B Bureaucratic Inertia

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Bureaucratic Inertia

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Synonyms

Administrative failure; Bureaucratic organization; Disaster governance

Definition

Disaster management inertia refers to the inability of government agencies and institutions to prevent and mitigate the impacts of disasters because of bureaucratic challenges. *Bureaucratic discretion* is granted among public managers to install effective mechanisms in resolving challenges in policy implementation. Ineffective disaster management measures suggest the inevitability of inertia in the *bureaucracy*.

Introduction

Disaster management is a governance problem where disaster leadership is a precarious but most coveted responsibility. Commonly, disaster governance is viewed to be effective if it has a centralized decision-making and decentralized operations (Kapucu 2005). Given that such a structure is accurate, crucial among public managers are their respective partnerships across government and nongovernment agencies to facilitate the decentralization of disaster response operations, while decision-making is centralized at the top management.

Meanwhile, disaster leadership involves (a) defining and operationalizing each member's responsibility to avoid confusion and overlapping of functions and responsibilities in the actual operations, (b) motivating leaders of partner agencies to actively participate in the planning process to harmonize the targets and activities during disasters, and (c) adapting and making last minute changes in order to address immediate concerns while ensuring that the targets are attained regardless of political conditions. In doing so, disaster and contingency plans are strengthened, competence among managers is enhanced, and political intentions are made clear to prevent administrative bickering which seriously hampers disaster operations.

Disaster management is undeniably one of the most complicated facets of governance. National issues such as disasters require tumultuous effort among government agencies and stakeholders to effectively combine resources and successfully address the needs of the affected communities. Collaborative undertakings emphasizing the importance of collaboration across organizational

and sectoral boundaries in carrying out public purposes are widely recognized. The impacts of disasters which trigger coordination and cooperation among agencies led to intergovernmental and interorganizational relations which are complex interactions among the multiple levels of government. Coordinated efforts between government and nongovernment organizations during the disaster or crisis management demand several capacities among responders and public managers since organizing initiatives are as complicated as the impacts of disasters they tend to address.

In general, working toward an effective interorganizational cooperation during emergency management entails several indicators uniting the entire bureaucratic organization. Moreover, specific challenges attached to both process and structure of disaster governance include lack of incentives and lack of capacities, and political dynamics impedes performance. The dynamic relationship among agencies suggests the significant role of public managers in addressing challenges during a crisis such as the need for a timely response and to determine the limitations of command and control. Nonetheless, certain levels of discretion are given to local institutions and agencies as recognition of their vital role in handling crisis situations (Congleton 1982). However, post-disaster conditions reveal the consequences of *bureaucratic inertia* such as lack of coordination and unreliable information.

Disaster Management: A Complex Reality at a Glance

Disaster management operation is often plagued with the need for information sharing and coordination. The lack of coordination leading to a number of possible failures such as inappropriate allocations of first responder resources and a delayed evacuation that leads to the higher number of casualties puts greater emphasis on the necessity of coordination in disaster management. Diverse obstacles hinder coordination in the different levels of implementation, and the existing institutional measures encouraging individuals and agencies to share information are unable to sustain effective communication. Initially, agencies participate and engage in information exchange, but over time, agencies are becoming more concerned about receiving information than providing for another agency. This predicament implies a less cohesive nature of the organization where trust and social capital is weak.

The role of trust is as equally important as leadership in managing disasters. Kapucu (2005) noted that effective response and recovery operations require collaborations and trust between government agencies at all levels of implementation and between public and nonprofit sectors. Trust is built with constant and active exchanges of information which boosts the dependability and competence among partner agencies. Trust building requires a gradual process of constant interaction where such process is facilitated by a structure designed to nurture effective communication. One starting point of trust building is the availability of programs and mechanisms, such as incentives, that build and promote effective communication. In practice, there are cases where effective communication is obstructed by the unwillingness of government agencies. Such unwillingness is anchored either on the lack of competence or on the reluctance to learn new things. Thus, the presence of incentive mechanisms and a new structure facilitating the exchanges of information motivate agencies to participate voluntarily. Building interdependencies among agencies and organizations through interactive processes such as face-to-face dialogues increases trust, builds social capital, and develops into a collaborative culture which substantially increases the speed of decision-making which leads to successful disaster management operations.

Consequently, the performance of an organization lies heavily on the characteristics of leadership and quality of information passed on in the network and how such information is processed and translated into actions. Recent post-disaster findings suggest the need for institutional innovations in order to address concerns on adaptability and varying institutional norms in every level of bureaucratic organization.

Inertia in Bureaucratic Organizations: Some Insights

Bureaucracy, which root word is "bureau" referred to the cloth used to cover the desks of French government officials in the eighteenth century and became linked with a suffix signifying rule by the government (Lutzker 1982). Over time, the term bureaucracy has evolved and signified the proliferation of agencies staffed by biased and autocratic officials whose work is characterized by countless twisted processes.

