Managing inter-organizational breaks in a context of cross-border crisis

KANAAN Nour
M&O DRM UMR CNRS 7780
Paris-Dauphine University PSL
nour.kanaan@dauphine.fr

ADROT Anouck
M&O DRM UMR CNRS 7780
Paris-Dauphine University PSL
anouck.adrot@dauphine.fr

ABSTRACT

Dysfunctions in interactions can impede communication between crisis responders. The literature in crisis management partially addresses this practical issue by outlining several types of "breaks" (Milburn, 1983). Breaks refer to social disruptions between organizations involved in crisis response that result in erosion of social links, conflicts amplifications and unstructured responsibilities allocation. However, research falls short of details about specification of these social breaks and how to address them, thereby leaving practitioners who need to handle this issue without clear practical guidelines. We draw on the concept of authority to help dealing with the occurrence of these breaks. The empirical analysis of this article focuses on a cross-border region between France and Germany, that is very likely to encounter inter-organizational breaks. This research in progress will contribute to understand the influence of authority on inter-organizational breaks and crisis response. We discuss the expected contribution of this research.

Keywords

AUTHORITY; INTER-ORGANISATIONAL BREAKS; SOCIAL INTERACTIONS; STRUCTURE OF COMMAND; RESILIENCE

INTRODUCTION

Disasters and accidents are part of the many events that can generate societal and organizational crises. Pauchant and Mitroff (1990), for instance, have emphasized that any crisis can " *threaten the core of its social identity*" and tear down a social system, both in terms of group, organization or society. In the latest years, both international organizations and scholars have embraced the concept of resilience as a valuable lens to deal with growing worldwide issues. From the Latin words "re" and "salire" which respectively mean "backward movement" and "jump", the term resilience would thus correspond to the ability to get out of a crisis, to break free of its effects and to begin to recover after the shock (Tisseron, 2007).

In the meantime, the literature has highlighted that resilience is not that simple, in particular due to multiple interdependencies between systems involved in or impacted by crisis (Boin, Van eaten, 2013). Not only organizations have to develop quick collaborative ties in response, but they also have to share or mutualize their resources (Kapucu et al. 2010). They might also have developed competing prerogatives, institutional beliefs and rigidities over time that aggravate the likelihood of inter-organizational collapse (Turner 1976). In addition large-scale events can involve hundreds, if not thousands of organizations (Butts et al. 2012), which implies on overall complexity generated by large amounts and diversity of interdependencies.

Inter-organizational interdependencies, in addition to strong unpredictability of incident response, account for inter-organizational breaks, that refer to social disruptions and interactions failures between multiple organizations facing an unexpected event (Boin, T'hart,2010; Moynihan, 2009; Ansell, Boin, Keller, 2010). They can take several forms, coming from the sudden erosion of social links to conflicts' brutal amplifications between responders. Despite extensive documentation on the nature of inter-organizational breaks, knowledge regarding how organizational and social systems manage such disruption and possibly lever resources to address them remains under developed.

In line with this view, this research seeks to address the following question: "What are the organizational, social and legal levers to avoid inter- organizational breaks in crisis response?"

We suggest in this article authority as a valuable lens to investigate how uncertainty, pressure and complexity can generate inter-organizational breaks that impede information transmission and coordination yet essential in order to formulate a structured and effective response to the crisis. Authority in our context can be defined as an institutionalization of power. It "implies an acceptance of the need to comply with a set of commands or rules" (Koppell, 2008). Our assumption is that all the inter-organizational breaks developed in this article are linked to the absence of a clear "problem owner" (Boin, Rhinard, Ekengren, 2014) that can 1) lead to a lack of organizational empowerment in the realization of some tasks which, at the end, remain undone or 2) lead to conflicts between several authorities that consider themselves as more competent to deal with the crisis. As a consequence, Boin, Keller and Ansell (2010) compare crisis management to a "hot potatoes" by suggesting a constant movement of authorities during the process.

