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“They only think of civil defense when a disaster happens”: notes about institutional communication

“Solo se acuerdan de defensa civil cuando hay un desastre”:
notas sobre la comunicación institucional

“Só se lembram da defesa civil quando tem desastre”:
notas sobre a comunicação institucional

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Resumo

Um diagnóstico realizado com profissionais da área de proteção e defesa civil revelou que há uma demanda muito grande por reconhecimento social da profissão, sobretudo para ações que evitem ou minimizem as consequências dos desastres. Nos três níveis do Sistema Nacional de Proteção e Defesa Civil (Sinpdec) foram observadas lacunas em termos de Comunicação Institucional. Este artigo discute como a falta de comunicação feita pelos atores do Sinpdec para a população contribui para que eles sejam somente lembrados nos momentos de eclosão de desastres e encontrem dificuldades para obter o desejado reconhecimento social.

Palavras – Chaves: Comunicação Institucional; Proteção e Defesa Civil; Redução de Riscos e Desastres, Brasil

Abstract

A diagnosis carried out with professionals of civil defense pointed to a very high demand for social recognition and acknowledgement of the profession, especially for actions that avoid or minimize the consequences of disasters. In the three levels of the National System of Civil Defense and Protection (Sinpdec), gaps were observed regarding Institutional Communication. In this work we discuss the professionals' claims that they are only remembered in times of disasters and find it difficult to obtain the desired social recognition. We also analyze how the lack of communication from the Sinpdec actors to the population contributes to these related problems.

Key words: Institutional Communication; Civil Defense and Protection; Reduction of Risks and Disasters, Brazil

Resumen

Un diagnóstico realizado con profesionales del área de protección y defensa civil reveló que existe una demanda muy alta de reconocimiento social de la profesión, especialmente por acciones que evitan o minimizan las consecuencias de los desastres. En los tres niveles del Sistema Nacional de Protección y Defensa Civil (Sinpdec) se observaron vacíos en materia de Comunicación Institucional. Este artículo analiza cómo la falta de comunicación que hacen los actores del Sinpdec a la población contribuye a que solo sean recordados en tiempos de desastres y les resulte difícil obtener el reconocimiento social deseado.

Palabras clave: Comunicación Institucional; Defensa y Protección Civil; Reducción de Riesgos y Desastres, Brasil.

1 Introduction

The diagnosis on the capacities and needs of municipal civil defense and protection agencies, carried out by the Elos Project throughout 2021 (Marchezini et al., 2021), underlined that there is a demand for social recognition and acknowledgement from professionals in the area. On the other hand, there is little attention to communicating about all the work which is done when there is no disaster. In this work we present part of the communication gaps identified in the municipal, state and national systems that compose the National Civil Defense and Protection System (Sinpdec), concerning the communication of its mission, values and activities to society, highlighting the role of Institutional Communication to obtaining social recognition, and suggesting proposals to minimize the gaps and foster communication and acknowledgement.

The data presented in this text are part of a larger study, which included the application of questionnaires with 1993 answers, 15 virtual focus groups, and dozens of interviews with professionals of protection and civil defense and researchers of the area, in the five regions of the country (Marchezini et al., 2021). Specifically, considering the communication context of the Sinpdec, mappings, debates and interviews were carried out with those who carried out communication activities, independently on whether they were professionals in the area or not. The collected information was analyzed in a systematic way, guided by the contributions of the Communication Science to the identified weaknesses and envisioning propositions for improvement.

2 The Brazilian civil defense

At a global level, the beginning of civil defense is related to the Second World War, being at that time oriented towards “defense”, security and protection against bombing (Gorgulho, 2006). In the last decades, civil defenses have evolved in different ways in each country, with objectives and strategies that vary between them.

In Brazil, the National Civil Defense and Protection System (Sinpdec) is established by the Law 12.608/2012, created after the disaster in the mountainous region of Rio de Janeiro, when more than 1000 people (including deceased and missing), were affected by floods and landslides that occurred in January 2011. The aforementioned law instituted the National Policy for Civil Defense and Protection (PNPDEC) and also provides for the organization of Sinpdec.

According to the aforementioned law, the Sinpdec is composed of agencies and entities of the national, state, Federal District, and municipal public administration, in addition to other “public and private entities with significant performance in the area of civil defense and protection”. In its structure, there are:

- a consultative body, the National Council for Civil Defense and Protection (CONPDEC);
- a central body, defined in an act of the federal Executive Branch, with the purpose of coordinating the system;
- regional, state and municipal civil defense and protection bodies;
- sectoral bodies from the three spheres of government.

