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“NO UNIFORMS, BUT SPECIALISTS” Involvement of external experts in crisis situations

SUMMARY

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SUMMARY

“NO UNIFORMS, BUT SPECIALISTS”: INVOLVEMENT OF EXTERNAL EXPERTS IN CRISIS SITUATIONS

The present report studies the involvement of external experts in crisis management and crisis communication. Every now and then crises occur which make decision-makers face major challenges. The characteristics of the modern crisis make such dilemmas even stronger. Citizens in modern societies expect these situations to be prevented or at least adequately managed. During crises adequate decision-making and communication are indispensable. The premise of the current study is that involving external experts in all these complex processes is crucial for a successful crisis management and -communication. The central goal of the present study is to provide insight into the ways in which external experts are involved in crisis decision-making, and which anticipated and unforeseen effects their involvement have on the course, outcomes, and legitimacy of crisis management and crisis communication. Experts are perceived to be the deliverers of specific knowledge, giving insights into the origins and nature of the crisis and how to deal with it. Experts are mentioned to be ‘external’ when they operate outside the regular crisis organisation, with particular focus on individuals and organizations from the private sector and science. The central research problem is: What are the lessons we can learn from: (1) the scientific literature on crisis decision-making, and the role/involvement of experts in crisis management and communication in particular; and (2) a national and international research-synthesis of experiences with the involvement of external experts?

Research design and methodological challenges

From the research question we further derived subquestions which we address in three parts of the study: (1) a scientific literature review; (2) a research-synthesis of evaluation reports, and (3) a qualitative analysis of evaluation reports. In order to address the research question, we relied on three data sources: reports of scientific research, evaluation reports, and expert interviews. All data sources pertain to secondary data – in the present study we have not collected new, primary data on events, activities, and outcomes in crisis situations.

Scientific and professional research into crises and crisis situations is a very specific type of social science research, with a number of specific challenges. In the present study, we have tried to adequately address three main challenges. The *first challenge* is characteristic for comparative case study research and arises when we wish to compare the involvement of external experts in different crisis situations. The challenge is that the course and outcomes of crisis management and crisis communication are highly contingent on the crisis situation itself. It is not easy to draw general (or generalizeable) conclusions from a wide diversity of crisis situations that have occurred in the past. We have addressed this challenge by combining a broad analysis of crises with an in-depth analysis of particular crisis events. The *second challenge* pertains to the selection of crisis situations about which we report. We observe a crisis situation only when it has turned into a crisis. Not only draws the literature disproportional attention to a limited number of quite severe crisis situations, also *latent crises* are hardly studied in the literature. Although it is impractical to include all incidents in the current study, we have nevertheless assessed to what extent the crises in our study have developed from incidents, and to what extent incidents develop into crises. The *third challenge* is the selection of crisis situations in which external experts played a role. If we select crises in our study on the basis of their crisis characteristics, we may face the problem of obtaining too little variation in expert involvement and expert characteristics. That lack of variation will make it very difficult to draw valid conclusions about effects of expert involvement in crisis situations – simply because we do not have enough data to compare. On the other hand could the selection of crises on the basis of expert involvement result in an unrepresentative picture of the role and involvement of experts. We overcame this challenge by being as inclusive as possible in our definition of crises and experts (this fits with practical experiences of crisis experts). In this way, we created a database of crises that is as comprehensive as possible, thus hoping that enough variation from that broad and rich dataset would

follow. Although a summary of results will not do justice to the richness of information derived from the research, in the following sections we will summarize the main results of each part of the study.

First part: study of scientific literature

The scientific literature points at a number of important theoretical and empirical clues that point us to the importance of involving external experts in crisis management and crisis communication, in addition to the internal organization for crisis control. External experts provide a solution for the information problems that decision-makers face during a crisis – both with respect to a lack of information and contradictory information. In addition, external experts provide the potential for decision makers to quickly and thoroughly assess which kinds of information are needed in the decision-making process. In that respect, external experts may provide a counterbalance for adverse processes, such as groupthink, anchoring, or tunnel vision. External experts may also contribute to the stability and external legitimacy of crisis management and the decisions taken. A sound communication strategy is essential during crisis situations to reduce damage and feelings of uncertainty and fear, and external experts may play a crucial role in the communication process. On the other hand, the scientific literature also reports negative side effects and adverse effects of involving external experts. External experts may complicate crisis management, because more actors with multiple views and multiple problem definitions, and different stakes, enter the crisis decision-making process. Scientific studies of crises and crisis management are characterized by comparative case studies, with less emphasis on ‘hard theory building’ and the development of large, quantitative datasets. Nevertheless, the scientific literature reports a number of conditions for successfully involving external experts in crisis management and crisis communication. Knowledge and insights should be brought into crisis management and communication fast, efficiently, and without the input of (too) many interests. Care should be taken to guarantee that the external expert and crisis decision-makers are on the same ‘wavelength’, in order to facilitate an efficient communication and input of expertise. The fact that individual characteristics of the external expert (such as personality and social networks) play an important role in the involvement of external experts, makes that good personal contacts should be stimulated, with appropriate relational investments.