INTER-ORGANIZATIONAL BREAKS IN CRISIS RESPONSE

Considering the concept of inter-organizational breaks has been the result of a literature review which emphasized that 1) during a crisis, actors involved in crisis response are often belonging to a network of distinguished organizations (Boin, T'Hart; 2010) and that 2) the reason too often exposed to understand a bad crisis management lies in inter-governmental and inter organizational failures (Kapucu, Arslan, Collins, 2010). On a practical perspective, the report named " The Federal Response to Hurricane Katrina : Lessons Learned » (2006) also emphasized the importance of social interactions by presenting several recommendations that highlight how a lack of coordination between inter-organizational actors can explain the ineffectiveness of a crisis response. In this sense, difficulties during a phase of response to a crisis appear to be essentially social and have to be considered on an inter-organizational dimension.

These relational breaks occur during crisis defined by Deliaune (2015) as the result of the combination between two processes : a process of vulnerabilities that occur in the organizational environment and secondly by managerial unawareness of actors who lack competences. This definition suggests two things. First of all, crises occur in a context of high vulnerabilities made of uncertainty, improvisation and complexity that disturb traditional organizational systems (Shrivastava, 1988). Second, this suggests that organizational responses often seem to be inappropriate or uncoordinated and actors cannot necessarily agree on the way of facing a disastrous situation causing then inter-organizational breaks.

Inter-organizational breaks as social system collapse

Inter-organizational breaks mainly suggest that inter-organizational interactions happen in a climate of conflicts and lack of confidence among crisis responders. According to different authors, organizational breaks are thus a social issue that emphasize difficulties to consider relations between actors who have to work together often for the first time and in a stressful environment (Boin, t'Hart ;2010). Because crisis implies to urgently deal with a temporary and new organization of work among unknown actors who have to coordinate their actions, Moynihan (2009) suggest that the social cohesion in a crisis situation is particularly hard to achieve, each actor staying more loyal to its own organization.

 On a theoretical background, the non-adaptive group behavior theory from Mintz (1951) first highlighted the notion of breaks: in a situation of high uncertainty with strong pressure on resources, a group is more willing to act independently in order to satisfy its own needs, mainly because the success for collective action cannot be taken for granted. By taking the example of a fire in a theater where emergency services were unavailable, Mintz suggests that, beyond psychological factors such a panic or stress that slow down the evacuation, high uncertainty was at the root of the group's cohesion collapse and compelled its members to act independently. This collapse in the group cohesion can be suggest in a context of crisis as inter-organizational breaks.

In particular, breaks in inter-organizational relations take several forms: i) a resistance to respond, ii) an erosion of social links and iii) inadequacies in responsibilities' allocations.

Resistance or incapacity to respond

First of all, obstacles to good inter-organizational relations can be materialized by a resistance to respond, often in the first phase of response to the crisis. These resistance forms threaten the social system by creating tensions between several actors. For example, because of the pressure, some actors who are overloaded can eventually spread their anxiety on others and on media making the adequate response less possible to achieve

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(Lagadec,2002). The spread of anxiety and actors demotivation can then become collectively generalized. This resistance takes several forms: from an avoidance strategy (Forgues,1993) to actors' paralysis that lead them to adopt a withdrawal behavior for different reasons (focus on personal and family safety, over-solicitation of some actors, pressure and anxiety leading to burnout) (Quarantelli,1988). On an organizational level, this withdrawal behaviors are problematic because it emphasizes an incapacity or an unwillingness to occupy some strategic functions leaving a gap in tasks that are however essential in order to formulate a coordinate response to the crisis. This is the idea of strategic evasion (T'Hart and al, 1993).

