Enabling policy teams in crisis management by addressing their specific information needs

Josine van de Ven
TNO Defence, Safety and Security
The Netherlands

Astrid Janssen
HKV consultants
The Netherlands

Abstract

In this paper we present ongoing work on clarifying information needs for the highest level in Dutch regional crisis management, the policy teams. The reason for specifying these information needs is an often heard complaint that the policy team is often too much involved in operational crisis management. We argue that the policy team has additional information needs based on their tasks, and that they are currently not provided with all the information they need.

With this research we will be able to provide more insight in the responsibilities and tasks of a policy team in relation to the information they need. Our aim is to advise crisis management organisations on content, context and form regarding information systems for policy teams.

We would like to present our work to discuss our findings and place them in a more international context.

Keywords

Policy makers, decision making, operational, incident information

Introduction

Dutch crisis management is going through a lot of organisational changes at this moment. These changes are based on new laws that seek to improve the effectiveness. Since laws themselves do not change anything, but people do, organisations have been looking these past years into ways to improve their way of working (The Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations and the Ministry of Defence, 2007).

For a description of the Dutch crisis management organisation see Van De Ven *et al* (2008). From this description it follows that most of development work focuses on the tactical and operational levels of the crisis management organisation. The policy level is involved, but not the focus of the attention (The Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations and the Ministry of Defence, 2007).

In the presented research project that is carried-out as part of the Flood Control2015 innovation program (www.floodcontrol2015.com) we focus on the policy level. The overall aim is to research the 'support of multi-party decision making processes'. In this project there are three work packages, one to research the support of meeting procedures, one to research the possibility to use video conferencing in such a context, and ours that researches the information needs of the decision makers at policy level.

In our process to come with advice for crisis management organisations regarding information needs for policy teams we came across the more general concern that "policy teams may become even more involved with operational matters in the new network centric way of working". This concern was based upon the current developments of the "actual incident information" (Actueel Totaalbeeld) which supports the situational awareness. The "actual incident information" (AII) may in time replace the current situation reports that are static, and therefore by default not up to date. The AII contains mainly operational information, and therefore anybody reading it gets informed on operational matters.

In our research of the information needs for the policy team, we therefore first looked into the main tasks of that team, and then combined this with our insights on the "operational involvement" problem.

Task Analysis

To be able to say something about information needs it is important to have a good understanding of the task the policy team has to perform. We consulted documents on operating procedures, interviewed people and consulted people taking part in policy teams. Normally, task descriptions are written down according to procedures followed. These are mostly tasks like "staying in close contact with the operational crisis managers", "carrying responsibility for the overall crisis management", "taking decisions on administrative dilemmas in operational incident management" and "setting longer term goals and policies" (Based on different documents from different safety regions).

To get a more complete overview, we used the roles a mayor plays during a crisis. The mayor is the head of the policy team, and lately a lot has been done to explain this role during a crisis. Basically 4 roles are recognized (Jong and Johannink, 2007):

1. Mayor of the village or city, leading figure of the citizens
2. Decision maker, chair of the policy team
3. Strategic leader in politics
4. Administrator of the municipality

Combining information from the task analysis and the roles of a mayor during a crisis we came up with a new structure regarding the tasks of a policy team during a crisis.

Based on the outcome of that combination (see Figure 1) we recognize 3 main tasks of a policy team:

1. Incident management for the short term. Tasks in this group span those activities related to administrative decision making for the current situation on dilemmas that are in general brought to the table by the Operational Leader.
2. Incident management for the long term. It is the responsibility of the policy team to look more than 12 hours ahead. All activities that are related to formulating policy and deciding on strategies regarding the longer term fall into this group. There is no

specific interested party or client for these topics, although they set the long term goals for the operational team.

3. Leading the (official) explanatory statements to the public. This last group of activities is related to informing citizens about the incident. Usually communication is done via the media, however activities like visiting the injured in the hospital also falls into this group. The main goal of these activities is to reduce public and political uncertainty caused by crises (Boin et al, 2005), increase trust in the government doing their job (in fighting the crisis) and to provide citizens with advice to enable self efficacy,

When we plot these tasks against the concern of too much operational involvement, it becomes clear that especially the long term incident management is underdeveloped. This is not surprising, considering the information that is presented in AII-systems or the current situation reports – both contain only operational incident information.