Max Weber theorized that there are three groups of bureaucratic characteristics. The first group is related to the structure and function of an organization which is composed of a hierarchy of offices with fixed areas of jurisdiction anchored on specific administrative regulations. The second group of characteristics is about incentives or rewards determined by rank or position in the organization. Lastly, the third group is about the protections accorded the officeholder that as a civil servant, he has sufficient and relevant training, has passed the prescribed examinations for appointment in administrative office, and has the necessary ability to be a civil servant, and therefore, he cannot be easily removed from office as long as he satisfactorily discharges his duties. In sum, Weber's ideal bureaucracy revolved around the structure, incentive mechanisms, and application of rules and precedents in decision-making where administration engages in defining and redefining institutional goals, resolving a conflict over the exercise of authority, and dealing with the consequences of policy variations.

This conception of Weber holds true after several decades of bureaucratic evolution and innovation. Standards related to performance and accountability are becoming sophisticated in steering bureaucrats and civil servants toward effective governance and excellent public service. Seemingly, bureaucracies today are becoming more complex and multifaceted, and with the advent of innovation, any changes entail additional responsibility with no additional incentive attached to it. Consequently, resistance to administrative changes is unsurprising.

Bureaucratic inertia, in this essay, is used interchangeably with administrative inertia and government inertia which refers to the "sense of avoiding making decisions that produce more socially efficient outcomes" (Ritchie 2014). Inertia is said to be a result of a perfect blend of risk avoidance among government employees, formalization as well as the presence of an incentive structure which underscores decision restraint.

Ironically, the formalized decision-making processes in a bureaucratic organization are set to aid innovation; however, instead of facilitating possible changes, such processes are considered overly bureaucratic which in turn obstruct innovation. With this, government agencies become less likely to innovate due to the complexities of practical realities which in the long run has formed a culture of risk aversion. On the other hand, bureaucratic inertia is also viewed as a result of how civil servants optimize their options using their respective discretions in the face of certain constraints.

Moreover, bureaucratic inertia is highly dependent on the bureaucratic preferences in terms of how such policy, innovation, or changes affect the interests of the bureaucrats. A policy that is aligned to the interests of the bureaucrats is easily adapted with lesser changes or distortion in the implementation processes. However, a policy not aligned to the preferences of the bureaucrats is hardly executed. Thus, the bigger the organization, the more apparent bureaucratic inertia because the transmission of policy down the organization hierarchy presents each civil service with the opportunity to make use his discretion. These characteristics of bureaucratic inertia are highly noticeable in disaster management operations.

Disaster Management Dilemma

Social concerns are commonly addressed by a policy, and every policy implementation is geared toward maximizing the available resources while promoting the public welfare. Policy implementation is where the goals and objectives formed into a law or policy are enforced into

Bureaucratic Inertia, Fig. 1 The flow of influence in disaster management. (Source: Adapted from the model of Bendor and Moe 1985)
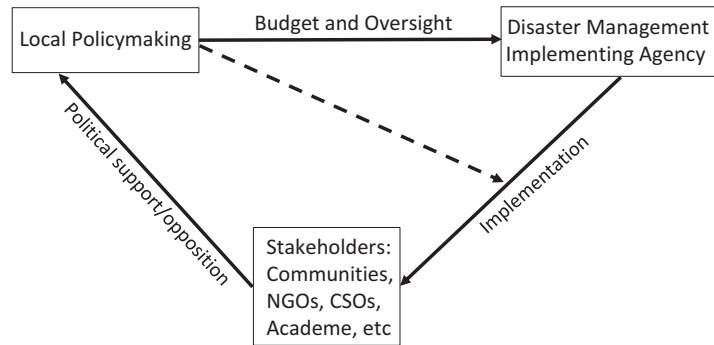
concrete actions by the responsible institutions and organizations that are often, but not always, part of the public sector. To ensure effective implementation, program details are laid out, budgetary requirements are met, and decision-makers or responsible agencies are identified. To facilitate the implementation of policy, bureaucratic discretion is granted among public managers. The existence of bureaucratic discretion is sufficient to allow distortion of policy and resistance to changes in official policy. Hence, policy implementation is critical as political and administrative actions are at the frontline, and such actions reflect the intentions of public managers which barely follow the objectives and programs of the policy. As a result, execution of policies is oftentimes distorted and delayed.

Similarly, with the discretion granted to implementing agencies, disaster management is hardly immune to bureaucratic bias and inertia. The allocation of resources and oversight functions of the policymaking body in policy implementation is crucial (see Fig. 1). For example, basic among democratic societies is the legislature's approval of the budget for implementing agencies prior to the utilization of government funds. Otherwise, the proposed activities are either revised or rejected. With this, lobbying and partisan politics underscore policymaking. The legislature's capacity to influence budget decisions is a function of both its authority over executive budget recommendations and its internal processes for decision-making. Hence, policymakers have a significant effect on policy implementation and to influence policymakers suggest prudent steps in maximizing the advantages of bureaucratic discretion. Meanwhile, the

bounds of bureaucratic discretion normally fall between completely constrained behavior and that of complete freedom to allocate the budget as the bureaucrats see fit. With the given discretion, it is to be expected that every bureaucrat in every level of the administrative authorities will use it to advance his own self-interests (Congleton 1982). Consequently, the absence of an apparent convergence between the interests of implementing agencies as bureaucrats and policymakers is vexing.