Conflicts amplification and erosion of social links between actors

Breaks in inter-organizational relations can also be seen primarily by conflicts amplification, especially those which existed before the beginning of the crisis (Hermann, 1963). In this particular case, this supposes that responders know each other anteriorly to the crisis which is rarely the case (Ansell, Boin, Keller; 2010). In fact, literature has shown that in this second situation, a lack of cohesion among the network of responders emerge, especially in the case of external crisis. As a fact, groups within the same organization can show more solidarity, trust and mutual support in opposition to other groups in different organizations (Dunbar, Goldberg, 1978; Milburn,1983, Boin, T'hart; 2010). For instance, after a natural disaster, actors working in the health sector but also firemen and policemen can be required to help victims. According to this approach, inter-organizational relations between firemen and medical staff for example will be defined by suspicion whereas actors within the same structure will act as one and cooperate easily.

In this perspective, interactions between responders occur in a context of suspicion, conflicts of interest and dynamics of power that have to be considered. This erosion of social links during the crisis (Deliaune,2015) emphasized that crisis do not necessarily make organizations work for a commune cause in order to formulate a response to the crisis but it rather appears as a "battle of good Samaritans" (Boin, T'Hart; 2010) that threaten the quality of the response.

Inadequacies in responsibilities allocation and structure of command vulnerability

The issue addressed here is that during crisis, traditional responsibilities no longer match the needs generated by the disaster. For example, in the case of cross-border crisis, conflicts can occur among established organizations who are used to deal with crisis management and "emergent" groups (e.g volunteers) or organizations who would like to help on traditional tasks assigned so far to experts' actors. This is considered by some established actors as an "identity usurpation" (Quarantelli , 1988) and thus contribute to weaken social relations. This suggest that there is then a need for organizational adaptation in a situation where roles and responsibilities have to be renewed between different stakeholders (Leifer, Huber, 1977)

Also beyond traditional tasks that new actors want to contribute to, there is also bigger flexibility in tasks management during crisis. This causes disagreements around new tasks generated by the crisis and which were not anticipated and inevitably not accomplished by any defined group at the beginning. In this extreme situation, some actors can consider that formal rules for example cannot be efficient and have to be violated (Faraj, Xiao; 2006).

The issue here is that the tasks distribution and responsibilities allocation become very changing during the crisis. This unclear command structure which constantly evolves depending on political conflicts between stakeholders need thus to be clarified in order to answer very basic questions: who is in charge and who is responsible?

Inter-organizational breaks consequences on information

Inter-organizational breaks are important to consider because they have operational consequences on information. In crisis management, several studies show that information management is a strategic dimension however particularly complex to consider (Scanlon,1982). Generating urgent needs (population displacement, emergency care) when resources tend to be scarce make indeed the transmission of information in real time a prior necessity. In a context of crisis, breaks are then materialized by information and communication flows challenges on three dimensions. The first issue is related to HOW information is communicated. In a conflictual environment, information flows can often be fuzzy and un-optimized (delay in the transmission, information overload) (Lagadec,2002). The challenge is also on WHAT is communicated. Inter-organizational breaks emphasizes issues related to a lack of cohesion and conflicts amplification which can be materialized by rumors and false transmission of information(Ansell, Boin, Keller,2010). Finally, the third challenge on information is linked to the actors who communicated (WHO). In most crisis situations, actors face partial, biased information flows or have to deal with information retention that impede coordination (Deliaune, 2015).

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Heterogeneity and complexity as a context of inter-organizational breaks emergence

Inter-organizational breaks are embedded in a context of crisis made of high uncertainty concerning the access to resources and complexity as well as heterogeneity of actors involved in crisis management. Because of complexity, responders cannot cope with the needs and problems they are facing (Fink, Beak, Taddeo;1971) making breaks in these situations inevitable. In fact, actors have their own way of responding to this complex environment without necessarily harmonizing actions between heterogeneous responders.