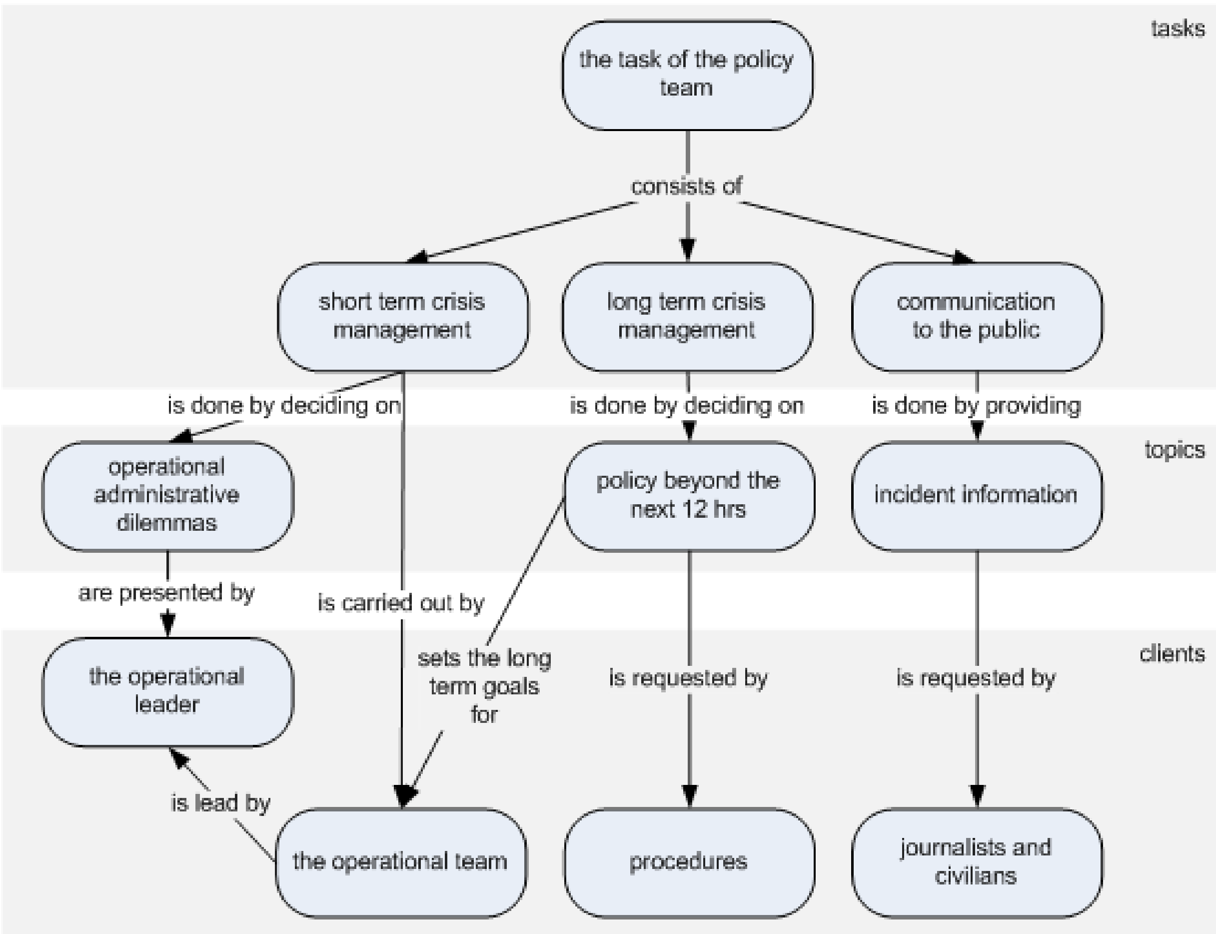

Figure 1. Task analysis of a Dutch crisis management policy team

Problem Analysis

In parallel with the tasks analyses we also performed a problem analysis. This problem analysis was only based on interviews and consultations with people having knowledge of policy teams.

What we noticed during our interviews and during sessions, that it is not possible to provide a universal story that everybody agrees upon.

Therefore the following analysis is fully endorsed by some interviewees, partially by others, and some recognize the background of the problem, but ascribe it to entirely different problems. In our activities we have incorporated some in-dept interviews with some of the people that do not fully agree with the analysis so far. To better understand their situation. These issues support the problems mentioned earlier on the task analysis.

The origin of the problem analysis was the utterance that we heard many times "the policy team has too much operational involvement". In this paper we will answer two of the main questions that we wanted to answer:

1. What does this mean "too much operational involvement"?
2. What is possible the origin of this involvement?

Meaning of 'too much operational involvement'

First of all it is the perception of the tactical and operational teams that the policy team is too much involved in the operational matters during a crisis, i.e. micromanaging. Members of policy teams generally do not have that perception. If asked they can come up with situations wherein others (other city, other team members) might have been *a little too much* involved in operational matters. We also came across the example where the members of the operational or tactical team found their policy team too much involved in operational matters, whereas the policy team disagreed with that.

Two obvious examples where a member of the policy team was too much operationally involved were:

- Requesting a specific ambulance to move to anther location.
- Providing different orders to personnel than their commander did, when visiting the incident location.

Why people do this and whether this can be easily changed is something for the following question.

After these two obvious examples it becomes fussier. Both parties (tactical and operational on one side, policy on the other) agree that the responsibility lies with the policy team. A policy team that does not answer solely *yes* or *no*, but poses additional questions, requests more details or even other options and even provides advice on actions to take, is that a team that is too operational or just a team that wants to do a proper job? Where does the responsibility of one team stop and the other one takes over?

It is not easy too distinguish when a policy team is being too much operationally involved and when it is requesting information needed to do its job.

Summarizing: Whether policy teams are too 'operationally' involved is on one hand an matter of perception, and on the other hand a matter of responsibility.

