

# COMMUNICATION IN LOCAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT NETWORKS (part 1)

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## Abstract

**Background.** Emergency management requires flexibility and adaptation to dynamic and changing circumstances. The urgent requirements and high standards of responsiveness in terms of emergency management depend on horizontal and vertical communication in that these are one of the main factors associated with the appropriate coordination of many essentially independent organisations.

**Research aims.** The paper attempts to identify the determinants of effective communication, particularly in regard to close coordination, as well as the role played by these processes in the management of local emergency networks.

**Method.** This work consists of a theory-based empirical study. It is qualitative in nature and the research method is based on both desk research and field research. The research was conducted as part of a research project entitled "Coordination, communication and trust as factors driving effective inter-organisational collaboration in the public safety management system" (DEC-2012/07/D/HS4/00537).

**Key findings.** As a result, the new role of communication as a factor associated with the appropriate coordination in local emergency networks is identified.

**Keywords:** Emergency management, Organisational communication, Coordination, Organisational behaviours, Network theory

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## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The conditions under which contemporary public organisations function, compel them to enter into collaborative relationships (Kożuch, 2011). Task completion in the field of public management is particularly challenging in crisis situations due to the dynamics and complexity of the determinants of hazardous events (Drabek, 2007). Entities that execute activities in emergency management situations need to be prepared for effective operations under conditions of risk and uncertainty, while accepting the need for

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dynamic changes when it comes to performing actions involving insufficient information or potentially limited possibilities for communication. Meanwhile, centralized planning at higher levels of the state organisation triggers tighter procedural rules (McEntire & Dawson, 2007). At the local level, where public safety is ensured through emergency networks, a new approach to communication as a factor associated with close coordination in the framework of emergency management activities has particular significance.

Emergency management presents a peculiar paradox. On one hand, it requires meticulous organisation and planning, but on the other hand, it involves spontaneous action entailing adaptation to developing situations, because even the best laid plans do not cover all circumstances (Waugh & Streib, 2006). In a complex and dynamic environment, no organisation is capable of immediately satisfying all requirements. The nature of hazards, however, impels the undertaking of adequate actions in the shortest possible time; it requires coordination adjusted to the type and nature of interaction between the organisations involved in such actions. These organisations constitute autonomous entities, and their operations are frequently interdependent, thereby they call for the creation of collaborative networks (Kapucu, 2005). These factors contributed to the decision to undertake research into the functioning of emergency networks. The aim of the article is to identify the factors that influence effective communication as a factor in terms of close coordination within local emergency networks.

### **Foundations of Local Emergency Networks**

In emergency management, the need for a network approach stems from the specifics of activities undertaken, and the collaboration principles arising from binding legal regulations (McLennan & Handmer, 2014). Network linkages occur when planning and mounting operations which include among others: scope of training, procedures for operations, responsibilities, entities being obliged to collaborate over such functional areas as, for example, water and sewage management systems, transport, public health, special planning, etc. (Henstra, 2010a; Henstra, 2010b). However, these relationships become most apparent when carrying out the tasks. Australia adopted an approach which held that operations in emergency management rely on close collaboration across and within governments, and on forging and enhancing existing relationships between administration, rescue services, enterprises, the non-governmental sector and local society (COAG 2011, p.7). In the Council of Australian Government's National Strategy for Disaster Resilience we find that collaboration based on a shared sense of responsibility tends to be more effective than individual efforts (COAG, 2009, p.22). Also, in the USA, individual states have intensively developed network relationships in emergency management, be-



cause it is said that efforts launched in this regard go beyond the traditional frontiers of vertical relationships (Kapucu et al., 2009). The effects from the accomplishment of activities within a network in emergency management principally include the following (Sienkiewicz-Małyjurek, 2012):

1. In the area of relationships: information transfer, increased trust and partnership relationships between the network actors;
2. With regard to the execution of operations: establishing the order of action, mitigation of risk of failure, bolstered the effectiveness and flexibility of operations, the smooth transfer of resources, quicker mobilization due to augmented coordination and the integration of activities;
3. With regard to development: articulating new challenging aims, innovativeness, creation of knowledge, strengthened synergy effect, complementarity.