Also, “voluntary community organizations or other entities with a significant role in local civil defense and protection actions may participate in the SINPDEC” (Brasil, 2012).

In its general provisions, the PNPDEC points out, in its second article, that it is “the duty of the Union, the States, the Federal District and the Municipalities to adopt the necessary measures to reduce the risks of disaster” (Brasil, 2012). Thirteen competences are assigned to the Union, most of them related to communication actions and articulation with federated entities, such as: coordination of the Sinpdec, risk mapping actions, identification of hazards, susceptibilities, vulnerabilities and disaster risks, monitoring of various risks and warning issuing. Other actions do not explicitly mention this articulation with the federated entities, but are also related to communication: issuing rules for the implementation and execution of the PNPDEC; establishing:

- i) disaster information and monitoring system;
- ii) national registry of municipalities with areas susceptible to landslides and floods;
- iii) system for declaring and recognizing a situation of emergency or state of public calamity, as well as the criteria and conditions for this declaration.

We highlight the need to “promote”, “foster” and “support” the carrying out of studies, research and “development of didactic-pedagogical material related to the development of a culture of disaster prevention”, also mentioned in the document.

In relation to state bodies of civil defense and protection - some of them with secretarial status, others as Coordinations, and few as Superintendence - eight competences are attributed, which are similar to those attributed to the Union. Sixteen competences are assigned to the municipalities, including the actions of mapping and inspection of risk areas, building inspections, communication about risk areas and about prevention and warning protocols, mobilization and training of radio amateurs, simulations, organization of temporary shelters, damage assessment, promotion of social participation and training of volunteers, provision of temporary housing solutions, etc. It is important to highlight that the ninth article of the PNPDEC still assigns powers that must be fulfilled by the Union, States and Municipalities, such as the development of a national culture of disaster prevention, fostering of prevention behaviors, establishment of preventive measures in schools and hospitals located in risk areas, human resource training and provision of data and information for the national disaster monitoring and information system.

The PNPDEC points out 16 competencies addressed to municipalities, but it does not describe the means for implementing the actions, that is: it does not indicate how to do it, with what resources, with whom, in how much time, with what criteria, etc. Institutional vulnerabilities in municipalities illustrate part of the great challenge of building another institutional image on the attributions of civil defense and protection. The Municipal Basic Information Survey - Munic 2020, carried out by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, 2021), points out that 76.05% (4236) out of the 5570 municipalities have a municipal civil defense and protection agency, and in 27,4% of cases (1161 municipalities) the person responsible for coordinating civil defense works exclusively in this role. From the existing municipal civil defenses, only 22.8% (968) have provision for resources for civil protection and defense actions in the Annual Budget Law. Most of them do not have a minimum structure to perform their functions: 20% have a vehicle, 48.5% have a computer, 37.8% use identification vests.

In Brazil, the civil defense work includes risk and disaster reduction (prevention measures) and disaster response measures, acting at the municipal, state and national levels. Although the legislation related to Brazilian civil defense mentions preventive actions (Law 3,742 (1960), Decree 67,343 (1970), Decree-Law 83,839 (1970), Decree 97,274 (1988), Decree 895 (1993), Decree 5,376 (2005), Law 12,340 (2010), Law 12,608 (2012)), Valencio (2010) points out that, in practice, civil defense professionals prioritized the response and bureaucratic care of damage assessment. Even with this prioritization, several difficulties are described in the execution of these activities, such as the lack of structure and resources (Soriano, 2012), limiting the efficiency of the work:

The level of preparation of the municipal Civil Defense determines the behavior in the face of a disaster, that is, it determines if the municipality will be able to shelter and feed the affected population, if it will be able to mobilize the best workforce in the shortest time, whether it will have the agility to ask for external help and if it will know who to turn to (Braun, 2006, p. 16).

Marchezini (2011) shows the need to create a prevention culture, rather than improvisation, suggesting the inclusion of the theme of education for risk and disaster reduction in schools, the creation of channels for public participation and the promotion of transparency in public spending. Braun

(2006) also suggests promoting technical knowledge and capacity building to plan short and long term measures.

