

## Safety Status in Kenya's Learning Institutions

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**Abstract:** *Disasters of various kinds have been witnessed in various learning institutions (both private and public) in Kenya for many years. Indeed, disasters disrupt the process and undermine quality of services and loss of lives. This paper ventilates on certain aspects in regard to learning institutions preparedness in handling adversities of various forms. The question here is: Are learning institutions adequately prepared to cope with disasters of all sorts? The main findings from secondary data is that learning institutions are not sufficiently prepared to handle disasters or emergency situations. Recommendations made include developing a coherent safety and disaster/emergency preparedness policy and carrying out sensitization for all key stakeholders within and without learning institutions on issues pertaining to Disaster and Emergency preparedness. It is expected that the findings of this paper will provide insightful reference that learning institutions and stakeholders can rely on in regard to emergency preparedness and management for purposes of instituting procedures that will deter adverse effects of disasters, frequently witnessed in our learning institutions.*

**Key words:** *Disaster, emergency, learning institutions, preparedness*

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### I. Introduction

Disasters have always co-existed with civilization. According to UNDP (2008), there is no Country that does not stand the threat of a disaster, though they may be threatened at different levels. Disaster is a serious disruption of the functioning of the society causing widespread human, psychological, material or environmental damage and losses which exceed the ability of the affected community to cope with using their own resources (ISDR, 2002). Munyasi (2002) notes that disasters such as earthquakes, floods, lightning, drought, and fire have an effect on child care, health, nutrition, water supplies, hygiene and sanitation, food production, shelter and security. Due to the great negative impact disasters have on the lives of those affected, there is an urgent need for improved disaster reduction strategies.

Disaster occurrences greatly hamper the education process in many ways, with human loss and injury, social upheaval, school property damage and closings, psychological torture, and often with children having to leave school for long periods in the recovery period - their families needing their help in meeting basic needs (FEMA, 2007). Kenya is one of the most vulnerable developing countries to suffer very often from various natural as well as human-made disasters which strike causing a devastating impact on human life, economy and environment (Alexander, 2002). These disasters include drought, floods, fires, landslides, transportation accidents, terrorist attacks and the post- election violence to mention but a few. For instance, during the 1997–1998 El Niño events, most parts of Kenya received 2 to 12 times the monthly long-term mean rainfall amount (Karanja and Mutua, 2000). The heavy rainfall resulted in floods and landslides in various parts of the Country (Ngecu and Mathu 1999), with consequent effects on education sector as well as loss of lives.

In addition to natural disasters, Kenya experiences a number of man-made disasters in schools. For instance, several fatal incidences and frequent violence in schools have brought an urgent need for the Government and the public to take action and deal with the problem of violence in our learning institutions and the youth in general (Republic of Kenya, 2001). In 1998 there was the Bombolulu Secondary School disaster in which 23 girls were burnt to death. Then in 1999 there was the Nyeri High School tragedy where fellow students attacked and killed four prefects. There have also been many rape & sodomy cases and road accidents involving school buses where precious young lives have been lost or seriously injured or pupils/students emotionally devastated, Infernos witnessed in schools have left school administrations with little to do to handle the disasters. Such tragedies seem to suggest that schools are not adequately prepared or are ill-equipped to deal with disasters. However, it is the degree of preparedness of the institution's entire system that makes the difference. Most learning institutions in Kenya have put up enough measures such as Fire fighting equipment, security checks and registration at the gate, perimeter fence among others; however, the sufficiency of these measures need to be evaluated.

## **II. Statement of the Problem**

Kenya's disaster profile is dominated by droughts, fire, floods, terrorism, accidents, diseases and epidemics that disrupt people's livelihoods, destroy the infrastructure, divert planned use of resources, interrupt economic activities and retard development (National disaster policy 2009). Each year people die or are seriously injured as a result of fires at their workplaces. Prominent disasters in Kenya include the Kyanguli Secondary School fire in Machakos where 58 students perished in a night inferno started by some students using petrol (Ministry of Education, 2001), the Garissa university terrorist attack, bomb scare in Nairobi university that left many learners seriously injured, Night infernos, sodomy & rape claims, kidnapping of pupils/students from school, missing of learners from boarding schools, flooding due to heavy downpour and heavy winds blowing off schools. However, during cases of emergencies, many victims lose their lives due to ill preparedness of the various institutions. Therefore, one wonders how well our learning institutions are prepared in handling emergency cases and how effective the measures in place are.

## **III. Literature review**

### **System Theory**

The central argument of this theory is that actors interact in statuses and develop agreements to sustain patterns of interaction that according to Turner (1991) became institutionalized. Institutionalization leads to relatively stable patterns of interaction among factors in status. The theory is based on the view that society is a system with interconnected institutions, which have specific functions for ensuring stability and harmony within the system. Turner (1991) notes that a social system and its constituent parts can only be understood by assessing how each part contributes to the systematic whole. This calls for team learning to help keep individual members focused on their collective potential, building alignments to enhance the teams, capacity to think and act in a new synergy. In an organization like learning Institutions, each and every stakeholder, ministries of education, security, health & gender, learners, parents, staff and the schools' immediate environment, are vital in the attainment of the overall institution safety, particularly in combating disasters.

