

# Conflicting Policy Objectives: A Paradox in Urban Resilience and Disaster Management Processes

Fredrik Bynander\*

*The consequences of national resilience programs for the administrative strategies of cities and municipalities can cause conflicting policy objectives and question the relevance of existing policy networks. In crisis preparedness, the relationship between central capacities and mandates on the one hand, and local self-reliance on the other is a fundamental dilemma for democratic governance. The paradox is clear in that empowering sub-units of a democratic system (individuals and institutions) risks eroding democratic governance efficacy at the national level. Local authorities tend to come up with modifications to the general programs that accommodates local social and political features as well as budget concerns, thus eroding the steering capabilities of higher administrative levels. If local adaption of policies does not happen, measures are likely to be ineffective or counterproductive. This study details this inherent dilemma for resilience policy-making and compares examples of such processes and their effects on local social networks and resilience planning.*

Resilience is a powerful concept that has rapidly claimed centre stage in policy developments concerning the safety, security and sustainability of modern societies. It deserves to be problematized like other policy driving but academically contested concepts such as security and power. The spread and consequences of resilience as an organizing principle is a global phenomenon. Resilience is one of the defining characteristics of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015-2030), and features in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change (2015). International organizations are heavily involved in forming global agendas on resilience as well as implementing various projects that aim to increase the resilience of individuals and societies (Hannigan 2012; Hollis 2015). The regional level of governance is an important carrier of these and other global themes on resilience, with the European Union, as an actor in its own right, designing an increasing number of resilience policies. At the 2016 NATO Summit In Warsaw the concept figured prominently as a vital part of national defence planning and 7 base line requirements for national resilience were identified by allies and partners. Continued work to operationalize these requirements is under way by Nato and by EU officials, that not always work in tandem.

The *consequences* of global, regional and national initiatives to improve societal resilience are hard to assess, however, as they are slow to materialize and embedded in larger, system-altering forces. The challenges of dealing with these consequences are substantial for a national system, which is too small for a decisive impact on many systemic factors, yet too big to manage and control processes in cities, communities and households where resilience is arguably built. Creating legal frameworks, incentive structures and guidance is the favoured way around this problem, but we have to ask ourself how those policy tools affect the situation 'on the ground' both long term and in case of an extreme event.

This paper will problematize policy and program coordination outcomes that are guided by the resilience mantra on a national level in order to produce results locally, and vice versa. A broad spectrum of societal domains are relevant, including critical infrastructure, credit institutions,

---

\* Swedish Defence University, P.O. Box 27805, Stockholm 115 93, Sweden. [fredrik.bynander@fhs.se](mailto:fredrik.bynander@fhs.se)  
[www.crismart.org](http://www.crismart.org)

housing, insurance, energy production and supply, health care systems, cyber-physical networks and even national defence. Each of these domains (and others) are often interconnected in vertical and horizontal streams. The vertical stream emphasizes the process and outcome of resilience policies between the global and local levels of interaction, while the horizontal stream emphasizes the interconnectedness and interdependence of domestic institutions and sectors. They affect each other in unexpected and sometimes unwanted ways. For example, initiatives to develop individual resilience to the effects of natural hazards may decrease ecological sustainability. Projects to decrease the effects of an infrastructural breakdown may hamper local community development. This relationality and interconnectedness raise many questions that must be asked and addressed to help us fine tune a more comprehensive approach to resilience that takes effects on each level of governance into account.

For public actors, one of the most important mid to long-term effect of resilience policies may be political. The political complexity surrounding resilience is no longer only or primarily about climate change activists vs. “climate deniers”. It is about the value conflicts hidden in the consequences of resilience, and the interests that represent different societal values. One such fundamental complexity is between short to medium term economic growth vs. medium to long term environmental vulnerability reduction (Arrow et al. 1995). Another one concerns livelihood factors vs. infrastructural and administrative factors (Plummer & Armitage 2007). In crisis preparedness, the relationship between central capacities and mandates on the one hand, and local self-reliance on the other is a fundamental dilemma for democratic governance. The paradox is clear in that empowering sub-units of a democratic system (individuals and institutions) risks eroding democratic governance efficacy (Comfort et al. 2010:10). Coming to grips with these political tensions, and how they play out on the local arenas, requires scrutiny of the political process of resilience and anticipated gains and losses. This piece will discuss the dilemma of controlling (coordinating) policy outcomes instances where self-reliance has been practiced (Paton & Johnston 2001). It will commence by discussing policy coordination factors that would intervene in democratic processes. It will then propose a comparative case study that could shed light on this issue and distinguish between factors that would contribute to democratic processes (such as democratic participation of empowered subjects) and factors that would counteract them (such as resilience-inducing community autonomy).