Second part: research-synthesis

We synthesized the research on experiences with the most important crises in the past thirteen years in The Netherlands, in order to obtain more insight into the types of situations in which external expertise is involved – and the way this involvement is organized. To provide a proper answer to these questions, we created a unique database of all recent crises in The Netherlands. The dataset comprises 60 incidents that grew into crises in the past thirteen years and about which 114 evaluation reports were available for analysis. In total 438 organizations or natural persons were involved as external experts in the 60 crises. On average, this implies the involvement of seven external experts per crisis, but the range in number of experts involved is quite large, often dependent on the scale of the crisis. To fully appreciate these numbers, it is important to note that we used a broad definition for ‘external expert’. In interviews and reports, we observed that from the perception of the ‘crisis-control organization’ at a low institutional level (local, regional), many governmental actors are defined and perceived as ‘external’. From the analyses we can, broadly, conclude that: (1) roughly 30 percent of all external experts are members of an existing network, which was activated by the crisis management organization; (2) the involvement of external experts in a crisis is primarily a matter of organizational involvement, primarily derived from (semi-)public organizations and civil society; (3) external experts are self-appointed in about a quarter of all cases; in very few cases asked by another expert, and in by far the most cases appointed/invited by the crisis management organization; (4) in almost half of all cases, the involvement is based on specialist knowledge and not the organization’s direct/indirect interest in the incident of crisis. We do not find any association between type of crisis and type of expert involvement.

Third part: in-depth analysis

The question of the third part of the study is to trace the most important mechanisms that explain the involvement of external experts and the relation between (the organization of) their involvement and the quality of crisis management. In the qualitative study we first distilled all references towards mechanisms out of the evaluation reports and expert interviews. We made a classification into the following five categories: subject of involvement, mobilization, structuring, transfer of knowledge, crisis communication. *Expert involvement* contributes to the quality of crisis management and communication through the supply

of specialized, substantive knowledge and expertise; the demand for general knowledge and advice in crisis management is only secondary. Sometimes, external experts are consulted for a 'second-opinion', this is often the expression of contradictory insights and/or advices. With respect to the *mobilization* of external experts in crisis management and crisis communication it is often reported that the active maintenance of a close network with experts – also in times of non-crisis situations – positively affects the efficiency and effectiveness of expert input. Collaboration with unforeseen external experts, often originates from a direct, physical involvement of an organization, or the direct threat to its survival. With respect to the *structuring*, the effective use of expert knowledge is supported by the existence of a basic structure for expert involvement which is not too detailed – in order to provide enough flexibility – and the establishment of short and direct connections within the crisis management organization. With respect to the *transfer of knowledge* it appears that external experts and decision-makers benefit from personal communication, personal knowledge transfer and interpersonal trust. Decision-makers need to recognize that differences in interest may exist, but they do not eliminate potential cooperation beforehand for this reason. Finally, with respect to *crisis communication* by external experts the reports systematically advise to consider making explicit agreements with external experts about external communication. By putting two Dutch crises in internationally comparative perspective, we deduced in a chronological analysis of events what specific events took place when external experts became involved. The cases are the potential flooding of parts of the province of Groningen, and a ship fire near Amsterdam (Velsen). In these additional analyses, we developed a center-periphery (layer) model for external expert involvement – depending on how experts became mobilized and positioned viz à viz the crisis management organization. The further the expert is from the core of crisis control, the more operational and less strategic the input of the external expert. The analysis shows that often a multitude of external experts are involved around the different 'layers'. An important conclusion is that the composition of the crisis management team is not a factor that contributes to a failing involvement of external experts – if the contribution of an expert is not necessary anymore, the involvement can be reduced without many further concern. In addition, the existence of 'liaisons' support an effective coordination between the transfer of knowledge between external parties/stakeholders and the crisis management team. In the pre-crisis phase potential risks can be mapped and contacts initiated with external actors, that may prove valuable during a crisis situation. When external experts are drawn from strongly hierarchical organizations, this may lead to delays and potential conflicts of interest. Finally, external interest mediation by external experts can, potentially, be a factor for success if the context of the crisis allows for that.

In conclusion, we concede that the extent of involvement of external experts in crisis situations is quite diverse, with a heterogeneous role in the crisis management organization and with varying success. If we define external experts as is custom at the local or regional levels of crisis management, then relatively many external experts are involved in crisis situations. If, however, we narrow down our definition to the universities and private sector, then only in a very limited number of crises are external experts involved. If we learn from crises that occurred on the local and regional levels, as well as the national level, we observe quite varying (un)intended effects of expert involvement – dependent upon the level of administrative settlement and context of the crisis. The most important lesson from all the cases we studied, is that for each crisis situation, it is important to make a deliberate choice to import specific specialist knowledge – with all the potential mechanisms in mind. To further support such a choice, the present study summarizes some best (and worse) practices, which may serve as a solid ground to involve experts on the basis of a transparent, deliberate, and explicit choice in the highly complex situation when an incident evolves into a crisis.