Inter-organizational disaster management projects: Finding the middle way between trust and control

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Abstract

This article studies disaster response and recovery operations from a project management perspective. In disaster response and recovery projects, characterized by uncertainty and time pressure, inter-organizational collaboration among disaster management organizations is essential. Trust and control are viewed as core aspects for building confidence among collaboration partners. This article sheds more light on this trust-control nexus by studying inter-organizational disaster response and recovery in the Netherlands. On the basis of documents and interviews, the roles of trust and control in the relations between the Dutch armed forces and traditional responders are examined. Findings suggest that trust and control are complementary and mutually reinforcing, while both concepts require multi-level studies to distinguish between inter-personal and inter-organizational trust and control. As a link between the trust-control nexus and power comes to the fore, future research is recommended to focus on the importance of organizational interests and power in post-disaster collaboration efforts.
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Keywords: Collaboration; Disaster response and recovery; Trust; Control; Armed forces

1. Introduction

Since a project can be defined as "a temporary organization to which resources are assigned to undertake a unique, novel and transient endeavor managing the inherent uncertainty and need for integration in order to deliver beneficial objectives of change" (Turner and Müller, 2003: 7), project management, in its core, is about purposefully organizing to cope with a limited amount of time and a certain level of uniqueness and unpredictability. Uncertainty and time pressure are also at the heart of disaster

management (see Boin et al., 2005: 2–3). Looking at uncertainty, every next disaster is almost impossible to predict, let alone to fathom the best way to handle it. The option to prepare nothing at all and follow an incremental decision-making philosophy of learning-by-doing will at best cause a chaotic flow of activities (Moe and Pathranarakul, 2006). At the same time, since every disaster is unique, the option to plan and organize every little detail in advance will result in a false sense of control, leading to organizational rigidity and a distorted view of reality (Drabek and McEntire, 2002). In terms of time pressure, conventional and disaster project management diverge. In a conventional project management context, it is the organization itself that decides to launch a certain project and it has the opportunity to more or less manage the available time in advance. However, after most disasters, whether human-induced or natural, the initiative is with the external stimulus. As a consequence, regaining momentum and overcoming the disaster situation take place under enormous time pressure. Given these extreme time conditions, and knowing

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that misjudgments can have far-reaching societal consequences, the pressure on the organizational system that has to cope with the disaster increases enormously (Webb, 1996).

To deal with an inherent level of uncertainty and stay on schedule at the same time, the project management community has developed an experienced-based body of knowledge (PMI, 2013). Yet, despite the availability of this extensive knowledge base, no project management handbook will offer the key to guaranteed success. On the contrary, strictly following a standardized project management protocol can even exacerbate matters (Robert and Lajtha, 2002). One of the problem areas that has proven to be especially difficult to grasp in a practical model, framework, or planning tool is the fact that project success is influenced by the way in which a project manager is capable of balancing all the objectives and requirements of the parties involved in a project (Atkinson et al., 2006). Although conducting a risk assessment, including a stakeholder analysis, is one of the first steps in the project life cycle, the outcome of such an analysis is seldom so profound that it helps to considerably decrease uncertainty about, for example, objectives, motives, and abilities of the contributing parties (Ward, 1999). In this respect, Pich et al. (2002) argue that, to successfully cope with project uncertainty, real effort should be put into relationship management.

A similar perspective applies to disaster management. Most governments follow a precautionary disaster management approach, relying on risk assessments and pre-planned collaboration arrangements, while in practice, smooth and flexible inter-organizational collaboration remains one of the main challenges (e.g. Comfort and Kapucu, 2006). Berlin and Carlström (2011), for example, show that Swedish disaster management organizations (i.e. police, ambulance and fire services) minimize collaboration in the immediate post-disaster stage for three reasons: they face uncertainties as to what their potential partners will do, are unaware of the information that the partners have received and do not have strong incentives to cooperate since this will harm their opportunity to enhance their individual reputation and legitimacy. With regard to the latter reason, some studies point at the influence of organizational interests in preventing smooth collaboration between organizations during emergencies. For instance, Comfort and Kapucu (2006) stress the difficulty of working across jurisdictional boundaries while others emphasize that organizations aim to enhance their organizational reputation which may lead to suboptimal coordination with other disaster responders (e.g. Salmon et al., 2011). What makes disaster response and recovery (consisting of multiple organizations with different interests) even more complex, is that the project team is often a mixture of fixed and ad hoc operational partners without considerable previous collaboration experience (Treurniet et al., 2012). In other words, the situational uncertainty caused by the disaster is further complicated by complex and ambiguous inter-organizational dynamics in the project team set up for disaster response and recovery (LaBrosse, 2007). Thus, in this specific project management context too, deliberate action needs to be taken to purposefully built trust and control in the inter-organizational relationships in order to reach shared goals (Bollen, 2008; Das and Teng, 1998).

From a more fundamental organizational perspective, it becomes clear that the true quest in relationship management is to strike the right balance between measures of control and trust (Costa and Bijlsma-Frankema, 2007). In short, one could say that control is crucial to safeguard an adequate level of controllability, while trust is needed for contributing parties to accept unplanned changes and to have enough freedom to act. Acknowledging this trade-off, the aim of this article is to shed more light on the trust-control nexus in collaborative disaster response and recovery projects. To this end, the current study will scrutinize the co-existence of trust and control in the interactions between the armed forces and traditional disaster responders (i.e. police, fire brigade and health services) in the Dutch context.

On a conceptual note, disaster management is a broad term which refers to a wide array of societal responses to disasters, ranging from prediction and warning to relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction (Moe and Pathranarakul, 2006). In this study, we will focus in particular on the immediate post-disaster phase, during which (inter-organizational) response and recovery activities are taking place (Ibid.). Response and recovery are no unambiguous concepts though (e.g. Quarantelli, 1999). While 'response' is generally believed to refer to the provision of live-saving assistance and 'recovery' focuses on the longer-term community needs, these phases often overlap and intermingle. In many Western countries such as the Netherlands, the relative small scale of disasters renders the strict distinction between response and recovery artificial as these phases are temporally and functionally not as distinct as after large disasters. For instance, the restoration of physical infrastructure (e.g. dykes after flooding, roads after traffic collisions) often takes place alongside or in close succession to the provision of life-saving emergency services. As a consequence, this paper will focus on the broader post-disaster (i.e. response and recovery) phase, zooming in on the institutional framework that prepares emergency responders to be deployed for both response and recovery tasks.

Focusing on relationship management in Dutch disaster response and recovery is worthwhile for a several reasons. Firstly, due to its position largely below sea level the country is prone to serious flooding. Although the Netherlands already experienced a major flooding in 1953, (looming) floods caused serious damage in 1995, 2003 and 2006. Secondly, as a result of its current active role in the international security environment, the threat of terrorist attacks on national soil has led to various interventions to increase the role of security forces in the existing institutional landscape. Thirdly, the Netherlands and its neighboring countries accommodate large petro-chemical and industrial activities which pose significant health risks and have occasionally faced sizeable industrial fires. Fourthly, as a densely populated country, disasters such as natural fires and epidemics require a quick reaction to avoid escalation and societal disruption. By offering insight into the way in which relationship management materializes in the disaster response and recovery network of a well-organized Western country, a real-world example is unraveled from which other countries and disaster management professionals can take advantage.