**Abstract**

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to review the changes made to civil protection in the UK, both legislative and capacity building that aims to make the UK more resilient.

Design/methodology/approach – Reviews the background to changes in UK civil protection and compares these with the work being done by the broader disaster management community on the meaning and development of resilience to a range of threats.

Findings – Finds that the UK approach has been deflected by the terrorist attack of 11 September 2001 and is clearly focused on organisational resilience. This top-down approach does not augur well in terms of promoting a more resilient society. The paper also questions if it is time to take a broader view of what constitutes an emergency.

Originality/value – The recent changes in UK civil protection are in many ways welcome. But the promotion of more resilient communities requires a bottom-up as opposed to a top-down approach. Government funding is aimed mainly at institutional resilience. This raises the question of how to promote a broader agenda of more resilient societies able to respond to a broad range of threats.

**Keywords** Emergency measures, Disaster management, Terrorism, Sustainable development, United Kingdom

**Paper type** Viewpoint

**Introduction**

In the UK, the aftermath of the Second World War had a major influence in the evolution of emergency management. Growing fears of a possible attack by a former ally led to the Civil Defence Act, 1948. This set out procedures for the public to protect themselves in the event of a nuclear attack. At the local level, the UK central government was quite willing to let local agencies deal with emergencies. Although local organisations were able to draw on regional and national resources through a designated lead government department, the planning and execution of emergency activities was left to local organisations. Central government did not feel it necessary to place a duty on them to co-operate and co-ordinate local efforts. Against this background emergency management in the UK developed in a complex way with the responsibility to plan for and deal with emergencies being very much a local function.

This approach of central and local responsibilities remained the hallmark of UK emergency management up to the 1980s (Hills, 1994). The Civil Defence in Peacetime Act of 1986 recognised the end of the cold war era and effectively legislated for the system already in place. In the late 1980s, a number of civilian disasters (Kings Cross, 1987, Zeebrugge, 1987, Clapham rail crash, 1988, Hillsborough, 1989) pushed a review of emergency planning procedures up the political agenda. However, the reviews of 1989 and 1991 concluded that there was no need to reform the current structure of emergency planning and response in the UK. The system, with appropriate lead government departments acting as co-ordinators with local services preparing plans and undertaking operations on the ground, remained in place up to the end of the last millennium (Smith, 2003).

However, the Millennium Bug experience demonstrated to government that it could not direct at local level, with many government departments feeling constrained because they lacked formal powers to require information or action (Beckett, 2000). This was further reinforced by the flood events in the autumn of 2000 and described by the Deputy Prime Minister as a wake up call for UK emergency management (HC, 2000). The UK Fuel Blockade crisis of September 2000 added weight to this call and to the recognition that wholesale reform was needed. By February 2001, the process of review, initiated by the Home Office had begun. By July 2001, the lead responsibility had been transferred to the new Civil Contingencies Secretariat within the Cabinet Office and government launched a consultation exercise on the review, requesting responses by the end of October 2001. The review of course was much broader than responses at the local level and was intended to establish a national, regional and local framework for anticipating and responding to a range of threats. As Alexander (2002a) observes it is in the aftermath of disasters when political support for change is likely to be the strongest.

The events of September 11 introduced an added dimension to and accelerated this process. Although the UK has had extensive experience in dealing with traditional terrorist threats, September 11 introduced a form and severity of terrorism not previously encountered in the UK – a dimension where the terrorist has no concern for their own life and is intent on causing as many fatalities as possible. There had been precursors to September 11 in other parts of the world, for example the Sarin attacks in Tokyo. However, September 11 raised fears that terrorism of a new kind, organised, well financed and planned, ruthless and determined, was about to be unleashed.

**Resilience**

During 2004 the intentions of the UK government became clearer. It has mapped out and implemented a legislative and capacity building programme under the banner of UK Resilience (UK Resilience, 2005). Resilience is a term increasingly used in reference to both civil society and the emergency services and is defined by the Civil Contingencies Secretariat, that is leading the reforms in the UK, as:

The ability at every level to detect, prevent, prepare for and if necessary handle and recover from disruptive challenges (Great Britain. Cabinet Office Civil Contingencies Secretariat, 2004, p. 1).