Heterogeneity generates tensions in inter-organizational collaboration. At an inter-organizational level, divergences between the responders' objectives and contributions can generate breaks (Quanrantelli,1988). In a crisis, responders come from diverse cultural and professional backgrounds, they also have different vocabulary and do not necessarily share the same comprehension of the command structure. This can thus weaken ties eventually by causing inter-organizational tensions and political conflicts between stakeholders. Cross-border context also occurs as a source of additional heterogeneity by mobilizing several cultures and work practices. First of all crisis response necessitates interventions of organizations which work in different fields (healthcare, firefighters, police, …). Also, there is a different type of organizations that are involved in the crisis response. We then distinguish emergent organizations(group of volunteers or non-professional NGO) versus established organizations which are used to deal with crisis situations. Finally, there is a global need for taking into account the cross-border context and the own institutional and cultural environment of each country.

Complexity can also exacerbate tensions between responders that can result into breaks. As crisis are hardly predictable, responders have to redefine some of their objectives, their goals on short but also on long term and reconsider resource allocation, which can conduct people to lose abandon procedures that routinely structure their actions (Roux Dufort, 2000).The major challenge will be for organizations to outline and redefine the sense that actors previously gave to their actions.

The disruption in sense-making within the organization can, in an extreme case, lead to an identity crisis and then aggravate the vicious circle of the crisis. By losing their common references, responders do not only question their modus operandi and their skills but also their values and social attachment to the organization (Milburn, 1983). These dimensions are exacerbated in our case in a cross-border crisis where the response is even harder to consider because actors do not share the same cultural context (Maury,Richard,2011).

AUTHORITY : A VALUABLE LENS TO INVESTIGATE INTER-ORGANISATIONAL BREAKS

Uncertainty, complexity and heterogeneity inherent to a critical situation can result into breaks and a social collapse within a response system. Despite resilience being an appealing concept to reflect about emergence, it fails to outline the circumstances and factors for breaks. We suggest that the concept of authority, as formalized in the field of organization science, can then offer a new perspective to address this need in the field of crisis management.

Authority in critical situations as a valuable lens to consider inter-organizational breaks

We pose in this research that consideration of authority provides new avenues for investigation of inter-organizational breaks. First of all, the resistance of some responders reflect their unwillingness (or incapacity) to deal with the current situation and then manifest their non-responsibility to the execution of some tasks. No one seem to feel responsible nor in charge of the tasks which remain at the end undone. The risk of this undefined structure of command and an unclear acceptance of who have the authority has been theorized with the concept of strategic evasion. This concept developed by 'T Hart, Rosenthal, Kouzmin (1993) show that actors behaviors and personal interests lead to a situation where actors considered not to be responsible of the current situation and that managing the crisis is the duty of others[1]. Secondly, the erosion of social links are mainly caused by a lack of cohesion between actors with different protocol of intervention, interests and dynamic of power. Contrary to the first point where neither authority can be defined, this lack of cohesion is explain by a duality of several authorities that intent to impose their authority on the others. Police for example will consider that evacuating a dangerous zone after a disaster should be the first step while professional in the health sector will consider that helping victims is the priority. In this case, the problem is not that no one feels responsible but rather that too many people consider themselves as being responsible and in charge of the tasks. This point is

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[1] T'Hart P. ; Rosenthal U. ; Kouzmin A. 1993. Crisis decision making : the Centralization Thesis Revisited. Administration & Society, 25 No. 1, 12-45.

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particularly exacerbated in a cross border context where differences in jurisdictions and political authorities appears (Boin et al, 2010). Finally, the vulnerability in the structure of command suggests that because of the urgent needs, flexibility is considered as being essential for some traditional or new actors who will then ignore some formal orders (Trouselle,2014).

In a sense, reading inter-organizational breaks through the perspective of authority conflicts and consider how they can be avoided can thus be a way to structure and coordinate a response to the crisis. In fact, in the field of management, what we know in the literature about authority and its application to organizations is that it can provide from three sources: formal, psychological and pragmatic (Simon, 1981; Koppell,2008). First of all, formal authority refers to legal authority (laws, organizations charter). This is the most unambiguous type of authority because it allows an objective traceability of rules (Simon, 1981). This kind of authority is not linked to the concept of legitimacy : in reality a leader for example can have authority without being considered by the community as having "the right to rule" (Koppell, 2006) . Second, the psychological authority is based on confidence of actors towards the one who has authority. This can be the result of a good expertise or a superior status that confer legitimacy to this actor. Legitimacy is then a "perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions" (Suchman, 1995). Finally, pragmatic authority is driven by self-interest and not on a moral basis (Koppell,2008).

