

**ADOPTING INTEGRATED EMERGENCY
MANAGEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES:
POLITICAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHALLENGES**

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U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) officials have promoted the Integrated Emergency Management System (IEMS) since 1981. IEMS has many components intended to serve all levels of government in developing, maintaining, and managing an efficient and cost-effective emergency management capability. This study analyzes the implementation of IEMS, and based upon interviews, and primary and secondary source information, reports what U.S. local emergency managers think of FEMA's IEMS initiative and how far local governments have gone in adopting IEMS. The author concludes that a variety of factors, which are separate from the IEMS concept itself, have impeded FEMA's ability to successfully promote local government implementation of the IEMS approach to emergency management, but that IEMS remains an important move away from narrow purpose, single hazard program orientations of the past, to a broader, functional, and multi-hazard method of emergency management.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is a key component of United States emergency management. Formed in 1979, FEMA was to provide a single point of contact for state and local governments, and was to "optimize" the use of emergency preparedness and response resources at all levels of government by taking advantage of the similarities and response activities for both peacetime and attack emergencies (McLoughlin 1985). By creating FEMA, the national government hoped to replace a patchwork of disparate agencies, councils, laws, and executive orders with a central, consolidated, and integrated emergency management agency. Once FEMA was in place, its officials struggled to search for a logical implementation strategy.

The search for a coherent implementation strategy was not to be easy, given the assortment of organizations that had been brought together to form FEMA (see Figure 1.) As late as 1982, the General Accounting Office of the United States Congress criticized FEMA for lack of management

systems, poor formulation of its missions, goals, and objectives, as well as for problems in its program evaluation, accounting, budgeting, personnel, and procurement functions (U.S. General Accounting Office 1983).

Figure 1

- Defense Civil Preparedness Agency (independent)
 - Federal Disaster Assistance Agency (Housing & Urban Development)
 - Federal Preparedness Agency (from General Services Adm.)
 - Dam Safety Coordination (Exec. Office of the President)
 - Earthquake Hazard Reduction (Exec. Office of the President)
 - Consequences Management in Terrorism (Exec. Office of the President)
 - Warning and Emergency Broadcast (Exec. Office of the President)
 - Federal Insurance Administration (Housing and Urban Development)
 - National Fire Prevention and Control Admin. (Commerce Dept.)
 - National Weather Service Community Preparedness Program (Commerce Dept.)
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A former FEMA leader claimed that after “a thorough analysis of response actions to numerous natural disasters and other hazards,” a new approach was needed for responding to emergencies. To meet this need and to “ensure that emergency preparedness actions at all levels are as responsive as possible to major crises of all types, and to move toward implementing the enhanced civil defense program proposed by the President, FEMA has developed an Integrated Emergency Management System, or IEMS” (Giuffrida 1983).

IEMS was, to a degree, an agency innovation. However, it was predicated on comprehensive emergency management and intergovernmental relations. For much of the decade of the 1980s, IEMS was not only the “rage” in FEMA, but was a buzzword that diffused through the entire U.S. emergency management community. IEMS is still an operative implementation strategy for FEMA, but the profession of emergency management has

moved on to embrace other managerial concepts, the latest being the Incident Command System.

This study proposes to examine IEMS as both an implementation strategy and a diffusion of innovation problem. It is also a summative evaluation of how far IEMS has progressed as a managerial initiative. It examines what U.S. local emergency managers think of FEMA's IEMS initiative and provides an overview of how far local governments have progressed in adopting IEMS in their communities. In addition, it identifies political and institutional obstacles that impede adoption of IEMS.

INTERGOVERNMENTAL DOMAIN OF U.S. EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

Emergency management in the United States is highly decentralized, but is not atomistic. In other words, while the system is characterized by state and local autonomy, every local government is not left completely to its own devices about what to do in emergencies and disasters. It can be said that emergency management in the United States is "defense in depth." When one local government is devastated to the point it cannot respond to, or recover from, an emergency or disaster, other governments provide help.