Legal requirements and normative rules in emergency management create conditions for collaboration within local emergency networks. Yet, without informal relationships, they are not factors likely to ensure sufficient effectiveness of operations conducted in this area, as all relationships may be formulated in terms of operational procedures. On a daily basis, when performing routine activities, specific organisations fulfilling tasks within emergency management, accomplish their statutory tasks based on applicable principles and procedures (Wang, 2012). At a basic level, the accomplishment of these tasks does not require collaboration with other organisations, but merely the execution of operations in accordance with a specific specialization. Nevertheless, in practice, even the accomplishment of basic tasks often takes place within network relationships (Kapucu et al., 2010; Maon et al., 2009). Respondents, for instance, said that the assistance is delivered through lending resources (e.g. specialist equipment), the joint execution of activities statutorily assigned to one unit, or sharing knowledge and information. Based on experience gained through the fulfilment of tasks on a daily basis, the informal relationships forged are likely to have both a positive as well as a negative impact on the course of action in emergency situations.

The need for the application of a network approach in the practice of emergency management results from the need for a comprehensive and adaptive approach to each individual situation. In particular cases of threats, similar resources are activated, yet these may be of varying intensity and configuration. Furthermore, each event takes place in a different location (e.g. highly urbanized areas, rural areas, industrial areas), has a different scale and intensity, and it is followed by different hazards likely to influence the escalation of the threat. Therefore, the structure of emergency networks is configured reactively and differently in each case, relative to the nature of the threat. It incorporates inter-organisational rela-



tionships shaped between the units involved, as well as the transfer of information, people and material resources. Due to the situational requirements, information transfers within coordination and communication subsystems in emergency management, have surged to prominence because they guide the processes of human and material resources administration.

## **Emergency Management Framework**

Emergency management is a decision-making cycle grounded on the diagnosis of potential hazards, the analysis of information and resources (personal and material) available, and the consequent deployment of these resources (Sienkiewicz-Małyjurek, 2014; Sawalha et al., 2013). This is essential for every type of hazard. Emergencies range from routine incidents, for example road traffic accidents, through to events that require a national, or even international, response (O'Brien, 2008). Given the intensity level, hazards may be divided as follows (Kaszubski & Romańczuk, 2011, p. 158):

1. Accepted threats – foreseeable threats to life, health or the environment, having an ordinary character and territorial extent, that require the undertaking of autonomous actions by the emergency management units with routine back-up from other services and bodies based on joint plans and procedures (e.g. fire, car accident).
2. Extraordinary threats – socially unacceptable threats to life, health or the environment which, due to their character or extent, go beyond the framework of the routine activities of specific emergency management units (e.g. animal disease epidemics). One of the features inherent in such a situation is the need for services to go beyond designed plans and procedures.
3. Crisis situation – a particular case of an extraordinary situation during which operations of relevant public administration bodies are substantially curtailed due to inadequacy in terms of forces, resources or competencies (e.g. extensive flooding).
4. State of exception – crisis situation occurring within the state where ordinary constitutional resources are insufficient to tackle it. An effect of introducing the state of exception may be: concentration of authority in the hands of the president and the government, limited rights and freedom for citizens, shifts in the structure and operating principles of the state agencies. The states of exception include: state of emergency, martial law and state of natural disaster.

With regard to local crisis management, all the threats enumerated have serious implications, because activities taken in crisis situations and states of exception rest on the experience acquired as a result of responding to unanticipated and extraordinary threats. Furthermore, even locally



accepted threats may require taking action that extends beyond the applicable procedures.

Communication processes occur with regard to all the types of threat displayed. However, the intensity of communication needs changes, depending on the scale of the threat. In the event of accepted threats, routine arrangements and consultations over activities exist between the basic units involved in these activities. In crisis situations, by contrast, extra communication channels are activated, the contact between rescue units and public administration, as well as with non-organisational organisations, media and society, are maintained on an ongoing basis. Moreover, consultations with specialists in the given field (e.g. experts in the field of chemistry when faced with the threat of industrial disaster) take place.

Emergency management comprises two principal phases: stabilization and realization. The stabilization phase covers the cycle of activities ahead of a crisis situation, that is a prevention and preparedness phase. Essentially, this constitutes the entirety of organisational efforts put into place at all levels of state management. It involves preparing and implementing investments that prevent potential hazards, as well as designing and implementing operational procedures. It also embraces standard activities executed by relevant units without the need to launch emergency procedures. On the other hand, the realization phase covers the control of crises situations through planned operations, mitigation of losses and recovery from damage. During this latter phase, the functions of response and recovery are fulfilled (Tatham & Houghton, 2011; Kusumasari et al., 2010; Perry, 2007).

