Building transboundary crisis management capacities in Europe

Lavinia Cadar and Maureen Donnelley point to the critical tasks at the core of transboundary crisis management

The world of crisis is changing. The refugee crisis, the European crisis - Brexit or terrorism - the modern crisis fields at the core of transboundary crisis management are now changing. The EU tasks at the core of transboundary crisis management.

The EU has various crisis centers and is working to put procedures in place that will help to process information, share it across boundaries and under-stand information from other sectors and/or countries, thus facilitating a shared response. But many barriers remain, especially when it comes to sensitive intelligence.

The biggest problem in a transboundary crisis is the absence of clearly demarcated decision making powers. While the US has at least addressed this problem through its National Response Framework (NRF), the EU is still stuck with the decision making structures that were designed to deal with complex but not urgent problems.

The refugee crisis is the large numbers of people from Syria and elsewhere arriving at Europe's borders highlighted serious limitations of the EU's joint decision making process. Initially, humanitarian concerns dominated responses. However, other issues, such as those relating to security, health and wider economic impacts, soon emerged. These concerns had to be weighed against a background of conflicting and incomparable information on the number, identity and dictions involved resulted in paralysis. Uncertainty over who (EU institutions, national leaders and authorities such as health services or border control, international organizations) should deliberate, and how, made it impossible to enable a comprehensive course of actions that could reduce the impact of the crisis.

Even when all national leaders agree on a course of action, the efforts of member states must be coordinated somehow. After all, the EU (like NATO) has no resources of its own. The EU's agencies have very little coordinating power.

After the outbreak of the avian influenza (H5N1) in 2005, the European Commission made efforts to coordi-nate member states in assisting the WHO's recommendation regarding antiviral stocks. However, these efforts straddled in debates over the centralization of antiviral stockpiles, in criticism from pharmaceutical companies on member states' delays in approving vaccine manufacturing, and in controversy over some member states' decision to vaccinate birds (Boin et al., 2013).

In the face of a transboundary crisis, it is critical that leaders communicate effectively and do so from the same song sheet. The recent terrorist attacks in France, Belgium and Germany were followed by different interpretations over causes and what must be done to contain them. Conveying a shared message that remains true to the expected values of the EU turned out to be a challenging task for European leaders. This challenge will no doubt become increasingly relevant in the face of simplistic explanations and extremist solutions put forward by populist politicians across Europe.

Finally, successful crisis management concludes when the actors render account about decisions and strategies initiated before, during and after the crisis, as well as the rational behind those decisions. When it is not clear who owns a crisis and who is responsible for what, particularly when multi-ple actors across borders are involved in responding to a transboundary crisis (think of the refugee crisis), a clear process of accountability is hard to imagine. The lack of accountability deepens the EU's democratic deficit. The European Parliament should push for improved procedures to hold EU leaders accountable for their role in managing trans-boundary crises.

Preparing individual institutions to respond to transboundary crises is important. Effective transboundary crisis management hinges on fostering successful cooperation across a far wider response network. Manage-ment demands amplify greatly when a crisis not only requires scaling up an institution's hierarchical chain, but also pervades multiple policy domains, jurisdictions and systems, requiring coordinated efforts among multiple organizations (Ansell et al., 2010). The EU has limited capacities to facilitate the effectuation of the crisis manage-ment tasks set out above. But it can do more. We suggest three possible initiatives.

1. Define a European vision on trans-boundary crisis management. This manifesto should set out what the EU can do to help member states, along the lines of the NRF in the US.

2. Integrate the various institutional capacities now found in separate poli-cy domains under one EU roof.

3. Refine training and preparation efforts rather than investing in large-scale exercises, pursue trainings that facilitate the effective implementation of detection, sense-making, decision making, coordination, communication, and accountability.

References


Lavinia Cadar is a consultant at Crisiplan and works primarily on the TransCrisis project. Marjorie Donnelley is a consultant at Crisiplan.