Ami J. Abou-bakr, *Managing Disasters through Public-Private Partnerships*  
(Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013)  
Reviewed by Austen D. Givens

A massive tornado tore a seventeen-mile path through Moore, Oklahoma on May 20, 2013, tragically killing twenty-four people and injuring over three hundred.1 Response efforts began immediately, and partnerships between government entities and businesses played a significant role in those efforts. For example, the Ford Motor Company donated $400,000 to local charities, including the American Red Cross, which worked closely with first responders to help survivors.2 The Home Depot gathered three hundred employees in Dallas, Texas, including plumbers and general contractors, and then bussed them to Moore to assist in recovery operations.3 With numerous cell phone towers destroyed in the Moore area, the wireless phone company Sprint provided cell phones to local first responders and set up mobile cell phone towers on trucks to boost service coverage.4 These examples of public-private sector cooperation and collaboration after the Moore tornado are part of a broader trend in which businesses and government agencies work together before, during, and after disasters. Ami J. Abou-bakr’s *Managing Disasters through Public-Private Partnerships* is easily the most comprehensive scholarly work on this topic to date.

Abou-bakr first traces the development of disaster-oriented PPPs from the late 1990s through 2005. Beginning with the Clinton administration, she systematically reviews the major milestones in the federal government’s evolving view of public-private partnerships in US national security. The first chapter of *Managing Disasters* covers the enormous number of post-9/11 changes in government, including the huge federal reorganization that led to the US Department of Homeland Security’s creation in 2002. Readers will find her detailed accounts of Verizon’s role in re-opening the New York Stock Exchange and Wal-Mart’s contributions to Hurricane Katrina relief refreshing and engaging. They add new insights from interviews with key Verizon and Wal-Mart officials, and her narrative style helpfully mixes these new insights with sharp, clear analyses.

In Chapter 2 Abou-bakr establishes an analytical framework for disaster-oriented PPPs today. This framework, which she developed based upon more than two dozen interviews with senior public and private sector leaders in emergency management, consists of seven critical factors: crisis, leadership, organizational structure, information sharing, shared benefits, trust, and adaptability or sustainability. Her analytical framework takes its place alongside a number of other frameworks developed to assess public sector partnerships with non-public sector entities.6 Through the balance of Chapter 2 she uses this framework to evaluate the current status of federal disaster-oriented PPPs, weaving in multiple case studies to illustrate the broad impact that disaster-oriented PPPs have on emergency management today. These cases make for fascinating reading, and include descriptions of FedEx’s role after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the shipping company Maersk’s efforts to combat piracy off the
coast of Africa, and the Walt Disney Company’s use of character actors in shelters for Hurricane Katrina survivors (pp. 50-51, 60, 70).

Using the analytical framework developed in Chapter 2, Chapters 3 and 4 explore two examples of historical frameworks for public-private partnerships that could be used as models to improve today’s federal disaster-oriented PPPs. From the late eighteenth century through the early twentieth century there were three separate attempts to create a national banking system in the United States (p. 93). The Federal Reserve, which Abou-bakr examines in Chapter 3, came about largely as a reaction to the panic of 1907—a national economic crisis that underscored the need for a central banking system (pp. 94-95). Yet the Fed’s creation was hardly an isolated reaction to a single crisis; it was, as she puts it, “[t]he culmination of decades of disjointed banking regulation and a changing national economy,” coupled with the panic of 1907, that ultimately brought forth the Federal Reserve system as we know it today. While Congress did not pass legislation forming the Fed until 1913—a full six years after the panic—the notion of “crisis as a catalyst for change” is clear here, and the parallels with the huge federal government structural reforms after 9/11 are self-evident (p. 96). The Fed, in Abou-bakr’s analysis, represents a strategic partnership between the federal government and the private sector, because its goals are ultimately focused on longer-term economic health. Although the Fed can and does intervene to bolster the US economy, its longer-term focus means that it ultimately works to prevent economic crises from happening in the first place (p. 117).