Even the most cursory inspection of the U.S. federal system of government presents a labyrinth of constitutional requirements, laws, and regulations that mandate or require "incorporated" local governments to provide for the public health and safety. Implicit is provision for disaster and emergency response. Less obvious are an array of rules pertaining to disaster mitigation and disaster recovery.

State governments are not appendages of the national government. To many outside observers, the United States appears to operate as if it fits an "inclusive authority" model. In this type of model, states and localities are mere minions of the national government, with insignificant or incidental impact on public policy. U.S. national government leaders enjoy perpetuating this myth in their relations with the international community because it serves their purposes. In actuality, however, the U.S. is better understood as conforming to an "overlapping authority" model, in which bargaining is necessary because substantial areas of government operations involve national, state, and local units simultaneously (Wright 1982).

In the overlapping model areas of autonomy or single jurisdiction independence are comparatively small, and the power and influence available to any one jurisdiction is substantially limited. Consider for example the issue of North American acid rain deposition. To the international

community, an obdurate President Ronald Reagan and his administration took few steps to address the problem of U.S. acid rain emissions over the years 1981 through 1988, but one close examination unearthed a broad assortment of subfederal, cross-national acid rain abatement agreements between many northeast and north central U.S. states and eastern Canadian provinces, all undertaken independent of the President and national government. The terms "microdiplomacy" and "trans-border regionalism" have been used to describe how U.S. acid rain environmental policy has developed through a network of United States and Canadian officials (Vittes 1990).

THE INTERGOVERNMENTAL CONTEXT

Understanding U.S. disaster policy and emergency management is no simple task. There is not only wide variation among the 50 states, each with its own governor and legislature, but there are more than 19,000 cities, more than 3,000 counties, 16,700 townships, and almost 29,000 special district governments, each with their own policy making structure (Wright 1988). Consequently, one should expect variation from one jurisdiction to another. However, FEMA funds and services passed through state emergency offices, as well as some individual state government efforts to improve their local governments' disaster preparedness and response have prevented atomism.

It is no surprise that many in the international disaster research community criticize American disaster research for lack of theoretic insight. Yet political scientists who study U.S. intergovernmental relations find generalizability difficult in the context of emergency management. In his remarkable study of professional emergency management in the U.S., Thomas Drabek explains, "while many agencies function with relatively high autonomy and visibility, others are nested within law enforcement, fire, or public works departments" (Drabek 1987). Drabek's study shows that at the local level there is considerable competition within municipal government over whose department or agency should control emergency management functions (1987, p. 195). This means that along with the profusion of U.S. local governments, there is high variability over control and direction of emergency management. In New York City for example, there has been long-standing conflict, sometimes violent, between the city's police and fire services over who has paramount control of emergency management authority (Sylves and Pavlak 1990).

Local Role

In the United States all levels of government are involved in emergency management. However, when disaster strikes, it usually does so in one or more local jurisdictions, and as a result, local government has the first line of official responsibility. "State and federal governments can be counted on for more support only when the damage has been unusually widespread and severe" (McLoughlin 1985, p. 165). Therefore, local governments have to develop and maintain a program of emergency management to meet their responsibilities and to provide for the protection and safety of the public.

Local emergency agencies are expected to work with other departments of local government and the private sector to develop emergency plans and capabilities that can correspond to any natural or man-made hazard which threatens the community. Local emergency management responsibility is typically placed either in an agency that reports to a mayor or city manager, or in an existing department such as police, fire, or public safety. Local emergency managers often are preoccupied with preparedness and response, giving less attention to disaster mitigation and recovery. During an emergency they act in a staff capacity to the highest local official with responsibility to assume coordination among governmental and non-governmental forces and among higher and adjacent governments (McLoughlin 1985, p. 165).

State Role

Each of the 50 state governments has an emergency management agency. State emergency management agencies, like their local counterparts, must have an effective organization, and develop and maintain needed plans, facilities, and equipment. On a day-to-day basis it must manage a state emergency management program that complements and nurtures local emergency management. State officials are expected to gauge the emergency management needs of their political subdivisions, assess their own and federal government resources, and aid in the acquisition and application of these resources. State governments guide and assist local jurisdictions in program development and channel federal guidance and sometimes funding to communities (McLoughlin 1985, p. 165).