On the other hand, disaster-implementing agencies, as bureaucrats themselves, face both budget and policy constraints. The lack of resources to effectively respond to the impacts of disasters implies the failure to create enabling policies and mechanisms to access funds from other sources. The inability of agencies or organizations to manage its own problems leads to inertia together with other various reasons. First, the leadership of the organization is weak and lacks the tenacity to realize the goals of the organization either due to exhausting political pressures or unwillingness to learn effective control and management of the internal and external organizational challenges. Second, the organization is composed of unmotivated and inept staff who no longer share the similar vision with the organization. Third, organizational culture disrupts professionalism and nurtures mediocrity. Social norms, beliefs, and values and underlying assumptions influence decision-making and serve as a basis in determining the culture of the organization, which is reflected in the process, structure, and performance of a particular group or organization. Lastly, the lack of accountability mechanisms fosters gradual innovation in bureaucratic

organizations. Accountability among bureaucrats is an intricate issue as it encompasses norms, policies, discretion, and self-interests. The complexity in measuring and ensuring accountability drives social institutions to arrive at formal agreements in most undertakings. Nevertheless, any bureaucratic organization faced with either one or all of these challenges surely takes small steps in providing ultimate alternatives to the challenges it's facing.

On a normal social condition, gradual changes in the bureaucratic organization are relatively tolerable. However, in times of emergencies, processes including decision-making and actual disaster operations demand to be organized and synchronized to save lives and properties. In doing so, public officials ought to demonstrate efficiency and the importance of their involvement in ensuring that the entire operations run smooth and successful, but more importantly, they should be properly accountable to the power they exercise. The result of disaster management is determined real time and so are the agencies accountable for the delivery of such tasks. However, due to organizational culture and the lack of stringent accountable mechanisms, liable agencies and bureaucrats go unnoticed. Significantly, accountable bureaucrats are not deemed answerable to the community who suffered severe losses in terms of lives and property. In fact, the same bureaucrats get often reelected. The startling amount of political support the bureaucrats are getting from the public suggests important implications: public trust could be generally high as opposed to the common knowledge of decreasing confidence in government agencies; electoral institutions are already passé and therefore needs to be updated, or performance either in policymaking or policy implementation is not a sufficient indicator in choosing credible leaders. Consequently, bureaucrats fall short of what is expected from them and the public mistrust to the government is deteriorating over time.

The declining public trust is commonly perceived as instigated by the incapacity of the bureaucrats to address social concerns. Thus, bureaucratic innovations are focused on expanding the bureaucracy, losing sight on the actual cause of the problem. Moreover, enhancing the electoral institutions of the country alleviates the impacts of bureaucratic problems and improves governance in general (Meier 1997). However, most of the governance problems emanate from bureaucratic structures where organizational processes and procedures are anchored. Such bureaucratic structures are either the output of the actors' motives and strategic preferences in policymaking and implementation or a product of past decision. With this, disaster governance is facing a constellation of challenges as products of both culture and innovation suggesting the inevitability of inertia.

On the other hand, as detrimental as it seems, inertia brings advantage to bureaucratic organizations, too. For example, the continuous desire of the implementing agencies to increase its budget magnifies the relevance of the oversight functions of the legislative bodies. The agencies incapability of attaining its targets regardless of political and social concerns directly reflects its performance which serves as a basis for legislative bodies to either approve or reduce the proposed budget. The undesirability of a budget being slashed motivates the implementing agencies to achieve their targets and use their discretion to effectively employ ways to minimize or avoid the possible challenges that hamper the implementation. In doing so, innovation in governance happens and bureaucracy evolves.

Conclusion

Disaster management inertia is a preordained feature of disaster governance which can be moderated (a) when bureaucrats utilize essentially the full limits of their discretion by at least improving organizational incentives so that bureaucratic goals and disaster management goals are more compatible and (b) when lead agencies are replaced with agencies in tune with those of the policymakers. The complexity of preventing administrative inertia goes at par with the difficulty of addressing the challenges toward effective disaster governance. Understanding the lineages of each social and political concern

(norms, culture, experiences) may lead to some better but intricate resolutions. However, it is in the complexity of these fundamental governance problems that feasible solutions should be taken. Until then, bureaucratic inertia lingers to be an enduring predicament in disaster governance.

Cross-References

▶ Causes of Organizational Conflict, Culture and Organizations, and Diversity in Organizations

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