When Policy, Politics and Emergency Responses Collide: Managing Coordination in Crises

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Overview

- Public Policy, Politics and Emergency Responses

- Conceptualising Inputs

- The 2009 Victorian Bushfires and 2011 Queensland Floods

- Key Research Findings

Public Policy, Politics and Emergency Responses

– Research undertaken from a public policy perspective, how does coordination work across government across all streams (political, bureaucratic and operational agencies)

What are the gaps between development of policy and delivery of services, how can these be overcome?

– Crisis events represent an intersection between policy, politics and emergency responses. Each of these domains are important and help to explain whether a crisis response can be defined as a 'success' or a 'failure'

– Everyone is under pressure and the stakes are high, public expectations are stronger than ever and the risk of disillusionment is ever present- political need of self-preservation

– The motivations of actors within these networks are very different, fundamentally there are different world views

– Little work has been done to explicitly link whole of government working and the management of crises, although it seems a natural example of this

Conceptualising Inputs into the Success or Failure of Crisis Responses

The 2009 Victorian bushfires and 2011 Queensland floods

– These events were selected as the most significant events of the past decade, different states and structures allowed for a natural comparison

– Comparative analysis seeking to understand how key inputs impacted on each of the responses in the immediate period leading up to the event, during the acute crisis phase and in the early part of recovery

– Document Analysis through Hansard, Freedom of Information requests, Media Reports and Commissions of Inquiry

– Qualitative study involving the interview of: Senior Ministers, Government Department Heads and Emergency Response Leaders:

"Anna didn't take the Machiavellian route of calling an election straight after, if she was merely interested in base politics she could have done that we might have had a chance of winning or at the least might not have had the result we did. When you're working in those disaster situations if you're worried about the political outcomes you will not have a good outcome" (Former Deputy Premier, Paul Lucas)

"So the model was an interesting thing, if you look back at that time Victoria was probably seen as the leader in terms of the structural arrangements and the leadership arrangements with this model...Everything is in order, the cabinet subcommittee, whole of government, a premier who is across the issue or thinks he is, leadership structures down, the CFA on alert, no rostered days off on Friday, Saturday, Sunday everyone is on duty so it's textbook, tick tick tick all the boxes" (Former Premier, John Brumby)

Key Research Findings

1. Operationalising Whole of Government

Although strong commitments have been expressed around whole of government working, it is often a difficult construct to operationalise across departments and agencies (particularly of different types). The lack of incentive or motivation around connecting across agencies represents a crucial hurdle to collaborative working.

2. Whole of Government Complexity

Implementing whole of government across different strands of government such as: political, bureaucratic and operational is complex, given that each strand brings a different world view and emphasis on collaboration.

3. Crises are Unique

Crises provide the necessary imperative and sense of urgency in which to engender connected forms of working. During a crisis, there is recognition of a store of collective goodwill where 'turf wars' are put aside for the greater common good.

4. Visible Leadership

Direct responses from the executive leadership are important to provide authority and mandate but also to meet public expectations around leadership 'on the ground' as events are unfolding.

5. Coordination Built in 'Peace Time'

There is strong recognition of the need to have coordination mechanisms in place during 'peace time', and leveraged during a crisis. Having these structures in place, which facilitate consistent and informative dialogue between all parties, is seen as a pre-condition to improve integration.

6. Community Resilience at the Heart

Enhancing community resilience must remain a focal point of mitigation and response activities. There is a need to consider how phenomena, such as urbanization and changing demographics, impact on the ability to be resilient in the face of major events.

7. Organisation Culture in Action

There is recognition that there needs to be closer collaboration between all agencies to improve integration, with strong advocacy for an emergency management doctrine, that recognises that overall system coordination is as important as the response of individual agencies.

8. Disaster Management Arrangements the Bedrock

Legislative frameworks around disaster management provide the tangible structure around coordination mechanisms in states. There is a strong requirement, however to juxtapose legislative frameworks against the need to act flexibly in the face of emerging crises.

Questions?

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My upcoming book, Disaster Management in Australia

available through Routledge Development Studies Series:
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