The self-identification and public identification of civil defense professionals as actors in risks and disasters is also a sensitive topic. In an interview with these professionals, Coutinho et al. (2015) report that more than half of the interviewees believe that the population confuses the attributions of civil defense with those of the municipal guard. Coutinho et al. (2015) also found that representatives of the municipal public power are still not clearly informed about the organization and hierarchy of civil defense.

Research on this topic indicates the importance of community participation and closer approximation between civil defense and communities (Tenan, 1974; Valencio 2009; USC/CEPED, 2012; Moura, 2011; Gonçalves, 2013). However, this is still a big challenge. The Survey MUNIC-2020 (IBGE, 2021) indicates that less than 10% of existing civil defenses work on creating NUPDECS - Community Centers for Civil Defense and Protection. Data analysis also indicates that civil defense organizations which organize educational practices aimed at raising awareness and perception of the risk situation in communities are scarce (16.7%). One of the ways to improve this relationship between civil defense and society is the use of social media, which are low-cost and very accessible communication channels.

3 Institutional Communication

The communication made by the institutions to their different audiences is important to disseminate to society what is being done, as a form of accountability and social sharing, and also to disseminate the true purpose that drives the organization. Political and social influence/recognition is sought through institutional communication, through trust and credibility, and the dissemination of information of public interest about the organization's practices, mission, guidelines and values. These communicative actions contribute to the construction of a good image (or reputation), associated with the idea of social recognition.

The image of an institution is often placed as its great asset (Brandão; Carvalho, 2010); after all, credibility is based on this public perception about its work and social impact. This process encompasses a series of strategies that aim to generate a positive perspective for public opinion and, consequently, acquire recognition of its role in society. Torquato (2015) points out that the ultimate goal of organizational communication is to generate consent, which is also aligned with the need for approval or favorable manifestation.

This immaterial, intangible asset corresponds to a certain type of symbolic capital that can be managed in situations of dispute of political or economic interests in favor of the institution. In a business context, it can be a positive extra factor and an attraction to obtain more customers. In the context of public management, it can be a justification for raising more resources.

It is noteworthy that a reputation requires support on physical, cultural, administrative, and historical components, and communication is essential to give visibility and projection to these aspects (Rêgo, 2015). When an institution spreads that it does something out of touch with reality, its reputation becomes negative, and the path for reversal can be quite arduous and long.

Those who act in this direction, in general, are the press officers, responsible for safeguarding the relationship between the institution and public opinion. It

is a practice that can be done directly through the institution's own channels (websites, social media pages, newsletters, etc.) or mediated by communication vehicles (especially journalistic ones) through the production of suggestions for topics.

The easy access and cheapness of internet channels have made social media increasingly present also in institutional environments. The relationship with its different audiences has been expanded and it is possible to be closer to the population. However, according to Gonçalves e Silva (2015, p.72), care must be taken with the way organizations show themselves to society: "[...] a bad internet management may cause much more damage than a bad administration inside the organization [...] given the speed of interactions and breadth of reach provided by digital technologies". It is not enough to create institutional spaces; they need to be properly planned to strengthen the relationship with the public and allow for an open and responsible dialogue.

In the case of the Sinpdec's institutional communication, the disaster risk communication model - Media CRD (Victor, 2015) is contemplated, as it concerns the use of the media by the civil defense, due to its outreach, power of ubiquity, speed and credibility to disseminate information to a wider audience on actions related to risks and disasters. Still from this perspective, aspects of public communication can be added, as pointed out by Prado (2021). For the author, the communication made by the civil defense professionals should also be guided by the axes indicated by Duarte (2011): transparency, access to information, interaction and social ombudsman (based on the interest in knowing and understanding public opinion).

Concerning the Sinpdec's institutional communication with its audiences, more than reinforcing the mission and objectives of civil protection and defense in Brazilian territory, we must pay special attention to risk management to avoid or minimize disasters, according to the National Policy for Civil Defense and Protection (Brasil, 2012). Therefore, the system's communication should be based on actions that consider the precautionary principle, to foster the development of a culture of disaster prevention. However, as we present in the next section, the reality of the agencies that work in this area reveals a mismatch between the legal provision and the conditions of action of the agencies of protection and civil defense today.

4 Structuring, capacity building and governance of civil defenses

The civil defense organizations which were consulted by the Elos Project pointed out that there are many challenges to be overcome for the proper implementation of the PNPDEC (Brasil, 2012). The realities of municipal civil defense agencies reveal that most teams consist of one or two people, and the coordinator of the agency often accumulates two functions or positions - with no exclusive dedication to the area (according to 59% of the responding municipalities). Besides the scarcity of human resources, the municipal civil defenses have, for the most part, few material resources: 67% responded that they did not have their own vehicle and 30% indicated that they did not have a computer/notebook.

