Interagency Relationships and Policy Making

Interagency (IA) coordination and collaboration is an effective tool for developing and executing a layered and integrated response to crises. IA processes and approaches are often compelled by governmental leadership. Legislation and regulations that create interagency constructs in the form of new agencies—such as the Department of Homeland Security, created by the Homeland Security Act of 2002—or new interorganizational bodies—such as the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), created by the Executive Order 13354—are important ways by which IA coordination is mandated. The NCTC is a particularly keen example of a network that is compelled by law to share, integrate, and analyze intelligence that has been collected by various organizations.

The U.S. Constitution carries an important, and often controversial, caveat called federalism. According to the 10th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, "The Powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people." This relatively short statement is dense in meaning with an acute bearing and is at the core of homeland security and emergency management doctrine, policy, and policy making.

Planning operations, exercising plans, and responding to emergencies and events of catastrophic nature begin with local communities such as cities, towns, counties, intrastate regions, and states. The National Response Framework (NRF) formalizes this process, reminding responders and partners at all levels of the sanctity of sovereignty. Yet, in the event that a locality is overwhelmed by a crisis and in need of additional support, these communities are encouraged (though not compelled) to request other governmental levels to provide those capabilities for which they specifically ask.

For example, in responding to wildfires, a small town with volunteer firefighters may seek county reinforcement if the fires expand too rapidly or are threatening lives and property. The county may in turn request support from the state, maybe expressly requesting only heli-borne firefighting capabilities, for example. The state and county are in support of the local community; at no time would the state’s leadership automatically be in charge unless for some reason the incident commander role (initiated at the local level) were to be relinquished.

The NRF communicates the means by which agencies and governments at all levels and from any sector can best collaborate and communicate, but this document provides guidance, not law. Homeland security and emergency management plans are developed at the user level, even while assistance from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), or individual state governments may provide templates, training opportunities, consolidated resource-inventory information, grant dollars, and other resources.
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Resources and shared expertise may provide incentives, but those do not equate to mandates. Then again, incentives are fairly hard to pass up in a resource-constrained world. Voluntary alliances also contribute to a comprehensive response, such as Emergency Management Assistance Compacts (EMAC) between states who pledge resources such as National Guard personnel and other capabilities in support of other states.

The ultimate point for considering the homeland security and crisis management policy-making process, while taking into account intergovernmental and interagency relationships, is that the relevant policies are developed and implemented at a myriad of levels of government and dispersed across organizations. Complementarity between any and all response plans and homeland security strategies is crucial, yet not necessarily compulsory.

In this way, IA involvement and coordination still requires an inordinate level of engagement and internal (individual or group) motivation. IA as a construct for an agency’s makeup may be legislated, but collaboration and cooperation cannot truly be forced even if certain coordination steps or phases are enumerated. Attempting to make collaboration obligatory is contrary to the whole point of encouraging coordination, relationship building, trust engendering, and partnerships.

Reference

U.S. Const. amend. X, § 1.