defined it based on population, suggesting that a community was such a small group of people who knew each other and everybody in that geographic unit. Inevitably, some thought of community in the broader sense, which rather than being based on the geographic or political-administrative unit, is based on the shared values and goals of a group of people. In that regard, the scientific community comes to mind, as well as religious communities, or even communities of first responders or activists around a common cause who may not live in the same geographic area and instead they might be scattered across political-administrative boundaries, as far as nations and continents. For instance, I identify myself as a member of the AAACERT community, even when my residence is in

Arlington, Virginia, as I share the values of AACERT and its cause to make that community more resilient to disasters; I have ties to the community and a sense of belonging. And I am a member of the *Athletes Serving Athletes* community, a non-profit charity that serves individuals with motor disabilities, providing them with support, training, and mentorship so that they can experience life to the fullest, participating in mainstream races. Most members of the organization live in the states of Maryland and Pennsylvania, where they train together and work with sponsors. Though many, like me, live in Virginia and other neighboring states. Yet, we all share the values of an inclusive society and the cause of providing same opportunities to people with disabilities to be part of mainstream races and the passion for running.

So in order to develop a better understanding of what community means in the context of CERT, we need to examine the broader approach to emergency management within disaster risk management policies and programs. The *United Nations Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction* adopted by the UN in 2015, as the successor of the *Hyogo Framework for Action*, calls for the ‘participation of civil society, volunteers, organized voluntary work organizations and community-based organizations, in collaboration with public institutions, in the implementation of local, national, regional and global plans and strategies for disaster risk reduction.’ This framework is based on the premise that all disasters by definition are local. Disaster is defined by the *United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction*, [UNISDR](#), as “a serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society involving widespread human, material, economic or environmental losses and impacts, which exceeds the ability of the affected community or society to cope using its own resources.” It further goes to explain that disasters are a function of the *hazard*, the *exposure* of the ‘system’ –community, county, state or nation, its *vulnerability* and *capacity* to cope with its potential negative impact, and that “disaster impacts may include loss of life, injury, disease and other negative effects on human physical, mental and social well-being, together with damage to property, destruction of assets, loss of services, social and economic disruption and environmental degradation.”

Based on this definition, the less vulnerable and better prepared a community is the better chances that it will be able to manage the impact of a hazardous event without external assistance; in other words, more likely to avoid a disaster. And consequently, the challenge is to identify the smallest ‘system’ exposed and susceptible to disasters and get it prepared to mitigate and manage the impacts of a hazardous event, whether natural, chemical or industrial, or intentional (also referred to as manmade). Hence, these smallest ‘systems’, our communities in the CERT, must be inserted into larger systems, from counties to states, to even and often into nations and multi-country systems, and all within a bottom-up approach. This organization depends on the typology of the hazard, which defines the potential impact area –such as flood planes or volcanic eruption impact areas, to coastal areas susceptible to surge storms or tsunamis, and the type of onset and dynamic of the hazard. A case in point is the Pacific-wide distant warning system for

Pacific nations, which the UN coordinated following the Pacific-wide 1960 Chile tsunami and the USA hosts at the Honolulu Observatory, as the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center (PTWC). Collaboration among South American countries on the Pacific coast, from Chile to Colombia, is also being strengthened to prepare and respond to local tsunami that can be triggered by thrust earthquakes –the kind that is responsible for most tsunamis and particularly in the Americas Pacific Ocean coast, where tectonic plates move vertically up and down and displace water, creating a harmonic wave. Another case in point is the collaboration between Israel and Greece for distant and local tsunamis in the Mediterranean Sea; the collaboration between Argentina and Chile for wild fires and volcanic eruptions; and the many multi-country cooperation agreements and treaties around transboundary basins –such as La Plata and the Amazon basins in South America, and the Bravo River basin between Mexico and the USA, among many others.

FEMA and its Emergency Management Institute (EMI), when describing the CERT approach, refer to neighborhoods and workplaces, and throughout the Basic CERT course and its implementation, they broaden its application to schools, churches and synagogues and other religious communities, as well as any social group that share activities in common areas or facilities, and common values and pursue common causes. Based on this definition and the CERT approach, homes become the smallest ‘system’.

In the end, in the context of and for the purpose of CERT, we can say that a community is a group of people who live or perform activities, sharing values and a cause or mission, within a geographic area or facility that is exposed to hazards, for which a certain vulnerability might exist for them to prepare to reduce the risk of disaster and to respond in case of an event, so as to minimize the impact and increase their resilience –reducing the recovery time and coming out better off from the event.

Following these definitions and context, the CERT approach further requires a good identification of the hazards to which the ‘system’ or community is exposed and an understanding of their collective vulnerability and capacities so as to develop a program to reduce that vulnerability and increase their capacity. The size of the ‘system’ will vary depending on training and organizational needs within the institutional arrangements at higher levels, from state to federal, and as discussed in some cases to multinational.

In the end, the community in the CERT will need to meet two major requirements: (1) To understand their individual, family and collective risk –the hazards, their vulnerabilities and capacity to prevent and mitigate, and prepare for and respond to a disaster; (2) To possess the knowledge and skills to reduce their risk and to be able to respond when professional responders are not available or cannot access their location; and (3) To be organized within the Disaster Risk Management and Disaster Emergency Preparedness and Response formal systems in their counties and cities, states and federal government, and even multi-national systems, whenever they exist.

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He has over 25 years of experience in integrated water resources management (IWRM) in transboundary basins and in disaster risk management (DRM), as well as in applied GIS, remote sensing and image processing to natural resources management, with emphasis in conflict (over competitive uses of land and water) resolution. He has spent some time studying the differential roles and conditions of women and men in IWRM and DRM –defined around gender-related social constructions, and has a special interest in geopolitical strategies that define relationships among States and joint approaches to sustainable development.