The needs related to structuring are limiting to some base-actions and, thinking about communication actions, depend on good relations with other bodies or their own infrastructure. However, in these cases, civil defense issues are usually not treated as a priority, except when a supposed "normality" has been broken by some tragedy, and the focus is on the response. Usually other

bodies and entities are called only after a disaster occurrence and it is possible to observe the collective work foreseen in the Sinpdec presentation.

Considering the use of digital social media, the availability of the internet is essential - as it is a direct possibility of communication with the population - although it is not yet accessible to all professionals. Providing infrastructure alone, in most cases, is not enough for the communication channels to be periodically updated and achieve the objectives of connecting the population with the work of civil defense.

The lack of capacity building specifically addressed to Communication was also observed. Despite the existence of competencies that are strongly interconnected to the area, few specialist professionals are part of the Sinpdec and many who develop this kind of work have not had adequate training (or sought out training by their own means). Courses at the federal and state level were mapped, and specific actions were identified, such as live broadcasts over the internet, but no specific course that could guide professionals in the outreach of their actions or in the dissemination of prevention measures.

None of the participants interviewed by the survey at the municipal level reported knowing specific training to better work with the press, although they acknowledge that it could improve the understanding of managers and the population about the work carried out in the context of civil defense. Only in the case of professionals from the Fire Department, who perform activities in the area, it was mentioned that in the training course for officers there are instructions related to the area of Communication.

In addition to theoretical questions about what may or may not become news and how to approach journalists, training spokespersons is essential, to avoid that the contact with the press turns into another type of crisis. Either the lack of communication or the problems generated from insecurities can damage the image of the civil defense, especially when the institution is the main source of information for the press, as in the case of disasters. Some reports show that professionals learn in practice how to relate to journalists:

I had never spoken in front of a camera! Then, out of nowhere, you come across that many reporters wanting to interview... So, for me, it was complicated at first. I got nervous, I stuttered, I asked the person to stop... "No, let's record it again". Then the people [from the press] helped. (Research informant, 2021)

Training civil defense professionals to interact with the press and guide them on what should be publicized to the population are fundamental issues that should have space in basic management courses. And, of course, not just in times of emergency. The Sinpdec, as responsible for the civil defense throughout the country, needs to communicate constantly and effectively with its internal and external audiences, and maintain a tuned speech in the different spheres, consistent with the purpose of reducing disaster risks. To detach from the representations that associate professionals only with tragic periods, preventive activities need to be propagated. After all, if there is no concern with the image and/or reputation of the Sinpdec, how could the population be mobilized for simulations and other actions that require institutional trust? How to ask for recognition from managers about the work if nothing is communicated about the performed prevention work? How to spread a culture of prevention without articulating communication strategies?

Considering governance - the formal and informal mechanisms through which public and private actors relate to deal with a certain topic of common interest (Adams et al., 2020; Seixas et al., 2020) - it is important to note the lack of coordination of a national strategy, to address other Sinpdec's actors in promoting its mission and to contribute to the construction of an image that goes beyond the idea of first aid, which reduces the role of civil defense to the response, causing confusion with the functions performed by firefighters or social assistance.

While firefighters and social assistance have several codes in the Brazilian Classification of Occupations (CBO), in order to discriminate the attributions of each position within the scope of their services, the civil defense is not even registered with the CBO, representing an invisibility in the job market: it is not known what the civil defense does, nor how many people work in civil defense functions. This basic aspect of the communication of the institutional image has not even been resolved, despite the civil defense services having been created and recreated in the country decades ago, especially in the face of disasters that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s of the twentieth century.

5 Communicational diagnosis

One of the initial challenges of the research was to contact professionals from civil defense agencies, sometimes not even identified by the Main City Hall. It is noteworthy that this period coincided with the beginning of the new municipal management (after elections for City Mayor), which may have aggravated the lack of communication between municipal bodies, but it can not be an excuse for this situation. This aspect confirms conclusions from previous studies, such as those from Valencio (2012) and Londe et al. (2015).