## **Policy Coordination<sup>1</sup>**

In order to achieve comprehensive results from public undertakings, national authorities increasingly try to deploy and control different modes of coordination. Public administration and organization scholars typically think of coordination in terms of a set of activities aimed at solving the problem of integrating different tasks (Boin and Bynander 2015). When people or organizations have to collaborate to get something done (because they cannot do it themselves), they will have to “fit” or “weave” together their activities (Argote cited in Jarzabkowski et al, 2012: 908; Chisholm, 2003: 254); they must “connect the elements” to deliver their product or service (Jarzabkowski et al, 2012: 910). Policy coordination is a core process for central authorities to influence and control local units. However, local concerns and needs can be formulated as demands on national policy-making, and the formidable actors in this regard are the cities. So, in a world with ever more powerful metropolitan units embodying the interests of urban community, the nation-state is under siege to craft solutions to central policy problems that are specific to urban areas and urban problems.

---

<sup>1</sup> This section is based on the discussion on coordination in Boin & Bynander 2015.

Hierarchical administrative practices is losing its prevalence in modern governance (Bardach, 2001) and an alternative view has made steady headway over the years. This 'bottom-up view' or 'emergent perspective' treats coordination as an outcome of diverse groups of actors working together to solve complex problems within local networks of governance or as emerging actors (Beck and Plowman, 2013).

#### *A top-down perspective on coordination*

The complexity of contemporary industrialized society presents increasing challenges to administrative practices in order to implement policies that are effective "down-stream". A deep-seated assumption among many public administration and organization scholars holds that coordination of interdependent administrative tasks does not come about easily. Without some form of guidance, conventional wisdom has it, such a collective feat is unlikely to emerge in an efficient and timely manner.

Potential policy conflicts need to be managed. Managers aim "to bring about some kind of order, to arrange things" (Chisholm, 1989: 13). They try to "align actions among interdependent parties" (Okhuysen and Bechky, 2009: 485). To coordinate policy between central and local levels require not only the elimination of counter-effective elements, but the organized provision of resources at the proper point in time. In this perspective, structured collaboration is the result of formal mechanisms that specify how organizational units and employees should work together to make the envisioned a reality (Thompson, 1967).

Much of the literature on policy coordination aims to uncover the organizational arrangements that allow employees to realize a collective performance. Fayol (1949), for instance, identified such administrative principles as the unity of command, centralization and the subordination of individual interests. Other familiar mechanisms include plans, protocols, rules, routines and structures. Effective mechanisms specify accountability, create predictability, and enhance common understanding of tasks and processes (Okhuysen and Bechky, 2009).

These mechanisms work best when the "task environment" is stable and uncertainty is limited (Thompson, 1967; Chisholm, 1989). When uncertainty emerges, formal mechanisms lose relevance quickly (Faraj and Xiao, 2006). It is commonly recognized that uncertainty requires less formal and more interpersonal mechanisms, which organization scholars have traditionally categorized in terms of 'mutual adjustment' (Thompson, 1967; Faraj and Xiao, 2006; Okhuysen and Bechky, 2009). This means that activities are coordinated by feedback rather than some plan or set of directives.

The uncertainty involved in creating policy for an entire national jurisdiction must be based on the best available estimates and calibrated to take account for local and provincial fluctuation and anomalies. Flood plain mapping and policy-making in the US, for example, is suffering from lack of implementation and funding of identified best-practices and risk-mitigation strategies, resulting in significant construction inside identified 100-year flood-plain and the paving over of coastal prairie wetlands in the Houston area (Conrad & Larson, 2017). The combination of low propensity to spend federal funds on costly but effective measures, such as buy-out of flood-prone properties, and local development interests that tend to favor real estate scarcity over sustainable catchment policies.

