

Notes for the Cabinet Office review of EU competences in civil protection.

Since the turn of the millennium, risk management and emergency response practices in the United Kingdom have undergone major developments. New legal and professional frameworks for best practice emphasise integrating all the agencies that may be involved by establishing how areas and levels of responsibility are to combine and communicate.

Beck's (2006) analysis of the new risks created by the complexities of contemporary global society warns against over-confidence in the efficacy of national risk management and crisis response measures. It also prompts scrutiny of how well such formal systems can deal with the unexpected problems that will inevitably exacerbate a crisis.

Disasters are fortunately rare but each one presents some unique challenges that test and stretch prepared plans. An important feature of EU work in the civil protection (CP) area is the international sharing of experience and peer evaluation of each nation's preparedness. Thus 'learning the lessons' is a competence area that should be preserved (question 2.)

The Civil Contingencies Act 2004 (CCA) was a huge step forward for the UK but it came five years later than it should have. Several EU countries were ahead of us and more use could have been made of EU mechanisms to learn from them. Whilst the Cabinet Office has conducted some 'refresh' exercises on the guidance that supports the CCA implementation, more could now be done to draw on EU thinking and research to take those documents further.

For some time I have been concerned that the CCA implementation is too constrained into a militaristic and hierarchical command doctrine that diminishes key features of the very sound Integrated Emergency Management (IEM) strategy. IEM is a bottom-up strategy that is reliant on local resources doing their normal jobs but in exceptional circumstances, and on the local command and control of the response. Within the EU there are examples the UK could draw on to strengthen the localism in CP contingency planning. Thus facilitating access to other models of administrative good practice is another sound topic for EU effort.

Training exercises are vital for establishing preparedness, but the scenarios often emphasise the creation and use of formal command and control procedures rather than promotion of personal effectiveness and leadership, especially at the lower levels. Secondly, reports of the lessons of real incidents rarely highlight where initiatives at lower levels improved matters, but there is often anecdotal evidence of individual enterprise having been very significant. Thus as I have shown in a book chapter (Miles, 2012) it is important to train for and sustain a management culture that enables effective action by those actually confronting the crisis. The EU has a function in promoting cross-border training but the UK should be pressing for devolved flexibility to be highlighted.

A strength of the CCA is the formal involvement of the Category 2 responders, since in the past some agencies were uncertain of their role and so failed to take a full part in planning and training. Depending on the exact nature of the emergency, different agencies will have greater or lesser roles but those cannot be predicted precisely. Thus another key feature of IEM has long been practising and preparing for inter-agency cooperation but within a generic approach that is capable of a coherent initial response to any and every type of emergency.

Within the EU there are expert focal points for CP planning for various risks, particularly for Health, Nuclear and Marine emergencies; these can be drawn on by the relevant UK bodies and

are areas where international cooperation is essential, and where the EU clearly should have competence. However some of the topic separations within the EU central CP organisation are too compartmentalised and narrowly focussed; there is inadequate attention to the common elements of theory and practice in CP. Thus in response to Question 4, the UK could do useful work within the EU mechanisms to reduce the bureaucratic 'silo mentality', and probable over-staffing.

Question 6. NATO promotes useful cooperation on civil emergencies and has run some worthwhile conferences of academic value. But the NATO mechanisms are not suited to the ready exchange of information on the totality of CP that the EU does provide. Similarly the UN and others add important capabilities for international relief and development of good practice but these are qualitatively very different to the needs for enhancement of grass roots IEM that can come through the EU functions. Thus the EU role cannot be replaced by these other bodies.

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References

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