Origin of operational involvement

To answer this question we will state only those issues that we found on the policy team since this team is the focus within our project.

We clearly see four grounds for the operational involvement of the policy team:

1. Diminished trust between the people in the different teams. Although trust between people in one team is also important we mean the trust between the different levels in here, policy – operational – tactical teams. (see for example Burke *et al* (2007) on this subject)
2. Insufficient understanding of own tasks and responsibility and those of others. Although procedures can be written down, there is usually room for interpretation. Most of the crisis management plans were clear on the responsibility of policy teams but rather vague about the scope of the tasks and the job description.
3. Personal motivation: "I would like to DO something". This motivation can be found in situations where members from policy teams are confronted with victims or upset citizens and feel that action is needed immediately.
4. Information that is provided to the policy team contains too much operational detail and does not correspond with their task. Moreover, no long term information is provided or requested, since this part of the job is specific to the policy team, it is not supported by the operational nor tactical team with information.

Especially for our work in this project this last reason was interesting to combine with our findings of our task analysis. This lead to an initial idea for a solution that will be discussed in the next section.

Proposed Solution

Having done a task analysis that resulted in three main tasks, our next question was what information would be needed for that task?

1. Supporting incident management for the short term. One needs information on the incident. At first the highlights, but when needed the details. In order to be able to put information in context the team also needs the main strategy of the tactical and operation team. These are usually based on the general policy to reduce casualties and reduce the impact of the incident where possible. How strategies should be shared at this level is to be researched.
2. Leading incident management on the long term. To be able to decide on policy and strategies for the longer term one needs to say something about the consequences of these strategies. Specific information about the incident needs to be added; at this moment we are investigating the possibility to make an impact analysis beforehand.
3. Leading the official explanation to the public. For this task the team needs to know what the media show, and thus what the citizens already know. On the other hand the team needs to decide on the regional communication strategy.

Since the current AII-systems focus on the incident information and getting it across as soon and accurate as possible, the above list suggests that these systems do not provide all the necessary information to the policy teams. At this moment these systems lack the information about strategies (current and future), expected development of the situation and the possible impact the strategies might have on society and its people.

We are currently working on the development of the administrative impact analysis to support the long term strategy development. In 2009, together with some people from the field, we developed a matrix-system that provides an overview of the impact of every strategy on society. Matrices are commonly used with these teams, and therefore a well-known method of working. These matrices have the benefit of providing an overview at a glance, leaving room for remarks, but also encourage people to keep it short (with the option to link to other documents in digital matrices). Colour coding systems can be used to indicate risks, ‘more information needed’ and good-to-follow practices.

In our impact analysis matrix the top row contains strategies that the team needs to choose between. Examples of such strategies are “no-evacuation, just rescue”, “only evacuation of …”, “vertical evacuation”, “total evacuation”. Although these seem rather fundamental decisions, they were during exercises often not evaluated against consequences on the policy level. Generally the decision for one of these strategies is made implicitly at the tactical or operational level because the decision needs to be made. .

The first column contains the areas in which the team would like to know the impact of the strategy. Our list contains at this moment 8 topics, but the list may vary per theme or phase of the crisis:

- Immediate consequences
- Acceptance by the public
- Harmed citizens
- Interest for society
- Political interest
- Feasibility
- Economic consequences
- Expected claims, judicial consequences

Conclusion

We conclude that incident management in the long term needs a different type of information than the Actual Incident Information-systems are currently providing. Lack of this type of information is one of the causes of too much operational involvement by the regional policy teams in the Netherlands. The information that needs to be added contains the anticipated impact of different crisis management strategies on society.

Whether simply providing this information is enough to divert the team from the operational matters that lay with the tactical and operational teams is subject to our ongoing research.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all contributing safety regions and water boards for sharing their documents, thoughts and opinions. We thank the Flood Control2015 Consortium for the financial support of our research.

References

Boin, A., 't Hart, P., Stern, E., and Sundelius, B. (2005). The Politics of Crisis Management. Cambridge University Press.

Burke, C.S., Sims, D.E., Lazzara, E.H. and Salas, E. (2007). Trust in leadership: A multi-level review and integration. The Leadership Quarterly 18 p.606-632.

Jong W., and R. Johannink (2007). Als het dan tòch gebeurt, bestuurlijke ervaringen met crises (2007). Enschede, Bestuurlijk Netwerk Crisisbeheersing. See also www.burgemeesters.nl

Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken, and Ministerie van Defensie [The Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations and the Ministry of Defence] (2007). Effectievere besluitvorming bij rampen, crises, calamiteiten en incidenten [More effective decision making for disasters, crises, emergencies and incidents].

Van de Ven, J., R. van Rijk, P. Essens, and E. Frinking (2008) Network Centric Operations in Crisis Management. ISCRAM 5th Conference 2008, Washington, D.C., USA.

Address for correspondence

Astrid Janssen: PO Box 2120, 8203 AC Lelystad, The Netherlands - astrid.janssen@hkv.nl;

Flood Control 2015.