In the wake of more frequent, more intense natural disasters, several US companies have begun hiring staff with public-sector crisis management expertise to better navigate the risks. One such company is Wal-Mart Stores, Inc., whose Senior Director of Global Emergency Management, Mark Cooper, has more than 20 years of public-sector experience.

Walmart is one of 14 multinational companies from a variety of industries that have developed leading approaches to disaster-risk preparedness and response. The companies are part of a collaborative public-private sector initiative—led by the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR)—to raise global awareness of natural hazards and risk resilience.

Over the next decade, UNISDR will leverage private sector disaster-management solutions on an international scale in collaboration with public- and private-sector participants—with the goal of creating risk-resilient societies worldwide.

**Interview with Mark Cooper**

**Walmart takes collaborative approach to disaster recovery**

In the early 2000s, after 9/11, we established the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) for Walmart in Bentonville, Arkansas, our corporate headquarters. We identified the company functions that are important before, during, and after a disaster. And we converged those functions to provide the most effective support to our stores and field divisions.

Some of our divisions have their own EOCs that work in partnership with our corporate EOC. And in addition to our regular distribution centers, we actually have disaster distribution centers, located mostly in those areas that are at high risk for a disaster.

We also have an in-house meteorologist who interprets weather data provided by government agencies (such as the National Weather Service or the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration)—so we have up-to-the-minute information we can use to guide our decisions.

But at the end of the day, what allows Walmart to be prepared to respond to disasters is our people. In an emergency, they don't have to make a request up through the system because we've trained and empowered them to make their own decisions; we know they're going to do what's right during a disaster.

Our research at PwC shows that one of the major concerns of CEOs is the threat of national disaster disrupting a major manufacturing or trading hub. What steps has Walmart taken to address business continuity for your distribution centers and supply chain?

We've identified company functions—and that includes operations in the stores—that are critical to business continuity. Each of those functions is required to have a business continuity plan, which includes us helping them to identify what risks are involved.

We've been able to make business continuity part of the annual strategic planning process for the company, so that in addition to identifying other
events that might occur that could impact sales in the stores, we also include potential natural- and man-made hazards.

We also work with our suppliers to make sure they’re going to meet minimal standards, because if they’re not able to provide the goods we need, then—even if we have the best continuity plans as a company—that’s going to impact our ability to recover from a disaster.

**How do you coordinate operations once a disaster occurs?**

As far as the operational rhythm surrounding a disaster, we’ll bring together the relevant functions and decision-makers. We’ll have conference calls to identify the issues they’re facing. And then based on those calls, the EOC in Bentonville will go into execution mode.

Emergency replenishment and transportation are essential; once we identify what we’re going to send out to the stores, we do everything we can to get those trucks going back and forth with those supplies.

We work closely with the power companies, because knowing when the power’s going to come back online becomes a major issue for us during a disaster, especially during a hurricane.

We partnered with them on a number of initiatives, including working with Walmart pharmacies in the coastal parishes of Louisiana on preparedness messaging. We could reach out to 60,000 or so residents who got their prescriptions filled at Walmart—to promote the State of Louisiana’s “Get a Game Plan” campaign for preparedness.

More than 140 million Americans visit a Walmart each week so we’ve got a lot of reach there. In 2012, prior to Hurricane Sandy, we partnered with states such as California, Texas, Massachusetts, and New York on the preparedness front, working with our local Walmart and Sam’s Club stores to promote preparedness.

Not only did it help those communities to be better prepared, it also helped our associates to be better prepared. It set us up to handle the next disaster, which happened to be Hurricane Sandy. Because we already had those relationships in place, we could get our stores open more quickly. And from the government’s perspective, the sooner they can bring businesses back online, the fewer resources they need to expend in support of recovery in those communities.

**What kinds of issues?**

One of our main concerns during Hurricane Sandy was trying to get generators from point A to point B in order to get our stores reopened. Well, many states have regulations that prohibit certain weight limits going across their highways.

Having that relationship with those states helped us to work through the red tape to get items like generators across state lines so that we could reopen our stores sooner—which helps local communities recover more quickly. It brings a sense of normalcy to the community when the local Walmart reopens after a disaster. So that’s something we’ve prided our company on.

**How else do you partner with the government?**

I’m a big supporter of public-private partnerships; they’re mutually beneficial. When I worked for the State of Louisiana post-Katrina, we were looking to see what we needed to do differently in preparing for, responding to, and recovering from hurricanes. Walmart was an early contact for us on the preparedness front.