Most states have a single agency that takes "lead" responsibility for emergency preparedness and response activities. There are five general types of state emergency management units: (1) a body within the executive office (of the governor), or emergency authority is delegated to (2) a civilian

department, (3) the adjutant general, (4) the state police, or (5) a council which oversees departmental activities (McLoughlin 1985, p. 165).

FEMA AS INNOVATOR

Budgetary Domain of FEMA

The U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency is the federal government's smallest independent agency, with an administrative operating budget estimated for fiscal year (FY) 1991 to be about \$420 million and 2,713 full-time employees. Full FY 1991 budget authority requested for FEMA by President Bush and his administration is about \$831.3 million; however, much of this is spread over civil defense (\$154.1 million), federal preparedness for domestic and national security emergencies (\$160.3 million), emergency food and shelter (\$124.9 million), flood insurance and mitigation administrative funds (\$56.1 million), training and fire programs (\$21.5 million), and the Disaster Relief Administration (\$11.6 million), earthquake-hurricane-unsafe dam and other hazard planning (\$16 million), and radiological and hazardous materials emergency preparedness (\$11.2 million).

Since 1988, annual federal budget expenditures have exceeded \$1 trillion every year, but federal revenue has routinely fallen tens to hundreds of billions dollars below annual expenditures. As a consequence, the 1985 and 1987 Gramm-Rudman-Hollings Anti-Deficit Control acts sought to reduce the annual deficits by imposing annual ceilings. These limits on federal deficit spending are enforced through a mechanism called sequestration (automatic spending reductions) when deficits exceeded the annual cap by more than \$10 billion. Each year's deficit cap was set lower than the previous year's in an effort to force the federal budget to be in balance (without deficit) in fiscal year 1994.

Enactment of Gramm-Rudman-Hollings III in the massive budget reconciliation law of October 1990 has not helped FEMA. While federal spending caps are no longer fixed, and there is no target fiscal year for balancing the federal budget, domestic discretionary spending of the type that funds FEMA's day-to-day operations undoubtedly will be squeezed tighter over each of the next five fiscal years. FEMA's operating budget has undergone dismal growth and frequent shrinkage over the 1980s, and prospects look no better for the 1990s.

The affects of budgetary limitations are that FEMA has meager resources to apply to nondisaster operations, such as mitigation work, responder training, public education, preparation, response exercises.

demonstration projects, and stockpiling of emergency resources. In many ways, the collective power of the 50 state emergency service public administrative organizations far exceeds the resources of the central government's FEMA.

Political Domain of FEMA

The Federal Emergency Management Agency is handicapped not only by a relatively small budget and staff, but additionally by weak clientele groups and a low public profile in nondisaster periods. One news story referred to FEMA as "the stepchild" of government (Ginsburg and Rasor 1990). Matters have not been helped by the Bush Administration's long delay in appointing a permanent director for FEMA. New Hampshire's Wallace Stickney, a former aide and close friend of White House Chief of Staff John Sununu, was finally confirmed by the Senate on August 4, 1990. At least five other senior, politically appointed FEMA posts were either vacant or filled by acting personnel over an eighteen month period.

During the Reagan Administration several FEMA appointees, including its top administrator, resigned under suspicious circumstances. At least one congressional inquiry unearthed damaging mismanagement by politically appointed FEMA officials. FEMA was not the only federal agency to suffer under unethical and incompetent leadership in the Reagan era. However, compared to other, more established departments and agencies, FEMA is seldom in the news. FEMA's negative publicity in the Reagan years may have hurt both its reputation and its employee morale.

Also, under political appointees of President Reagan, the agency gave increasing priority to preparing for nuclear attack. Some FEMA subordinates "say planning for such disasters as tornadoes and floods were all the worse off because of the agency's nuclear focus." One former FEMA official argued that "agency bosses pay lip service to dual preparedness but privately emphasize nuclear attack." Advocates for natural disaster planning complained that while FEMA will spend \$300 million in FY 1991 preparing for nuclear attack, the National Earthquake Program will receive only \$11 million. In addition, while the U.S. suffers the highest fire losses among industrialized nations, fire and training programs are budgeted to expend only \$24 million in FY 1991, and FEMA has proposed cutting those funds by \$3 million.

