UNDERSTANDING AND ADVANCING CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION IN HOMELAND SECURITY AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT


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ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, public and private leaders have begun to develop sustainable networked partnerships in support of regional preparedness and risk management. These partnerships, or Multi-Organizational and Networked Alliances (MANA), are bringing government agencies, private businesses, and non-profit research organizations together in an attempt to develop collaborative solutions to shared challenges. The increasing complexity and interconnectedness of modern society, business and governmental operations has created systemic vulnerabilities and interdependencies that transcend public, private, and civic sector boundaries. The limitations of traditional organizational models and cross-sector coordinating structures to confront these challenges have given rise to this new, joint problem-solving approach. In the homeland security mission space in particular, public and private leaders are beginning to appreciate the value of these new alliances, and are experimenting with how they can enable progress in areas such as information sharing, infrastructure protection, disaster management and operations, and other homeland security missions. This research examines three formal seminar discussions led by both public and private entities: CNA and Virginia Polytechnic Institute (Virginia Tech), United States Northern Command (NORTHCOM), and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS)/FEMA. The goal of these discussions was to better understand the value that these alliances represent, how they arise and are successfully sustained, the challenges to their formation and operation, and opportunities to further advance knowledge and understanding. This study reveals commonality in how these discussions characterized value, key elements critical to success, challenges to formation and advancement of these alliances, and identifies areas for further study and discourse.

INTRODUCTION

As the world becomes increasingly more complicated and interconnected, new challenges and vulnerabilities are confronting both the public and private sectors in the domains of business, economics, energy, the environment, security, and disaster management. These new challenges are often complex, involving multiple interdependent vulnerabilities and public and private entities are finding that they have a common interest in developing joint solutions, though their motivating interests may be different or even in conflict. As the Pacific Northwest Economic Region has pointed out, international labor mobility is one example of a field where both private and public entities have a common interest for different reasons. Governmental agencies are concerned with migratory workers because of health issues, the smuggling of illicit
materials, and the entry of dangerous individuals into the United States. The private sector is concerned with migratory workers because of their needs to meet staffing requirements, maximize production, and develop predictable personnel forecasts. If the governmental security processes are too cumbersome or costly, then American businesses will have difficulty staffing their operations and stabilizing production. Both the public and private entities have an interest in cooperating to better understand each others concerns and provide for an outcome satisfactory for both.

While public-private partnership is by no means new, recently cooperation has emerged in a new way—through collaborative alliances of public and private entities. Rather than organizing themselves in vertically structured models under the clear leadership of a single sector or organization, as has frequently been the case in the past, these alliances are adopting a network-based approach, organizing horizontally with members joining and converging around areas of shared interest. This new model has emerged, at least in part, because more traditional models for cooperation have been less effective in confronting complex issues of interdependence among otherwise sovereign entities. In contrast, less centralized, more network-based approaches allow for each new member to add value to the larger whole, capitalizing and acting upon knowledge and ideas spread throughout the network. This has given rise to an alternative horizontal leadership model aimed at stimulating and cultivating the organic formation of cross-sector collaborative networks of stakeholders and peers to address shared challenges. Such a horizontal leadership approach is proving more adaptable and responsive, and thus more effective at developing resilient, sustainable solutions to problems that cannot be solved unilaterally by any single organization or sector.

Many of the challenges presented by homeland security and disaster management—such as information sharing across levels of government, the private sector, and the public, securing critical infrastructure in a systems-based economy, and integrated planning for catastrophic events like Hurricane Katrina—represent precisely the kind of complex, interdependent problems that are confronting government officials, private sector leaders, and non-governmental organizations alike. In this context, sustainable regional alliances linking together multiple organizations can make valuable contributions to increasing the resilience of individual communities and the nation to the full range of threats and hazards we face.

These new horizontal collaborative approaches are also forming because they are more effective than traditional models at winning the support of private and civic sector actors and integrating them into a solution-oriented framework. The value of private and civic sector expertise and involvement cannot be underestimated, as many of our nation’s critical infrastructure and key resources are privately held, and both the private and civic sectors have and will continue to be deeply involved in mitigation and response efforts to both terrorist attacks and natural disasters. As a means of engagement, local or regional alliances can be more attractive to private and civic sector actors than large, national level, government-directed models; alliances’ horizontal framework is more responsive to their needs and concerns, and affords them a partnership position in the collaboration, rather than treating them as merely interested stakeholders, as government-directed approaches
often do. For government, the attraction lies in the ability to more efficiently access private and civic sector capabilities, resources, and cooperation to address mission priorities. The trade-off for all lies in the necessary give-and-take inherent in collaborative decision-making and action.