If we apply the concept of authority to the field of crisis management it remains obvious that Quarantelli (1988) was among the only researchers that mention the exercise of authority and the command structure that occur during a crisis. So far, much uncertainty still exists about how to deal with interactions issues and the allocation of responsibilities in a context of crisis where numerous and heterogeneous actors are involved in the formulation of a response.

METHODOLOGY

As this work aims to thoroughly investigate multiple aspects of inter-organizational breaks, the most adequate design of inquiry in this work is qualitative. Our rationale is double. First, we intend to identify the conditions of emergence of inter-organizational breaks during crisis response. To do so, we need to explore a large spectrum of contextual features likely to account for inter-organizational breaks, in particular all the contextual features that contribute to complexity and heterogeneity within crisis response such as professional, regional and national culture, political and social settings, etc. A qualitative design supports the discovery of potential variables that were not reported in the literature yet. Second, we plan to examine in which manner they impact crisis response and how crisis responders address them. A qualitative design, inspired from a processual perspective (Langley, 2011) allows the analysis of such dynamics.

This empirical case under study will be part of a wider research project entitled INCA that will be completed by a French-German academic and professional consortium. INCA aims at the development of a decision support framework to improve cross border area resilience to disasters. Started in Spring 2017, this work will take into account several challenges such as organizational complexity, management of multi-cultural dimensions, volunteers integration and organizational interactions. This work will help achieve INCA's objectives, e.g. elaborate a multi agent model on cross-border coordination during the phase of response to a disaster.

Empirical examination of a cross-border region is particularly relevant to further understand inter-organizational breaks, to what extent they occur, their impact on crisis response and how they are addressed because inter-organizational breaks are very likely to occur in cross- border regions due to the important levels of complexity and heterogeneity that characterize cross-border regions.

Our research design is also relevant to study inter-organizational breaks in that we will focus our data collection on surprising behaviors and the surge of emergent organizations on the stage of the crisis (e.g volunteers). Organizational emergence is very likely to occur because of strong unpredictability of cross-border areas. Connections between France and Germany are indeed numerous nowadays and are the results of major conflicts which occurred over the past centuries. It is also a borderland particularly vulnerable to natural disasters such as earthquakes or industrial accidents due to the presence of chemical wastage.

This is also suggest by the involvement of many actors with different natures (public authorities as well as private organizations) or different expertise due to diversity in equipment between organizations or differences in organizational autonomy and diverse expertise to deal with the crisis (Boersma & Engelman, 2012; Adrot, Fiedrich, F., Lotter and al; 2018). This then address the question of heterogeneity of responders.

The example of a cross border disaster between France and Germany can emphasize this dimension and illustrate inter-organizational breaks. Responders' behaviors and mechanisms to answer the crisis are in fact not the same from each side of the border. This multi-cultural context allows us to highlight different crisis

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management systems, and different social practices and procedures for example in the way France and Germany take into account civil protection. These countries have also different languages that can make the knowledge and information flows more complicated to achieve between organizations. Finally, on a national level, administrative and institutional barriers in France or in Germany can threaten the ability of responders to formulate a global response to a disaster occurring in a cross-border area. As a consequence, cross border authorities and command structure are sensitively different. This remains problematic because if authorities and organizations involved in the response do not take into account these differences, crisis response remains too vulnerable. Investigations have then to be done on this project in order to reach a mutual understanding and a strong collaboration to formulate a coordinate response to the crisis.