The use of the term resilience is an interesting choice by the UK government. Resilience as a concept was initially used in ecology to describe the ability of ecosystems to resist and recover from external negative impacts (Blaikie and Brookfield, 1985). The term is increasingly used in the disaster management sphere and reflects a trend towards a holistic and proactive approach that has the community, and its ability to resist and recover, as its focus. The term resilience brings together the components of the disaster cycle – response, recovery, mitigation and preparedness, utilising a range of structural and non-structural approaches. There are a number of definitions of resilience. Burby et al. (2000) and Mileti (1999) state that resilience applies to the minimisation of losses and damages when a disaster occurs and Emergency Management Australia defines

resiliency as “A measure of how quickly a system recovers from failures” (quoted in Buckle et al., 2000, p. 9). In both these definitions it is clear that a holistic approach to disaster prevention is advocated. Minimising losses and damages and recovering quickly both imply some level of community preparedness and an anticipatory viewpoint. Resilience is increasingly used in the growing global debates on the need to reduce the impacts of disasters. The United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UN/ISDR) has adopted the term resilience and defines it with reference to natural hazards as:

*The capacity of a system, community or society to resist or to change in order that it may obtain an acceptable level in functioning and structure. This is determined by the degree to which the social system is capable of organizing itself and the ability to increase its capacity for learning and adaptation, including the capacity to recover from a disaster (UN/ISDR, 2002a, p. 24).*

Risk to human populations is a function of frequency (occurrence of a hazard), severity and vulnerability. Vulnerability represents a range of factors that express the state of development that determine the amount of damage and loss of human life that a particular hazard can cause. McEntire (2001) cite a number of factors that are increasing vulnerability and are related to the physical, social, cultural, economic, political and technological developments of society. Vulnerability and resilience are tied together with the ways in which societies develop.

Disasters result from a complex mix of conditions. Mileti (1999) suggests that there is close relation between resilience and sustainable development. Tobin (1999) takes this further by arguing that the interconnectedness of many issues at different spatial scales, including globalisation, impacts the resilience of local communities and defines sustainable and resilient societies as those structurally organised to minimise disaster impacts and able to recover quickly by restoring socio-economic vitality.

It is clear from the research by the international community on the relationship between hazard, risk, vulnerability and development (UN/ISDR, 2002a, b; UNDP, 2004) that there is a clear relationship between disaster and development and sees effective disaster management as an integral component of sustainable development. This is reflected in the call by WSSD (2002) for disaster reduction strategies that have a

twofold aim of enabling societies to be resilient to hazards while ensuring that development efforts do not increase vulnerability to hazards. This call, to enhance resilience at all levels, has been further strengthened by the World Conference on Disaster Reduction held in Kobe (UN/ISDR, 2005).

Development trajectories will continue to produce new hazards that will present new problems for governments in that they will find it difficult, if not impossible to regulate through a legislative framework. Globalisation has both its critics and advocates (it is beyond the scope of this paper to argue the merits or otherwise of globalisation), but it does present new vulnerabilities. For example the frequency and coverage of air travel can help to propagate dangerous diseases as seen with the spread of the SARS virus. Other areas are the global dominance of one information communication technology (ICT) operating system making it a target for hacker

attacks and a vehicle for spam e-mails. This has had significant consequence for the European economy with the European Commission reporting half of e-mail traffic is spam resulting in losses of $3 billion in productivity in 2003 (BBC, 2003). This is just the tip of the global iceberg in terms of increased vulnerabilities resulting from

globalisation. This is less a criticism of globalisation but a recognition that it can have unintended consequences.

Resilience is a holistic approach to disaster management that encompasses the components of the disaster management cycle. Resilience requires that the capacity of governance structures, civil society, communities and individuals to both mitigate and adapt and adjust to both current and future hazards and threats must be promoted and developed.

**UK approach to resilience**

The UK government has made significant structural changes to civil protection, bringing the legislative framework up to date, introducing new duties and codifying what already happens in practice. The Civil Contingencies Secretariat, based in the Cabinet Office, provides a focal point. The changes to the legislative base underpinning civil protection are wholesale. The Civil Contingencies Act, 2004 (HMSO, 2004) clears outdated legislation, re-defines emergencies, clearly identifies the roles and responsibilities of all participatory organisations, introduces a mandatory regime for responders and replaces the previous outdated system for emergency powers. The Capabilities Programme (UK Resilience, 2003), now underway, has been developed to ensure that there is capacity to respond effectively and efficiently to the potential effects of massive disruptive events.

How effective is this new regime likely to be in improving resilience? There is little doubt that this is a very comprehensive approach. Clear organisational structures making the process transparent, multi-agency approaches that bring together a range of expertise needed to face increasingly complex challenges, a clear audit of capabilities to fill gaps in provision and a duty throughout the UK on local responders leading to a uniform and consistent approach. However, there are areas in the reform process that raise questions about whether or not the UK government has taken a holistic approach to resilience or whether it has focused on particular areas, thereby undermining the concept of resilience.