**ANALYTICAL APPROACH**

This research seeks to better understand the value that these alliances represent, how they arise and are successfully sustained, the challenges to their formation and operation, and opportunities to further advance knowledge and understanding of this developing phenomenon by reviewing findings from three recent seminars on the issue of cross-sector collaboration in homeland security. In April, 2008, CNA, the Virginia Tech Disaster Risk Management Institute, and the Cooperative Leadership Institute (CLI) co-sponsored an executive-level discussion to further collective understanding of how collaborative, regional homeland security partnerships form among public, private, and academic organizations, the value they generate, and how they are sustained. ³ Representatives from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the private sector, academic institutions, and two multi-organizational alliances convened in a day-long discussion of these issues, the findings of which were subsequently published and later presented at a symposium at the 2008 International Disaster and Risk Conference in Davos, Switzerland. Three months after that session took place, United States Northern Command (NORTHCOM) held a two-day conference in Colorado Springs, CO, focused on improving cooperation between public and private entities in emergency response; and one month later, FEMA sponsored an Executive Seminar on Multi-Jurisdictional Networked Alliances, conducted by the Naval Postgraduate School’s Center for Homeland Defense and Security.

All three of these events provided a forum for executive dialogue on how new, collaborative approaches to cross-sector partnership might support greater resilience and more effective disaster management within the United States. Diverse representation from existing alliances, such as the Safeguard Iowa Partnership, All-Hazards Consortium, and the Pacific Northwest Center for Regional Disaster Resilience, as well as from federal, state and local government agencies and prominent private sector companies (e.g., Booz Allen Hamilton, Walmart) participated in these discussions. Drawing on reports published following these sessions⁴ and direct participation in two of them, this study synthesizes the findings, identifying areas of convergence and difference across the discussions in an effort to further advance national dialogue on the topic.

It is important to note that the stated purpose for each session differed. The CNA-Virginia Tech session was designed as an inquiry to further collective understanding of how collaborative homeland security alliances form, the value they generate, and how they are sustained and consisted mostly of facilitated discussion among participants. The purpose of the NORTHCOM conference was to identify opportunities for public-private collaboration, and it was structured as a series of panels representing viewpoints on specific issues from public, private, and non-governmental organizations’ perspectives. The FEMA sponsored seminar, on the other hand, was organized to better understand
how FEMA can engage individual alliances at the regional level, the value they offer for federal preparedness efforts, and how FEMA can support these relationships. All three sessions included at least some pre-selected speakers with prepared remarks, followed by open dialogue among participants.

In analyzing the findings from these events, special attention was paid to how each session approached the issue of networked alliances and how each viewed the networks’ application to homeland security and disaster management. Convergence among the different organizations’ opinion on networked alliances was identified, as was the value that participants saw in these alliances. Common elements of success were also identified, as well as challenges to the successful formation and sustainment of these alliances, and finally, potential opportunities for strengthening and even linking alliances together.

**RESULTS OF ANALYSIS**

While each of the three sessions examined was structured differently and led by different actors, all three centered around three common themes: the value these alliances represent, key elements that were critical to their success, and challenges to their sustainment over time. This analysis reveals convergence in how value, key elements critical to success, and the challenges to formation and advancement of these alliances were identified by participants, and presents an array of views concerning their future.

**Value Proposition**

Participants in all three discussions asserted that networked alliances allowed for much better communication and collaboration among leaders of governmental, private, and non-governmental organizations in the fields of regional preparedness and risk management than had existed previously. Networked alliances were characterized as providing value in three primary ways, each of which is described below in greater detail.

- **Bridging boundaries.** Building networks of relationships and broad-based partnerships, developing deeper understanding of interdependencies and shared challenges, and bridging cultural and organizational divides are all ways that participants characterized the core value proposition offered by these alliances—the ability of these alliances to bring different combinations of stakeholders from multiple sectors together to focus on a particular problem. The All Hazards Consortium provides a good example of this, functioning as a forum to bring state government officials who “own the problem” together with private sector leaders and academicians who can offer solutions.

- **Enabling rapid and reliable communication.** Seminar participants frequently highlighted the ability of their alliances to enable rapid and reliable communication, “among trusted stakeholders far more quickly and reliably than other forms of information-sharing.” The decentralized nature of these alliances
enables information to move much more quickly and extensively than through traditional communication mechanisms, and the trusted relationships they foster improves the reliability of this information, allowing it to be acted upon quickly. In times of crisis, such speed and reliability in communications is at a premium.

