

## **Communication challenges in multi-authority emergencies**

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This paper discusses the special features and conditions characterizing the *communication* of public organisations in different phases of crisis management, i.e. prevention, mitigation and reconciliation. It also aims to define challenges of performance in the multi-authority rescue *networks*, within which governmental and other organisations are involved. In this paper, the concept of crisis is equated to emergencies and disasters.

Today's world is characterized by uncertainty and risks that threaten the safety of society. Risks by definition are matters of uncertainty. Environmental, economical, technical, and societal risks have become part of our normal life. In addition, the consequences of crises have enlarged and become more severe. Not all crises can be foreseen but management of perceivable risks may mitigate the serious effects of them.

Crises affect many, their consequences are negative and severe, and fast communication is required. Many crises are multidimensional and develop fast. Because of the unpredictability and uncertainty, crises are hard to manage. Intrinsically public sector crises involve multiple actors. Different from organisational crises, civil crisis management does not aim at image restoration and protection of business functions. Core publics of civil crises are vulnerable and affected civilians. Risk perception and reception of information in stressful situations make crisis communication challenging.

One critical point in multi-authority networking is efficient coordination and collaboration. Networks are strategic alliances or partnerships, which are connected for accomplishing particular tasks. Multi-authority networks consist of three categories of organisations involved. The first category embodies obligatory members, which have legal obligation to participate in security situations. The second includes members involved because of their sphere of authority, e.g. safety authorities. The third category covers organisations providing voluntary support, like NGOs. Research indicates that problems within the network are mainly caused by shortcomings in coordination and collaboration.

Another critical aspect is limitations like the slowness of communication, which has been especially underlined in the era of online media. The hierarchical structure makes networks unable to respond to the challenges of rapid communication. Therefore, their operation might be reflected through sociological network theory, which explains how efficiency is based on proper, flexible and scalable functioning of all nodes of the network. Many organisations responsible for societal security have a top-down, pyramid-shaped structure that does not facilitate rapid communication and respond. According to network theory, networks function adequate when they are constructed horizontally.

The purpose of this paper is to further identify the bottlenecks in crisis communication. It also scrutinizes whether crisis management should focus on the improvement of network functions: i.e. low hierarchy and shared management, media use and communication practises. This might increase a network's ability to respond to constant and rapid changes in the environment and improve communication with publics.

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