Based on a cross-border blackout scenario, our analysis seeks to understand how organizations involved in a blackout behave and to what extent achieve inter-organizational resilience. This scenario is being constructed by INCA team and targets several participants with different authorities levels and who contribute differently to crisis management (in their everyday activities or in a punctual way). This includes professional of health sectors, policeman or professional NGOS as well as unprofessional groups or organizations such as volunteers which are necessary to optimize a crisis response.

This scenario will be completed by several interviews with this same actors coming from different sectors (health sector, civil society, NGOs), with different expertise (professional actors versus volunteers) and with different cultures (French and German side). These methodology will also include a work on secondary data (such as reports on historical examples of organizational cooperation between the two countries) in order to understand potential inter-organizational breaks and the way authority conflicts are coming from.

We will also lead a second case by investigating another type of crisis linked to the fire of the Mont Blanc tunnel which occurs in 1999 at the border of France and Italy. Data collect will mainly remain on archives (radio records, press release, official reports from both Italian and French sides) and will be, if possible, completed by interviews with actors who was in charge of the tunnel management at this time.

EXPECTED CONTRIBUTIONS

At this time, our work remains at its very beginning and we are still refining its design in order to address the theoretical gap that we identified. There is no doubt that crisis response is fragile. Due to the complexity and heterogeneity of the set of crisis responders, actions initiated to address a crisis response remain completed on the edge of the razor. The whole response can easily collapse due to organizational breaks and the loss of social cohesion among actors (Milburn,1983). Despite the dramatic material, social and political costs associated to inter-organizational breaks, some uncertainties still remain regarding their management. In particular, the literature suggests that power and leadership are important to prevent inter-organizational breaks but does not specify the organizational levers nor the practices that can practically contribute to alleviate or reduce the risks of inter-organizational breaks. We hope that this work will contribute to address these uncertainties.

To do so, we first want to contribute to inter-organizational breaks and the different forms they take during a crisis. Also, to answer to these failures, we propose in this article the concept of authority as a valuable lens to address the research question of this work and its application to unanticipated situations. In fact, much of the searches up to now have been descriptive in nature of authority without taking into account the particular context of crisis. In crisis management, Quarantelli (1988) addressed the stakes of authority exercise during crisis but our knowledge on this specific topic remain scarce, while desperately needed : authority embodies differently and conflicts appears to be more severe in critical than in common situations. In fact, in a common organizational situation (for example doing unwanted tasks asked by a given authority) people are able to accept to conform to the situation because the cost of obedience is very low. This means that their actions may have no consequences on the organizational reputation for example or won't cause ethical tensions. This can be different in a context of crisis where there are important stakes (helping victims, avoid death,..). Actors in charge of formulating a response to a situation where people lives are threaten, will then be less supportive to authorities they do not want to follow even if this authority is formally defined (Koppell,2008). This question the three forms of authorities defined earlier. First, if legal authority is defined by formal rules, the stake here is not whether laws or rules are traceable but rather to understand what can be done when this same rules are inapplicable because of the situation. This does not mean that rules or standards have to disappear but rather to be more flexible (Bigley, Roberts, 2001; Faraj, Xiao, 2006 ; Pichaut, Nizet; 2011). Also, few writers have carried out the concepts of psychological and pragmatic authority in relation to critical settings. When authority is not based on formal rules, psychological and pragmatic authority are in fact particularly important. But, because they are based on interpretations and subjectivity rather than formal rules, they can foster behaviors that generate conflicts within the command chain and endanger crisis response.

 As a result, lack of knowledge on authority can become a serious issue. We thus seek to build practical

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guidelines in this work to help build an appropriate structure of authority and command in order to avoid inter-organizational breaks. These examples in a context of cross border crisis seem to be very necessary to study because crisis response coordination much depends on crisis responders' behaviors. A lack of consideration of psychological and pragmatic authority can lead actors to misleading decisions and affect the civil society. This work thus plans to bring this contribution to practitioners and scholars.

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