In crisis, formal structures and planned responses are 'too slow, disconnected, and inadequate for the task' (Majchrzak et al 2007: 147); 'the preconditions known to facilitate expertise coordination are limited or nonexistent in disaster response' (Majchrzak, 149). A crisis creates conditions where

“coordination by plan” is not only inappropriate, but may have negative consequences (Dynes and Aguirre, 1979; Clarke, 1999).

Traditional coordination tools have limited applicability in high-velocity environments. This message has not penetrated deeply in policy circles. In his classic analysis of how communities respond to disaster, Alan Barton (1969:144) referred to the “Utopia of the Civil Defense Planner: everybody has a role and is trained to perform it.” Today’s plans all too often still create the illusion of coordination, and thus the illusion of control, which may undermine the preparation for, and response to, a crisis or disaster.<sup>2</sup>

#### *A bottom-up view of coordination*

Not all researchers approach coordinated behavior as a resultant of formal mechanisms imposed from the top. A rich body of research has documented how groups and organizations in so-called high-velocity environments work together quite effectively without being guided from the top. The “craftsman perspective” is replaced by a focus on coordination as an ‘emergent property of a collectivity’ (Bardach, 2001).

Faraj and Xiao’s study suggests that these “coordination mechanisms” work best in a particular organizational setting, where the organizational culture sanctions and facilitates “emergent coordination.”<sup>3</sup> It is not clear how these mechanisms could spring into action in a timely fashion when a network of actors who may have never seen each other before must start collaborating in the face of an urgent and frightening threat. It appears that spontaneous collaboration does need a little help. Bardach (2001) proposes a set of “building blocks” that should be in place to enable such collaboration. Training, for instance, may help to familiarize team members with each others’ roles, which generates a level of predictability (through familiarity).

This study provides a first hint how two seemingly contradictory perspectives, when viewed in concert, may provide the building blocks for effective collaboration under uncertainty and instability (Bardach, 2001; Faraj and Xiao, 2006). We have the top-down perspective, which identifies time-honored mechanisms to engineer collaboration – but these mechanisms only work in stable and known environments. Then we have the bottom-up perspective, which assumes that collaboration will simply emerge in times of instability – but it is not clear why or under which circumstances this would happen. Upon closer inspection, it appears that orthodox ways to engineer collaboration may be used to create an environment in which unplanned collaboration can emerge.

We may be thus able to propose a combination of both perspectives and develop a theory of collaborative resilience governance (cf. Ansell and Gash, 2008: 544). This theory would recognize that collaboration has to be analyzed at different levels: from local collaboration, intra- and inter-organizational cooperation, to the cooperation between formal organizations and emerging networks. It would allow analysts to assess the effectiveness of governmental actions in bringing about or facilitating collaboration.

---

<sup>2</sup> This is why Lee Clarke (1999) calls these plans “fantasy documents.” The collective process of *planning* is a different creature as is often noted – it creates mental preparedness by putting anticipated needs in context, by clarifying requirements on eg. communications and logistics.

<sup>3</sup> The fact that they observed the trauma teams, and were allowed to observe them in action, suggests they were doing their research in a very special organization.

This perspective would analyze government's coordinative actions along two dimensions. First, it would study if and how government enables the emergence of collaborative behavior locally. Second, it would study if and how a governing arrangement is established "where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets" (Ansell and Gash, 2008:544). This perspective, in other words, would study how public leaders overcome the gap between formal coordination processes and emergent collaborative practices.

Such a perspective, I argue, would go a long way in answering the core question underlying this research: how can we explain why vertical collaboration sometimes succeeds and often fails. It is usually described as a function of poor needs assessment, dysfunctional public relations or disorganized implementation. The core of the problem, however, should be sought in the fundamental mismatch between the top-down and the bottom up coordination concepts, which are continuous forces of change and ubiquitous sources of friction in policy processes. The challenge for actors straddling the divide between the central and the local is to channel emergent collaborative outcomes into the framework of formal policies.