FEMA assistant associate director for civil defense, John McKay, refutes allegations that FEMA is disproportionately investing in preparation for nuclear attack. He argues that 85 percent of planning for nuclear attack applies to natural disaster preparation as well (Ginsburg and Rasor 1990, p.

B-5). Given the Reagan Administration's preoccupation with national defense, and its lavish funding of the defense budget in the 1980s, FEMA officials may then have been tempted to emphasize the civil defense component of FEMA's jurisdiction in hopes of capturing a fraction of increased defense spending. In many ways their efforts failed. Now that superpower relations have improved, to the point that "the Cold War has ended" (as many, including Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, claim), continued FEMA preoccupation with civil defense against nuclear attack may only work to the agency's disadvantage by alienating potential allies in the natural and technological hazard community.

ORIGINS OF IEMS

U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) officials, building from their own experience, and from the products of academic research, created the Integrated Emergency Management System in 1981. During 1983, this approach was promoted widely, to all levels of government, as an innovative and important strategy for applying comprehensive emergency management. The IEMS concept rests on teamwork, particularly coordination and cooperation between agencies and governmental jurisdictions. Teamwork is encouraged throughout all phases of comprehensive emergency management involving preparedness for, mitigation of, response to, and recovery from all types of disasters, including conventional or nuclear war (*IEMS News* 1990).

Features of IEMS

The IEMS concept embodies use of a single integrated emergency operations plan for common response elements of all types of disasters, as well as hazard-specific appendices for unique situations and requirements. It also advocates use of procedures, personnel, and facilities for major emergencies that are as close as possible to procedures used on a day-to-day basis. "Integrated" means an emergency management program that includes interagency and interjurisdictional teamwork through all phases of operation.

The IEMS program calls for identification of emergency or disaster risks and potential vulnerabilities. An inventory of community resources is necessary, as well as an outline of the roles and responsibilities of municipal departments, such as law enforcement, fire services, public works, emergency medical, finance and personnel. The IEMS also insists on strict coordination and good communication between departments of govern-

ment; certain important businesses (utility companies and contractor associations, for example); and volunteer organizations, like the American Red Cross, the Salvation Army, and private search and rescue teams.

While FEMA issues guidelines, directives, and informational materials that helps each community to identify those hazards most likely to affect them, the IEMS concept is designed for tailoring to the specific requirements of each community. FEMA people do suggest ways to plan responses to different hazards. This is logical because the administration of emergency management varies so much among local governments.

BENEFITS OF IEMS

The primary benefits of IEMS flow to local government. Improved protection of life and property is the chief benefit of integrated emergency management. Better teamwork among agencies, jurisdictions, and the private sector is one way this benefit is produced. Other ways are through simplified plans and procedures which are closely linked to day-to-day operations, through wider sharing of resources and provision for support (as in mutual aid agreements) among organizations, and through better programs to assist citizens and businesses in recovering from disasters (*IEMS News* 1990, p. D).

IEMS has many components intended to serve all levels of government in developing, maintaining, and managing an efficient and cost-effective emergency management capability. It is an important move away from narrow purpose, single hazard program orientations of the past, to a broader, functional, and multi-hazard method of emergency management. "When IEMS is properly implemented, significant and measurable progress can be achieved in both national security-related and peacetime preparedness. The Integrated Emergency Management System holds great promise for the across-the-board improvement in emergency response capabilities," according to a former FEMA official (Giuffrida 1983, p. 10).

How IEMS Is Promoted

The chief ways in which FEMA promotes state and local use of the IEMS are through training and education assistance provided to state and local officials, and through administrative interchange with state and local emergency management officials. A leader in this regard is the U.S. Fire Administration, aided by its major professional clientele group, the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC). An IEMS National Advisory Committee has been formed to promote diffusion of the IEMS innovation.

