

The future of governance for societal security and crisis management

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Abstract

Organizing for societal security and crises management is a main responsibility for government authorities that is difficult to fulfill. It tests the limits of what bureaucratic organizations are mandated to handle. This is especially true for transboundary crises which are difficult to predict and handle. Organizing for crises management is not only a question of governance capacity but also one of governance legitimacy. A main lesson learned is that there is no single best way to organize for crises management. While coordination arrangements are necessary, type of crises and national contexts must also be addressed.

We live in turbulent times and the world is perceived as increasingly insecure, dangerous and characterized by unruly problems. Major crises strike at the core of democracy and governance and hence constitute challenges not only for capacity but also for legitimacy and trust. A well-functioning democracy needs an effective administrative apparatus as well as a high level of trust in government.

This places organizing for societal security and crisis management high on the political agenda for both developed and developing countries. Societal security and crisis management, therefore, is critical for political leaders, administrative executives and public administration in general, and leads to public criticism and debate.

This paper will present some core concepts on how to understand organizing for societal security and crisis management followed by findings from an international comparative project to highlight the importance of this topic. The focus is on crises management in civil society, leaving military and related security issues aside, and mainly addresses the strategic at the central government level rather than the operational at the local government level.

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1) Characteristics of the policy area

Crisis management is defined as the sum of activities aimed at minimizing the impact of a crisis. It is the process by which an organization deals with a crisis before, during and after it has occurred. It has a functional dimension addressing technical and professional features, as well as a political function which includes political facets, conflicts, and legitimacy.

Crisis management is a core government responsibility that is often difficult to fulfill. Equally difficult for public authorities is the challenge of planning and preparing for the unexpected and unknown, while meeting the demands and expectations of the citizenry. These test the limits of what bureaucratic public administration systems are designed to do.

There is limited academic research on how to design public administration to protect citizens against crises and from transboundary threats. Instead of studying unsettled situations and crises, public administration research has focused more on settled, stable and routine situations. This creates a gap which needs to be reduced.

Public policy or organizational studies focusing on public administration in crisis management are also not very common. As these studies have been left to crisis management experts, there is now a need to mainstream the field because we do not have a tested general public administration theory on this topic.

A general theory that can explain the causes of all crises, how they are best managed and by way of which organization does not exist; it is unrealistic to search for one. Thus, we need to distinguish between veracious types of crises and situations. This means that not only does context become pivotal but the authorities will need to go beyond the generic approach and apply middle range theories to grasp the complexities of crisis management.

Crisis can be seen as threats to core values or life-sustaining systems which require urgent responses under conditions of deep uncertainty.

Major crises are increasingly transcending national borders as well as policy areas and administrative levels. They are difficult to predict and difficult to handle and are perceived as ‘wicked problems’ characterized by complexity, uncertainty and ambiguity. Crises often challenge existing patterns of organization and management. They do not fit easily into established organizational contexts, and are framed and reframed. There is often a mismatch between the organizational structure and the problem structure which makes crises difficult to handle. In more turbulent times, when a crisis is unexpected, difficult to handle, wicked and unruly, quick improvisation, flexibility and resilient arrangements are needed.

2) An organizational approach

Organizations matter for effective crises management. Organizing is not only a technical, logistic issue but also a political one involving accountability, power relations, values, blame games, and mobilization of biases. Some problems and solutions are addressed, some are ignored and some are counteracted. If we want to understand crisis management we need to understand how formal organizations work in practice. It is important to study ‘living’ institutions and not only how they work on paper from a legal point of view or how they are supposed to work from a normative point of view. An organizational theory approach implies that while organizational structures, such as specialization and coordination, do matter administrative culture and context matter just as equally. It makes a difference if there is a high or low level of trust, if it is high or low corruption or if it is a cooperative or confrontational culture.

When organizing for societal security and crisis management three core questions arise:

- *The normative question.* How to balance individual rights and civil liberties against societal security? When perception of threat increases, liberties tend to shrink. The concern then becomes ‘security at what costs?’

- *The question of governance capacity.* This is about coordination and implementation capacity and addresses issues of hierarchy, networks and lead agency to enhance efficient and effective crisis management response.
- *The question of governance legitimacy.* This is about citizens' trust in government addressing issues such as accountability, support, expectation and reputation. A key challenge is to uphold and restore trust in government arrangements to deal with crises.