It is, therefore important, to have all the concerned parties in flawless working relationship and high alert for them to contribute appropriately in the whole institution safety. This paper is based on this theory to underscore the collective responsibility of all concerned stakeholders with respect to combating calamities of all sorts in our learning institutions.

## **IV. Methodology**

This study consisted of survey of secondary data concerning disasters in Kenya in respect to disaster awareness, perception and preparedness of the entire system.

## **V. Results and discussion**

Training of students and staff should be focused on the four recognized phases of emergency management for learning institution; namely prevention/mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery, (Borland, 2008). As Nderitu (2009) recommended, the Government should strive to assist the school authorities to adequately prepare for school disasters by introducing disaster management training in all teacher training institutions and in-service courses for others. Practice drills and exercises should be conducted frequently (at least twice a term). Kelly (2010) recommended that practice drills should be taken seriously because through practice, the students and teachers and other staff learn what to do and how to behave in an emergency. Nderitu (2009), while investigating the implementation of safety standards Guidelines in Secondary schools, found out that headteachers were not trained on disaster management nor was the school community. Okumbe, (2001) points out that an effective safety programme should seek to provide people with the much-needed information on what to do, what not to do and who else to do what in order to enhance safety in disaster management training. Kimathi (2011) revealed that most schools did not set aside funds for emergencies in the event of a disaster. It is worth noting that most schools suffer financial flow crisis thus cannot set aside funds for emergencies. Although the Ministry of Education is subsidizing secondary education, these funds proved to be insufficient besides being disbursed late. Kimathi further says that there has been remarkably little attention devoted to disaster preparedness and management in schools which exposes the school community members to disasters some of which can be avoided.

According to Kimathi, 86.7% of the schools have installed fire extinguishers. However, he noted that fire alarms (83.3 %), lightning arresters (96.7%) and smoke detectors (91.7%) were inadequate in the schools. In addition, the disaster preparedness facilities and equipment were not repaired at all as indicated by 61.7% of his respondents while 68.4% of the schools did not have emergency exit doors nor wide stair ways.

Nderitu (2009) notes that despite the stringent safety measures put in place by schools, disasters still occur. However, it is the degree of preparedness of the schools' entire system that makes the critical difference. It is, therefore, imperative that educational stakeholders foster disaster preparedness to either minimize or

eliminate risky conditions or threats. Kimathi (2009) states that various parties will have to work together by pooling resources, which may include joint training and safety committees as they all continually affect each other and operate towards a common purpose of mitigating disasters and its effects.

According to KNHCR report (2014) on state of security in Kenya, it was reported that as a result of the insecurity and violent attacks, some schools have been vandalized and displaced children have been unable to attend school. The report further indicates that in 2012 following an inter-ethnic conflict in the Tana-River, the Commission found out that the violence and subsequent displacement happened when schools were about to reopen for the final term of the school calendar where candidates at primary and secondary schools were expected to be sitting for the Kenya Certificate for Primary Education and Kenya Certificate for Secondary Education national examinations. Despite assurances from local administrators that the Government was liaising with Kenya National Examination Council (KNEC) to ensure that all candidates in the area sat for their exams, there were media reports that more than 100 candidates could not be traced as KCSE examinations were underway. Numerous educational facilities were damaged or vandalized during the violence in Tana River, while others were converted into temporary operation bases for GSU officers. 9 primary schools with a student population of 2705 and 1 secondary school with about 120 students were affected. Hundreds of pupils were displaced, while at least one teacher, was killed during the violence.

## **VI. Conclusion**

These findings indicate that the importance placed on matters pertaining to emergencies within learning institutions is relatively low and hence there is need for concerted effort to roll out a well-orchestrated awareness campaign and should not be a one-off affair. The results further show that there is sufficient number of obstacles that need be addressed to improve effectiveness of emergency preparedness measures. This means that despite the fact that every institution is a candidate of disaster, most institutions are ill equipped hence there is need for synergy from all stakeholders towards emergency preparedness measures as they play a key role in enhancing safety of our learning institutions.

## **Recommendations**

There is need for every learning institution to boost emergency preparedness measures to enhance its safety and that of its customers. It is the opinion of the author that based on the findings of this paper it is necessary for Learners, school staff, parents and all stakeholders to share the same vision regarding the role of each party in view of this issue. Learning institutions should maintain a mutual relationship with all stakeholders, this will be geared towards creating ownership sensation about the institution who would then work towards mitigating disaster and in unfortunate event they will work harmoniously to counter the disaster and arrest its effects. The Government through the disaster management programme should empower learning institutions to put up infrastructure, measures and instill capacity on matters pertaining disaster preparedness and conduct regular audits on the adequacy and efficiency of measures in place.

The Government should ensure school managements strictly implement safety guidelines outlined in the Government policies and reports commissioned by the Government on the same matter, hefty penalties should be instituted to defaulters of these guidelines.

Ministry of education in collaboration with its stakeholders should develop a practical coherent safety and disaster/emergency preparedness policy and carry out intensive sensitization for all key stakeholders within and without learning institutions on issues pertaining to Disaster and Emergency preparedness.

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