It was identified that in the municipal system, civil defense actions are usually reported by the City Hall's press office, along with the communication demands from other bodies and departments. The same is true at the state level - where there are several coordinators that depend on the government's press office - and at the national level, because the press office of the Ministry of Regional Development (MDR) responds to the communication needs of the National Civil Defense Secretariat (Sedec), among other matters. In the latter case, it was found that there are various entry topics on the site (Regional and Urban Development; Mobility and Urban Services; Sanitation; Housing; Irrigation; São Francisco River Integration Project; Regional Funds and Tax Incentives; and Protection and Civil Defense), which receive different emphases. This scenario reveals that the institutional communication in the Sinpdec receives peripheral and fragmented attention, derived from the lack of professionals dedicated exclusively to communication in all spheres of the system, hindering a recurrent dissemination of civil defense actions (and, consequently, impacting in the social recognition of the activity). The lack of communication professionals who prioritize the topic ends up limiting effective strategies towards a culture of prevention.

Another finding is that the structure of communication addressed to the external public is usually more precarious in small municipalities, which often do not even have a computer (IBGE, 2021). In the more structured civil defenses, it is possible to find newsletters and social media accounts fed by the agents themselves, who do so on their own initiative and interest (specific training courses in Communication for professionals were not found).

The survey participants showed concern about raising awareness among

the population and managers in relation to risk and disaster management, reinforcing that they do not want to be remembered only when disasters occur. At different times during the diagnosis work (Marchezini et al., 2021), professionals stated that both the population and managers understand their work as only response measures when a disaster breaks out. It reveals a series of frustrations, because all the work for disaster risk reduction is not considered. In addition to claiming resources for these activities - according to Liberato (2016), from 2005 to 2014, the Union spent R\$ 6 billion on actions in the area, but only R\$ 147.7 million (2,46 % of the total investment) was allocated to prevention - there were complaints about the usual lack of visibility, which is also related to the lack of training to promote these agendas in the media.

This panorama is, in different ways, intertwined with the existing neglect in relation to communicative efforts aimed at civil defense. The word "communication" is not always mentioned, but the actions desired by professionals depend on this process (mobilizing the secretariats and agencies of the city hall, attracting volunteers, promoting self-protection and warning actions, etc.). Therefore, those who work in civil defense identify a gap in terms of understanding the role of civil defense, even internally, in public management structures.

For the production of another institutional image - which may even support material and symbolic resources for a better performance - the dissemination to different audiences about the functioning of the Sinpdec and its mission is urgent. The PNPDEC turns 10 in April 2022, but its implementation remains problematic. The lack of communication about the competences, actions and difficulties of Brazilian civil defense also hinder public debate and society's own understanding of who could have avoided or reduced the damages of a disaster.

6 Concluding Remarks

Considering the diagnosis survey, it is necessary to pay more attention to institutional communicational aspects (oriented towards the communication of the Sinpdec with its audiences), since professionals are, above all, articulators and coordinators of actors and actions that involve all stages of the disaster management cycle, but claim recognition from managers and the population. Good communication strategies are a requirement for the efficient development of civil defense work, both to respond to a disaster, and to involve different audiences in mitigation actions and in the promotion of a culture of prevention.

To shift the image of civil defense from those who act or are remembered only in critical events to those who act in all phases of disaster management, as a desire manifested by the research participants, it is necessary to disseminate skills and operations linked to prevention (because those associated with disasters will continue to be covered by the press due to its newsworthiness criteria). Communication must permeate the different levels, as provided in the PNPDEC on Sinpdec, so that public entities recognize the role of disaster risk management and act in favor of protecting lives. The promotion of the institution to the population, showing its objectives and limits, can also contribute to a broader discussion on a preventive culture, which is indispensable in the face of the intensification of the climate crisis.

It is important to note that the recommendations of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR, 2015) point to the need to develop people-centered approaches, which apply to both structural and non-structural disaster risk management measures. To develop people-centered

approaches, it is essential to invest in communication, starting with the institutional image that is disseminated in complex governance arrangements. In those arrangements, many times, anonymous actors disseminate false information that compromises the image and performance of the institution. In this process, institutional reputation becomes even more compromised in disaster scenarios, where the image of civil protection and defense is under rubble, without any clarity on what it actually does or should do. The culture of improvised responses to disasters (Valencio, 2012; Marchezini, 2015) ends up reflecting on the institutional image of the civil defense. Without a systemic communication, the civil defense only appears publicly at the time of tragedies and is forgotten soon - just like the deceased and disappeared who cannot claim how important it would be to have a structured civil defense.

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