Both capacity and legitimacy is needed for a well-functioning crises management system. Often, there is a difficult trade-off between capacity and legitimacy, but this is also a dynamic relationship. Crisis management is often most successful when it is able to combine the quality of democratic representativeness and state capacity.

3) Crisis management in practice

One of the main findings from a comparative study of crisis management in some stable Western representative democracies (Norway, Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands and UK) after 9/11 found that there seems to be broad agreement about the problems which arise when facing transboundary crises. These include strong sectorization, siloization, coordination problems, fragmentation, lack of leadership, and ambiguous responsibility and accountability relations coordination.

There are, however, more disagreements regarding appropriate solutions. Often, the response is reactive rather than proactive, with some pointing to structural reorganization, others to the need for cultural changes, or relying on legal means and measures. Often, the changes are incremental: external shocks such as a terrorist attack lead to gradual institutional changes, rather than fundamental rearrangements.

Crises prevention is a necessary but insufficient strategy to fight transboundary crises. To handle the more unknown crises, a strategy of resilience is also needed. Policy makers cannot escape the dilemmas of crises management by banking on crises learning and prevention alone. This is especially the case for ‘low probability, but high impact’ cases.

Over time, some major trends can be observed in organizing for crises management.

- From a military to a civilian focus
- Toward an all-hazard approach
- Increased centralization
- Increased agencification, lead agency approaches
- Increased coordination and collaboration
- Network arrangements in the shadow of hierarchy
- Still a fragmented, sectorized and decentralized structure
- No convergence to a ‘best practice’. Crises management varies according to type of crises
- There is no general and tight coupling between different administrative arrangements and how crises management play out in practice

Structural and governance capacity may constrain or enable crises management, but contextual features such as cultural dimensions and national variations have to also be taken into account. The general trend in organizing for crisis management seems to shift toward a ‘whole-of-government’ approach including more network arrangements but also more centralization and hierarchy. The changes are triggered by external crises, but constrained by national traditions and contexts. The core trend has been system maintaining rather than radical redesign and system transforming. Policy instruments and organizational structures and processes have been adapted to accommodate external pressures for change while core values and governance arrangements prevail. Changes occur within existing administrative orders. Existing and new organizational arrangements are recombined in an adaptive and pragmatic manner by combining external shocks and internal pressures for stability, resulting in gradual transformation.

4) Conclusion

Even in well-run Western democracies, governments at all levels have much learning and adaptation ahead of them if they want to become better crises managers than they have recently proven to be. This is probably even more so for developing countries. To understand crises management performance, we need to address governance capacity. Effective inter-organizational coordination is an important component of good crises management, but trust and legitimacy are also needed when designing a well-functioning crises management system. Crises management performance is a combination of capacity and legitimacy. The match or mismatch between governance capacity and behavior, on the one hand, and citizens' expectations, on the other, will affect the perception of crisis management performance. Both cultural factors such as trust and loyalty and structural factors such as coordination arrangements need to be taken into consideration. Furthermore, the type of crises matters and national context is important, for example, if the state is a representative democracy or an authoritarian regime. Capacity and legitimacy is especially significant when facing major transboundary crises.

5) Implications

A main implication is that there is no panacea or one single best practice for harmonizing the competing interests, overcoming the uncertainty and ambiguous government structures, and making policy choices in crises that everyone will accept. This implies that diversity might be seen as a potential strength for gaining both capacity and legitimacy. We have to look for hybrid and complex organizational forms to handle crises, combining, for example, hierarchy and networks, and centralized and decentralized arrangements. Finding 'smart practices' to balance hierarchical tools and network solutions is complicated and context-dependent. Centralization is important, but tends to create serious legitimacy issues.

Coordination is important, but requires trust. Coordination is obviously important when it comes to governance capacity for crises management, but we have to go beyond that observation and also discuss the underlying problems linked to legitimacy, such as what is perceived as legitimate and illegitimate government power in different types of crises. Thus, there are permanent tensions and dilemmas for which there is no general solution or best practice that can easily be adapted to different type of crises or to different countries. The mismatch between governance capacity and governance legitimacy might be handled by increasing the capacity, by reducing the citizens' expectations, or by a combination of both approaches.

A main way forward might be to build transboundary crises management institutions. But more than anything else there is a need for more research in this policy field. We need more comparative studies, including both high and low income states, stable states as well as fragile and conflict-affected states that are living in nearly a constant state of crises. There is a need especially for more evidence-based knowledge about the effectiveness of different crises management arrangements and better understanding about the relationship between governance capacity and governance legitimacy.

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