**Local level and civil contingencies act**

At the local level many of the changes simply codify much that was already happening. Sections 2-4 of the Act set out new duties for local responders to undertake risk assessments, develop Community risk registers and promote organisational continuity. A new regional tier has been introduced that provides a platform for a regional role in both planning and response in relation to civil contingencies (ODPM, 2003). The regional tier will provide improved co-ordination and facilitation but the actual delivery of a response to a disruptive event will remain, for the most part, with local responders. The regional tier compounds the problem of boundary mismatch – a feature of UK emergency responders where the “Blue Light “ services (Police, Fire and Ambulance) work to different map bases that, in turn, are different from local authorities.

Will local services fall under regional direction or will the status quo remain? What is clear is that the spatial mismatch of boundaries between different responders will remain a feature of UK civil protection. Many of the reforms proposed at the local level are long overdue. However, many local response organisations function effectively and have already embraced much of the proposed reform. For example, a changing approach to risk and greater community involvement (the Fire Brigade for example has been proactive in promoting prevention and has an established network of community fire stations), the imposition of a duty should promote greater uniformity of approach. The challenge will be in ensuring that capacity is uniformly developed and the reforms offer little evidence of how this will be achieved.

One of the key changes is the approach to risk. Anecdotally evidence suggests that although risk (and consequently risk prioritisation) has been based upon experience and expertise of practitioners without qualitative audit, the new duties require a written justification of the prioritisation process. Section 2 [1] [f] of the Act requires the development of a Community Risk Register, which will be available for public scrutiny. This is a step change in approach reflecting government concern. The cleavage between government and governed about the reliability and truthfulness of “official” information and “expert” opinion and the reluctance of the citizen to accept this at face value is well established. As the Strategy Unit (Great Britain. Cabinet Office, Strategy Unit, 2002) of the Cabinet Office states for government effectively to discharge its responsibility in communicating risks, it needs to have a track record of openness and reliability. It cites the Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) outbreak and the Measles, Mumps and Rubella (MMR) vaccine as examples of particularly difficult risk communications to the public. Government recognises this and sees the involvement of the public in prioritising risks as crucial to the validity and acceptability of the process.

Communications is of paramount importance. How effective this two-way communication will be and how well it will act as a vehicle for strengthening resilience is difficult to judge as the media, particularly the newspapers, tend to sensationalise. Perceptions indicate that public distrust is deep and both government and the local response agencies will have to work hard if they are to convince the public.

The introduction of a duty to promote continuity management in section 4 of the Act is necessary, as experience in the UK has shown that many organisations fail to recover after a major incident. The Home Office (Great Britain. Home Office, 1999, p. 15) in their publication Business as Usual state that research has shown that 80 per cent of small businesses without business recovery plans fail within one year of a major disruption. It is understood that this research looked at the aftermath of terrorist attacks on the economic infrastructure in the UK with especial reference to the bomb that devastated the centre of Manchester in 1996. This is further supported by research by The London Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Its publication, Disaster Recovery, Business Tips for Survival (London Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 2003), points out that many UK businesses do not have plans for recovery after an incident and in the event of a data failure 90 per cent would go out of business.

**Capabilities Programme**

The Capabilities Programme is split in to three discrete areas; structural, functional and essential services. It is clear from the programme focus (chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) terrorism, mass evacuations, mass casualties and fatalities, site clearance and infectious diseases), that the rationale is based primarily on the threat of a terrorist attack. Although the UK has had extensive experience in dealing with “conventional” terrorist attacks, these have usually had an economic focus. It can be argued that the emphasis of the capabilities programme is on the kind of terrorism that is designed to maximise casualties and fatalities rather than economic damage. In this sense, the Capabilities Programme is very much a response to the events of September 11, 2001. The command structure is based on a single chain of command that is able to appropriate resources as and when required. This is a very different approach to the local structure, where agencies have to co-operate and collaborate. There are dangers associated with this. Local efforts have been built on collaboration. Central efforts tend to a command and control model. There is a danger, as Alexander (2002b) points out, that the ethos of civil protection could be undermined by centralism. This mix is dangerous with command and control likely to dominate particularly in times of crisis.

**Commentary**

UK civil protection has undergone massive changes, and will continue to, driven by events in the wider world. The reforms at the local level are certainly welcome, as they will help to promote uniformity and foster closer relations between response agencies. However, the overall structure of civil protection will remain largely the same; that is, government fulfilling the role of co-ordinator and offering guidance and with local agencies left to get on with the task.

