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The role of external experts in crisis situations in the Netherlands: a research synthesis of 114 post-crisis evaluation reports

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ABSTRACT

This explorative study examines the role of external experts in crisis situations and the conditions under which their involvement contributes to adequate crisis management. Existing crisis-management research tends to focus on stakeholder analysis, and the valuable input of experts during crisis *preparation*. Consequently, the role of external experts during the crisis response phase has been largely overlooked. This is somewhat surprising given the crucial role that is often attributed to external experts. To fill this gap, we have investigated the role of external experts by conducting a research synthesis of 114 post-crisis evaluation reports relating to 60 crises in the Netherlands between 2000 and 2013. The analysis shows that external experts are frequently involved and often play prominent roles in the crisis response. Further, these external experts are often not actively recruited by the (strategic) crisis management response structure. In addition, the contributions and activities of external experts tend not to be well coordinated by the (strategic) crisis management response structure. Based on an in-depth analysis of the evaluation reports, we identify six opportunities and threats related to expert involvement in crisis situations, and ten conditions under which expert involvement contributes to adequate crisis management.

KEY WORDS

Crisis response, external experts, crisis management, expertise, crisis networks, crisis learning

INTRODUCTION

On August 20th 2002, a leak was discovered in a tank wagon, containing the hazardous and toxic acrylonitrile, that was part of a goods train temporarily halted at the busy central railway station in the city of Amersfoort in the Netherlands. Due to the risk of a possible explosion and potential health problems, the event quickly turned into a crisis situation with extensive media coverage. In line with the crisis-response plan the local crisis management response structure was activated, involving public officials and emergency services, which closed nearby roads and railways. There was great uncertainty as a result of a lack of knowledge of the cause of the leak, the chemical substances involved, and the potential consequences. In order to be able to adequately assess the situation and determine appropriate courses of action, the crisis management organization involved three external experts to

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