

Abstract

The United Kingdom's Concept of National Risk Assessment

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In the UK the 1990s were a pleasantly quiet and safe decade. The Cold War was over; history had ended; and the IRA's campaign was drawing to a negotiated end. As a result the events of 2000 and 2001 – floods, foot and mouth disease, fuel price protests and the firemen's strike – came as sharp shock. The first two of those events were foreseeable hazards and the second pair emitted ample warning indicators of their onset. Yet the nation's awareness of the risks, preparedness, processes, structures and speed of response were deficient in every case. The realisation that we could and should have done much better marked a watershed in the UK's approach to civil protection and risk management, and specifically in its risk assessment concept. The presentation describes the UK's national risk assessment concepts, systems, processes and philosophies that emerged from the experience of 'The 5 Fs', and outlines the role of horizon scanning within the wider risk management framework.

The first step was to replace the obsolete 1948 Civil Defence Act with modern civil protection legislation – the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. In the context of this conference the 2004 Act and its supporting guidance have several interesting and novel features. First, it mandates multi-agency joint risk assessment at the local – county and city – level. Second, it defines and standardised risk model for universal use. Third, it mandates the disclosure by publication of the resultant local risk registers. Of course, the risk facing the UK as a whole is more than the total of the risks identified locally, as there are many hazards and threats that are beyond the capacity of local responders to identify and evaluate. This creates a requirement for a system to integrate both bottom-up and top down information flows into a coherent picture. This is the foundation of the UK's national risk assessment process, and the structures that enable its delivery.

One of the challenges in creating a national risk assessment is the effective integration of hazards and threats. Although our conversion of hazard to risk can never be exact at this level, it can at least be consistent in its approach and outcomes. This is not the case when dealing with threats – especially of terrorism – where actuarial tables do not exist and intelligence is never exact. The UK's approach to this problem is designed to resolve the inevitable imprecision consistently, with enough reliability to allow decision makers to strike the balance between hazards and threats.

Finally, a systematic approach to risk assessment, however good, is not a complete solution to the civil protection problem. Knowing what can happen does not identify when. Major floods occur in the UK every 25-30 years, but they are as likely tomorrow as in 2033. Furthermore, thinking that you have covered everything systematically

creates the psychological pre-conditions for being surprised. Countering those factors is the role of horizon scanning, which the UK conducts as a continuous activity superimposed on the more deliberate cyclical processes of the national risk assessment. However, the horizon is not a straight line but a full circle of limited radius, and therein lays the challenge.