Will this promote a more resilient UK? Data do show that the frequency of natural disasters is increasing in Europe and the UK (Munich Re, 2003). Much of this has been attributed to climate change and the threat it brings of more unpredictable weather patterns, rising sea levels, new disease vectors, disturbance to agricultural systems and the impact of higher temperatures on the vulnerable in society. Climate change has been described by the UK chief scientist, Sir David King (King, 2004), as a greater threat than terrorism. There are many more threats, in addition to those cited earlier, such as genetically modified organisms, drugs, social dislocation, changing demographics, extremist movements, novel technologies, to mention a few, that in the longer term may undermine society.

Civil protection by its nature is an area that can easily be neglected. In the UK, local government emergency planning has often been the Cinderella of local services. It is something never needed until it is required. The amount of funding for emergency planning fell from £29 million in 1988-1989 to just over £14 million in 1997-1998 (Coles, 1998). There were also wide variations in the amount of additional funding provided by local authorities (LGA, 2003). The lessons to be learned are that emergency planning has fallen foul of other local political priorities and even with a clear duty, will take some time for an even and consistent fiscal approach to develop across the UK. Funding at the local level has recently been increased. The Spending Review (Great Britain. HM Treasury, 2004) doubled the amount of civil defence grant from £19 million to £38 million. It also announced its intention to transfer the ring-fenced grant into the mainstream Revenue Support Grant (RSG) once the duties under the Civil Contingencies Act are in place. This raises concerns that this could be used to fund other local political priorities. The increase is welcome but it is dwarfed by the central government spending on promoting capability to counter terrorism. The Spending Review also provided additional resources of £450 million in 2006-2007 and £560 million in 2007-2008 to enable departments to strengthen the UK’s Counter Terrorism and Resilience capabilities. By 2007-2008 the UK’s planned investment in this area will be over £2 billion, more than double the pre-September 11 2001 level. Spending is a clear indicator of government priorities.

There is little evidence of attempts by government to promote the wider resilience agenda at the local level beyond that already undertaken by response organisations. The government has distributed to each UK household a pamphlet describing actions for individuals and families in the event of an emergency (UK Government, 2004) but nothing further is proposed to promote wider resilience. Evidence shows that public awareness campaigns of this kind do little to improve preparedness at the individual and local level (Ballantyne et al., 2000). Developing and enhancing community resilience requires the active involvement of the emergency services in assimilating and co-ordinating the perspectives and needs derived from community consultation and providing the information and resources to sustain empowerment, self-help and resilience (Paton and Johnson, 2001).

**So what is the future of UK civil protection?**

Much of the UK government proposals for civil protection should lead to improvement. However at the local level funding is likely to continue to be a contentious issue where Local authority funding is itself a cause for concern. There is a need for clearly identified, adequate resourcing to deliver UK resilience. At the national level, there is too great an emphasis on centralism. The focus of the UK resilience is very much about institutional resilience as opposed to a holistic approach. In reality, the promotion of resilience stops at the level of local responders and no meaningful effort is being to promote the wider resilience agenda. This, in the longer term, could be problematic.

Resilience in the face of international terrorism is an obvious current priority in the UK, but wider considerations should not be subsumed by this single source of threat. UK resilience is a worthy ideal yet, unless it is woven through the policy fabric of government, it is likely to be no more than a panacea unless it includes the wider agenda of vulnerabilities and includes a focused effort in engaging the wider public in strengthening community resilience. The UK government is using a variety of high profile exercises to demonstrate its commitment, for example the London Underground evacuation exercise of September 2003, but there is a danger that these could be no more than propaganda events as opposed to a real attempt to improve resilience.

McEntire et al. (2003) argue that we need a new paradigm for civil protection. They cite a range of approaches, each with merit, and conclude by arguing that a comprehensive approach to emergency management is needed. Given the complexity of the hazards we are likely to face, driven by anthropogenic activities that are, and will continue, leading to a series of unintended consequences, then arguably civil protection should engage on a wider front. Perhaps we should no longer think of civil protection as being bound by the narrow definitions of what are considered emergencies and look to promote a broader agenda based on the range of problems faced by civil society.

The reality is that emergency management at the local level will probably continue to be inadequately resourced and therefore unable to provide a service compatible with changing public expectations. Experience and expertise of emergency management at the local level will continue to develop over time as new threats emerge. The new duties mean that there is likely to be a more uniform and qualitatively audited approach. Nationally, the future structure of emergency management provision is much moredifficult to predict.

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