In terms of the traditional approach to emergency management, though mostly centred on natural disasters and material management aspects, the attack on the World Trade Centre was a breakthrough (Haddow et al., 2008; Drabek, 2007; Reynolds & Seeger, 2005). That event sparked changes and the extension of crises situations, especially embracing events caused by human actions. This also led to administrative and legislative changes, among others in the United States of America and in Canada (Henstra, 2003). In the USA, the Department of Homeland Security was established at the federal government level, which includes Federal Emergency Management Agency and all the federal government disaster management programmes. Headquarters at state and local levels are now calling for better coordination and new communication technologies (Haddow et al., 2008, p. 377).

It is commonly accepted worldwide that public administration agencies are responsible for operations conducted in terms of emergency management at all levels of the state organisation (McEntire, 2013; McLennan & Handmer, 2012; Act of 26 April 2007 relating to crisis management in Poland; Kusumasari & Alam, 2012; National Emergency Response System, 2011). They fulfil the function of directing the operations. The experience



of various countries shows that the organisation of emergency management as part of a 3-tier system (local, regional, national) tends to be the best solution (Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, 2010; Australian Emergency Management Arrangements, 2009, An Emergency Management Framework for Canada, 2011), yet in practice, responsibility for these operations is assigned to relevant authorities within local government (Henstra, 2010b). For example, in Australia, the Council of Australian Governments plays an important role in coordinating the government response to emergency situations. However it is stated that local authorities are best positioned to understand local requirements – for which they have sufficient knowledge and capabilities – and have the ability to take appropriate action in the shortest time (Building our nation's resilience to natural disasters, 2013, p.31). In effect, local governments are closest to their citizens, they have first-hand opportunities to assess local hazards, and they are capable of starting immediate response actions when emergencies occur. They accomplish basic tasks that involve anticipating and monitoring hazards, planning actions, warning and alerting, responding to and mitigating the effects of hazards in their area. These tasks also include evacuations, medical aid and welfare, and providing essential supplies and services for survival.

If the crisis situation covers an area controlled by more than one local government, the supervision of operations is done at a regional level. Analogically, in the event of a supra-regional threat, supervision is taken over by the central authorities of the state government. This suggests that local governments may call upon the regional or central levels for assistance, but above all, they need to be capable of effectively responding to crises situations within their own administrative borders. However, experience suggests that local government agencies struggle with seemingly more pressing problems on a daily basis (e.g. aging population, infrastructure development, public transport), and thus they tend to postpone consideration of issues associated with emergency management (Henstra, 2010a; Henstra, 2010b). Decision-makers' awareness and appreciation only increases in the aftermath of an emergency situation (Kusumasari & Alam, 2012). Other entities are also involved in the carrying out of operations in emergency management, including organisations, inspectorates, police, universities, media, the private sector, NGOs and the whole of society.

Entities such as fire brigades, police, border guards and medical rescue units have an executive function, whereas the remaining entities perform auxiliary functions. In each case it is necessary that these entities should quickly mobilize and execute operations. The entities specified, constituting complex organisations themselves, from a holistic point of view, create collaborative networks aimed to performing socially useful activities.



## **Basis of Organisational Communication in Network Theory**

The most popular definition of a network defines it as:

"...structures of interdependence involving multiple organisations or parts thereof, where one unit is not merely the formal subordinate of the others in some larger hierarchical arrangement" (O'Toole, 1997, p.45).

According to this definition, the network is made up of organisations coordinating their operations in the context of inter-organisational relationships. Effective functioning of the network requires voluntary collaboration between all entities, and a readiness for trade-off (Kozuch & Sienkiewicz-Małyjurek, 2013). Their operations are only made possible when all entities reckon that the value of joint actions is higher than the value likely to be achieved in any other manner (Kickert, 1997, p.40).

Typical public networks are defined as:

"...collaborative structures that bring together representatives from public agencies and NGOs to address problems of common concern that accrue value to the manager/specialists, their participating organisations, and their networks" (Agranoff, 2007, p.2).

Currently, four types of network can be identified in public management – service implementation networks, information diffusion networks, problem solving networks and community capacity building networks (Milward & Provan, 2006, p.11). Their characteristics in relation to example scope of organisational communication are presented in Table 1. Service Implementation Networks seek to fulfil basic public services. They require both vertical and horizontal communication capabilities. Information Diffusion Networks emerge in turbulent situations where information quickly becomes outdated, and is replaced by new information, while the purpose of the operations performed by Problem Solving Networks focus on resolving complex problems through collaboration. These networks may crop up from Information Diffusion Networks. Last but not least, Community Capacity Building Networks revolve around building the social capital at the local level.