LAFC and FEMA, as reported in February 1990, plan to promote education and awareness of IEMS to policy makers, public interest groups, and operational level personnel. They hope to conduct IEMS workshops for the International City Management Association, the U.S. Conference of Mayors, the National League of Cities, and the National Association of Counties (*IEMS News* 1990, p. A).

As early as 1986, the American Public Works Association (APWA) extolled Integrated Emergency Management. Its newsletter depicted IEMS as a bridge-building approach to emergency management, and referred to Los Angeles, a city that sent 60 of its top leaders to learn about IEMS at FEMA's Emmitsburg, Maryland training facility as exemplifying good use of the IEMS (Biagi 1986). However, a 1985-86 survey of nearly 400 California city managers showed that "city managers do not place a high priority on emergency management," and few judge it as significant. City managers whose cities have requested and received aid from FEMA are more likely to consider emergency management essential than managers whose cities have not asked for or received FEMA aid. The survey also showed that city managers who think intergovernmental relations are important, are also likely to be those who plan for emergencies and disasters (Sutphen and Bott 1990). These findings suggest that the IEMS has considerably further to go before it is comprehensively adopted by U.S. local governments.

Waugh (1990, pp. 221-37) argues that the IEMS model raises serious questions about the administrative system required to coordinate and promote such a program. "It would necessarily have to be a relatively sophisticated and well-financed program and it is uncertain whether states and communities are up to the task."

Probably most compelling is the extensive evidence that Drabek (1987, p. 28-29) compiled in *The Professional Emergency Manager*. Among his IEMS-relevant findings, he identified a resource-based dependency relationship that "remains the primary mechanism that laces together the fragmented components of the intergovernmental system." Drabek says the entire U.S. emergency management system is loosely coupled so that all "the agencies involved must respond to a wide variety of additional forces within their respective environments." Drabek reports that 45 percent of the EM agencies he surveyed received 50 percent or less of their budget from the local government, suggesting that a great many local emergency management organizations are heavily dependent on funds from FEMA and their respective state. Localism, lack of standardization, unit diversity, and

fragmentation characterize local emergency management agencies in the U.S, according to Drabek (1987, pp. 48-49).

Waugh makes it clear that the successful adoption of IEMS, as well as other EM innovations, depends on local capacity building. Obstacles to local use of the IEMS include shrinking funding for federal programs and continued decentralization of national programs, with either recentralization at the state level or no support at any level. Add to this demands for more local self-reliance, which are often conveyed as more administrative responsibility with little or no policy making authority. Compounding this is the fact that few states in a softening economy will make more money available to their local governments, money that might encourage them to adopt IEMS.

CONCLUSIONS

A number of factors have combined to create barriers to the successful diffusion of the IEMS innovation. Difficulties inherent in U.S. intergovernmental relations, the weak institutional status of emergency management agencies (especially at the national level), fragmentation of disaster/crisis responsibilities at each level of government, weak political constituencies advocating improved emergency management, severely constrained national budgetary authority have worked together to weaken FEMA's ability to promote local government use of IEMS. While state governments have, and can, facilitate adoption and use of the IEMS by their respective local jurisdictions, few are yet willing to do so.

Local governments are likely to use IEMS as the result of state governmental inducements or independent local adoption usually spurred by professionalization of its emergency managers. Also, local governments that have applied for and received FEMA disaster or emergency funding are more likely to accept the IEMS.

Integrated Emergency Management is an implementation strategy that has been impeded by limited FEMA funding, FEMA managerial disarray, disputes regarding the civil defense/nuclear attack mission infused within FEMA's programs, and lack of local level coherence in emergency management authority and functions, among other things. However, IEMS need not be abandoned. In many ways, the IEMS implementation strategy itself may help to overcome most of these impediments, but FEMA has diminishing leverage in promoting IEMS to the state and local governments so necessary for success. It is imperative the FEMA continue to promote the IEMS by conducting workshops, training programs, and other educational programs through its National Emergency Training Center.

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