## Bibliography

- Ansell, C., & Gash, A. (2012) Stewards, mediators, and catalysts: Toward a model of collaborative leadership. *Innovation Journal*, 17(1).
- Arrow, K., Bolin, B., Costanza, R., & Dasgupta, P. (1995) "Economic growth, carrying capacity, and the environment." *Science* 268(5210): 520.
- Barton, A. (1969) *Communities in Disaster*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bardach, E. (2001). Developmental dynamics: Interagency collaboration as an emergent phenomenon. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 11(2), 149-164.
- Beck, T. E. and Plowman, D.A. (2013) Temporary, emergent interorganizational collaboration in unexpected circumstances: A study of the Columbia space shuttle response effort. *Organization Science*, 25(4): 1234-1252.
- Boin, A. & Bynander, F. (2015) "Success and Failure in Crisis Coordination." *Geografiska Annaler: Series A, Physical Geography*, 97(1): 123-135.
- Chisholm, D. (1989) *Coordination without hierarchy: Informal structures in multiorganizational systems*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Clarke, L. B. (1999) *Mission Improbable: Using Fantasy Documents to Tame Disasters*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Comfort, L., Boin, A. & C. Demchak (Eds.) (2010) *Designing resilience: Preparing for extreme events*. Pittsburgh, Pa: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Conrad, D. & Larson, L. (2017) "We already knew how to reduce damage from floods. We just didn't do it." *Washington Post* September 1 Retrieved on September 1: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/we-already-knew-how-to-reduce-damage-from-floods-we-just-didnt-do-it/2017/09/01/cc6c4174-8f2a-11e7-8df5-c2e5cf46c1e2\\_story.html?hpid=hp\\_hp-cards\\_hp-posteverything%3Ahomepage%2Fcard](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/we-already-knew-how-to-reduce-damage-from-floods-we-just-didnt-do-it/2017/09/01/cc6c4174-8f2a-11e7-8df5-c2e5cf46c1e2_story.html?hpid=hp_hp-cards_hp-posteverything%3Ahomepage%2Fcard)
- Dynes, R. R., & Aguirre, B. E. (1979) Organizational adaptation to crises: Mechanisms of coordination and structural change. *Disasters*, 3(1), 71-74.
- Faraj, S., & Xiao, Y. (2006). Coordination in fast-response organizations. *Management Science*, 52(8), 1155-1169.
- Fayol, H. (1949). *General and industrial administration*. NY: Pitman.
- Fekete, A., Hufschmidt, G. & S. Kruse (2014) "Benefits and Challenges of Resilience and Vulnerability for Disaster Risk Management." *International Journal of Disaster Risk Science* 5: 3.
- Fortun, K. (2001) *Advocacy After Bhopal: Environmentalism, Disaster, New Global Orders*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hannigan, J. A. (2012) *Disasters without borders: The international politics of natural disasters*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hollis, S. (2015) *The Role of Regional Organizations in Disaster Risk Management: A strategy for global resilience*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hollis, S. (2016a) "Global and local re-presentations of resilience in the Caribbean: the role of art in the construction of the self." *Resilience: International Policies, Practices and Discourses*. Published online: 11 Jul 2016.
- Hollis, S. (2016b forthcoming) "Global Governance-Localized Development Gaps: The Case of Disaster Risk Reduction in Oceania." *Global Governance*.
- Jarzabkowski, P.A., Le, J.K., and Feldman, M.S. (2012) Toward a theory of coordinating: Creating coordinating mechanisms in practice. *Organization Science*, 23, 4: 907-927.
- Majchrzak, A., Jarvenpaa, S.L. and Hollingshead, A.B. (2007) Coordinating expertise among emergent groups responding to disaster. *Organization Science*, 18, 1, 147-161.
- Okhuysen, G.A. and Bechky, B.A. (2009) Coordination in organizations: An integrative perspective. *The Academy of Management Annals*, 3, 1: 463-502.
- Paton, D. & D. Johnston (2001) "Disasters and communities: vulnerability, resilience and preparedness. *Disaster Prevention and Management: An International Journal* 10(4): 270-277.
- Plummer, R. & D. Armitage (2007) "A resilience-based framework for evaluating adaptive co-management: linking ecology, economics and society in a complex world." *Ecological economics* 61(1): 62-74.
- Tierney, K. (2014) *The Social Roots of Risk: Producing Disasters, Promoting Resilience*. Stanford, CA\_ Stanford University Press.
- Thompson, J.D. (1967) *Organizations in Action: Social Science Bases of Administrative Theory*. New York: McGraw-Hill.