An analysis of Table 1 explicitly supports the view that for public management networks, organisational communication proves to be one of the principal management functions. Essentially, this results from the structure in which the organs act as participants of the network function; the networks are characterized by a vast diversity in terms of the roles, duties and powers. This triggers the need to effectively communicate in order to ensure an adequate accomplishment of activities.



**Table 1.** Public Management Networks - Types and Key Characteristics in Connection with Organisational Communication

Network type	Example scope of organisational communication	
	Actors	Main fields
Service Implementation Networks	national authorities; public administration; state-owned enterprises; private companies; judiciary	public transport; environmental protection; public health; public safety
Information Diffusion Networks	public administration; police; fire service; rescue service; sanitary-epidemiological stations etc.	emergency management
Problem Solving Networks	public administration; architectural and construction; supervision; business environment institutions; scientific institutions; NGOs	regional development; social politics (eg. unemployment, education, health care); environment protection
Community Capacity Building Networks	public administration; NGOs; business environment institutions; scientific institutions; private companies	social politics (eg. education, population policy)

Source: own development based on Milward and Provan (2006).

At present, networks in public management refer to the method by which operations are conducted in terms of inter-organisational and cross-sector relationships. They encompass both the structural description as well as connections between the actors involved. These networks are based on interactions, and consist of interdependent actors with different values, interests and strategies. Collective decisions have to be achieved by coordinating the actions of these actors, each of whom makes their own strategic choices. This all requires effective communication.

## METHOD

In the field literature it is rightly underlined that there is a need to intensify research into the interaction between context and collaborative performance (Agranoff, 2005; Dickinson & Sullivan, 2014; Moran, 2013). In reference to this need, the paper attempts to analyse the determinants of effective communication, as well as ascertain the role played by this aspect in local emergency networks. The main research questions are: To what extent have local emergency networks already implemented instruments of effective organisational communication? How well is such communica-





tion developed? Which are the key determinants when it comes to improving communication and consequently coordination in local emergency networks? The theoretical background of the research consists of theoretical reasoning based on elements of the theoretical foundations of emergency management, network theory, stakeholder theory, and also on concepts of organisational communication and coordination.

This study is qualitative in nature and the research method is based on both desk research and field research conducted in Poland. The field research included 15 partly-structured interviews with emergency management managers from police, fire service and medical rescue units. The interviews took on average of 1.5 to 2 hours to complete. Each interview focused on specific issues that elaborated on analyses of theory and practical examples. The interviews were based on a structured literature review in the light of evidence mainly from the USA, Australia, Canada and the European Union. In the course of the analysis, the emergency management framework and the foundations of local emergency networks were described. Next we analysed the processes of communication as a mega-function of local emergency management. As a result, the new role of communication in local emergency networks is identified.

The research was conducted as part of a research project entitled "Coordination, communication and trust as factors driving effective inter-organisational collaboration in the public safety management system " (DEC-2012/07/D/HS4/00537) and was part of an initial task which was focused on mapping the processes of public safety management involving specialized units at the state and local levels.

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## KOMUNIKOWANIE I KOORDYNOWANIE W SIECIACH ZARZĄDZANIE KRYZYSOWEGO NA POZIOMIE LOKALNYM

### Abstrakt

**Tło badań.** Zarządzanie kryzysowe wymaga elastyczności i dostosowywania się do dynamicznie zmieniających się warunków. Wysokie wymagania i standardy w tym zakresie zależą komunikacji poziomej i pionowej, które są jednym z głównych czynników koordynowania działań wielu niezależnych organizacji.

**Cel badań.** W pracy podjęto próbę określenia czynników wpływających na skuteczne komunikowanie się w odniesieniu do koordynowania działań, a także rolę tych procesów w zarządzaniu lokalnymi sieciami zarządzania kryzysowego.

**Metodyka.** W artykule przedstawiono wyniki badań teoretycznych i empirycznych. Badania przeprowadzono w ramach projektu badawczego "Koordynacja, komunikacja i zaufanie jako czynników napędzających efektywną współpracę między organizacjami w systemie zarządzania bezpieczeństwem publicznym" (DEC-2012/07 / D / HS4 / 00537).

**Kluczowe wnioski.** Rezultatem przeprowadzonych badań jest identyfikacja roli komunikowania się w koordynowaniu działań w sieciach zarządzania kryzysowego na poziomie lokalnym.

**Słowa kluczowe:** zarządzanie kryzysowe, organizacyjne komunikowanie się, koordynowanie, zachowania organizacyjne, teoria sieci