Chapter 4 presents the War Industries Board (WIB) as an example of a responsive, rather than strategic, partnership between government and businesses. From March to November 1918 the WIB existed for a single purpose: to lend private-sector know-how to US government preparedness for World War I (pp. 130-32). It was in this context that the WIB mobilized American industry to support the war effort, helping to produce and deliver basic supplies and munitions to U.S. military personnel (pp. 136-38). Although the WIB existed for less than a year, it played a valuable part in organizing the private sector’s resources to meet federal government needs. The singular purpose of the WIB stands in sharp contrast to the Fed, for the WIB was created solely to mobilize the United States in wartime, and the WIB was dissolved when the war ended (p. 158). The Fed, meanwhile, continues to play an enormous role in steering the US economy today.

In Chapter 5 Abou-bakr compares and contrasts the Fed and the WIB against the backdrop of today’s disaster-oriented PPPs. There is an “identity crisis,” she argues, in which modern federal disaster-oriented PPPs share traits of both strategic partnerships (i.e., the Fed) and responsive partnerships (i.e., the WIB) (pp. 188-89). This identity crisis hampers the effectiveness of disaster-oriented PPPs. Without a clear and shared sense of what disaster-oriented PPPs are supposed to achieve, the organizational structure of disaster-oriented PPPs remains ill-defined (p. 191). Although federal disaster-oriented PPPs should address strategic, long-term disaster response needs, at present, these PPPs are actually more responsive in nature. Abou-bakr maintains that it will likely take a catastrophe bigger than 9/11 or Hurricane Katrina to ultimately reconcile this tension between strategic and responsive disaster-oriented PPPs (p. 193). Such a catastrophe would rivet the nation’s attention, generating the political will necessary to tackle and resolve many of the messy organizational problems that plague disaster-oriented PPPs.

Managing Disasters skillfully explores the current status of federal disaster-oriented PPPs and exposes two of the central problems with disaster-oriented PPPs: the lack of consensus on what these partnerships are supposed to be, and what they are supposed to achieve. Managing Disasters also suffers from several shortcomings. First, it does not offer detailed prescriptions to heal federal disaster-oriented PPPs of their identity crisis. Instead, as Abou-bakr notes, “I do not purport to provide ‘the solution’ but I hope to provide a foundational first step in the development of a comprehensive and viable way forward for disaster-oriented PPPs” (p. 197). Yet Managing Disasters clearly sets the stage for at least a preliminary discussion of
“the solution.” What would an act of Congress that re-orient responsive disaster-oriented PPPs look like? What government regulatory mechanisms may be used to move disaster-oriented PPPs from a responsive posture to a strategic outlook? A second issue is that Managing Disasters focuses overwhelmingly on federal disaster-oriented PPPs, and not state or local disaster-oriented PPPs. This federal focus is understandable, as federal disaster-oriented PPPs are generally more developed than state or local disaster-oriented PPPs. But even a limited exploration of state and local disaster-oriented PPPs would add greater depth to this book. A third shortcoming is that the book returns again and again to 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina to illustrate the ways that federal disaster-oriented PPPs function. A more expansive examination of other large-scale emergencies, and the roles that disaster-oriented PPPs played in those other large-scale emergencies, would provide a more robust sense of how these disaster-oriented PPPs work in the context of other types of crises.

The world’s growing interconnectedness means that even smaller-scale disasters will tend to impact greater numbers of people as time goes on. This “cascade effect,” in which a crisis in one part of the world can quickly affect systems in other parts of the world, will require excellent cooperation and collaboration amongst many diverse actors. Disaster-oriented PPPs hold great promise as a tool to facilitate this cooperation and collaboration. Managing Disasters through Public-Private Partnerships delivers the most compelling analysis yet of how disaster-oriented PPPs can help us to deal with increasingly complex crises, and how to begin to make these partnerships more effective in the future.

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