- *Increasing flexibility and adaptability.* Many contributors from both private and public organizations also praised the adaptability, flexibility, and resilience of these alliances. Furthermore, the localized nature of many alliances was noted as particularly effective in mobilizing action across jurisdictions to confront specific challenges facing a given region, allowing for efficient knowledge sharing, and great adaptability.9 “Horizontal and localized networks can work more effectively across existing jurisdictional and agency boundaries, respond more flexibly and rapidly to the accelerating pace of problems, and remain more resilient under the threat of multiple hazards than traditional government structures alone”.10

From the federal perspective, it is worth noting that both DHS and NORTHCOM recognize the value of working with localized leaders and agencies as an essential element of national preparedness. DHS is currently attempting to understand how it can support these alliances and integrate them into Federal preparedness efforts.11

**Key Elements of Success**

As these multi-organizational and networked alliances have already begun to form and take effect, it is important to understand the elements that enable their successful creation and sustainment. This research identified the following four key elements of success:

- **Organic formation.** Both public and private organizations noted that one of the most important elements to establishing these collaborative relationships is an organic formation of governance whereby leaders, missions, and goals emerge as the process of joining together unfolds.12 This organic formation allows each member organization to be directly involved in the creation, implementation, and subsequent evolution of the partnership. Allowing alliances to emerge, rather than attempting to deliberately orchestrate their development, also allows for a degree of flexibility in the collaborative relationships that enables them to adapt to changing circumstances and new challenges more quickly and effectively. Alliance members noted that they often needed each other even to begin to understand the various dimensions of complex preparedness issues, and to perceive opportunities for participation in new areas that were not very well organized.13 Therefore, these partnerships cannot be implemented on a standardized model, but they must be allowed to develop naturally according to their unique local environment.

- **Organizational trust.** Public, private, and non-governmental members of these collaborations also asserted that building trust is the backbone to building a
successful collaboration or partnership. Without trust, alliances can devolve into competition over individual interests, which can defeat the goal of the group. Some alliances found the use of a neutral party as a mechanism for ensuring that divergent viewpoints from both the public and private sector are represented across the collaboration to be effective in establishing credibility, and indicated that a neutral party can sometimes be used to begin to scale and syndicate trust amongst members in an effort to promote greater connectivity and cohesiveness.\textsuperscript{14} Gaining the trust of the community or constituency that the alliance has formed to support is also essential to its sustainability.

- **Narrow focus with reciprocal benefits.** Public and private entities also both observed that these collaborative relationships were more successful when they had a narrow focus and provided reciprocal benefits to all members.\textsuperscript{15} A narrow focus allows members with divergent interests and capabilities to focus their efforts on specific issues where their interests overlap,\textsuperscript{16} and to develop a more precise dialogue about how they can specifically work together to achieve a common goal. As each member invests their own resources into the endeavor, having stable expectations of reciprocity will encourage involvement.\textsuperscript{17}

- **Catalytic leadership.** Perhaps the most critical element of success identified throughout the seminars was leadership. Importantly, however, alliance participants stressed that what led to success was not traditional command and control styles of leadership; rather, the essential ingredient is a catalytic leader, one who can identify the unique values of divergent organizations and have the vision to see how they can collaborate in support of mutually beneficial outcomes. These individuals have the ability to initiate and mobilize alliances by finding active participants who have ownership over an issue and then leading horizontally across these organizations—facilitating creation of a network of peers of equal importance and then ceding control to the members.\textsuperscript{18} This is no easy task; as participants in the FEMA sponsored seminar noted, “The agility to find where interests overlap and use the strengths of independent organizations to pursue shared goals requires enormous talent and effort.”\textsuperscript{19}

### Challenges to Implementation

While each alliance participating in these discussions has followed a unique path to its creation, many have confronted similar challenges that must be understood and mitigated to facilitate successful cooperation elsewhere. This research identified the following four challenges to successful creation of these alliances:

- **Formalizing too soon.** Alliance members and researchers highlighted that collaborative efforts often faced the challenge of resisting the tendency to develop a formal or rigid policy structure in their early formation.\textsuperscript{20} Attempting to create a new organizational model or formalized structure before establishing proven value can place too much focus on members’ respective roles and responsibilities, taking focus away from delivering results; this was identified as a primary cause
of failure for many alliances. Additionally, the challenges these alliances form to address are often too unstructured or fluid for a rigid policy structure governing a diverse group of actors that lack a strong, collaborative history.

- **Integrating private and civic society members.** Private sector participants indicated that they frequently question how they can successfully integrate themselves into alliances with government partners, and they are concerned about public sector responsiveness to their needs. The lack of understanding of legal issues surrounding collaboration among private and public sector entities, particularly when working across state lines, was noted as a particular challenge. Funding issues also arose, as participation of private and civic sector organizations is not always cost-neutral; both private sector and non-profit participants highlighted that in some cases their organizations may require additional financial resources to fully participate in preparedness and disaster response activities with governmental agencies.

- **Misunderstanding the mission and capabilities of alliance members.** Public and private actors have different missions and cultures, and the lack of common language and a poor understanding of each others’ roles in homeland security and disaster management comprise some of the greatest challenges to successful partnership. For example, private sector actors expressed a frustration with governmental processes that slow action, such as checks and balances, oversight, and divided authorities. Public sector actors, in turn, warned against requests for direct funding from the federal government, noting that the requirements that such funding often brings may be in conflict with the objectives of localized alliances.

- **Overcoming sectoral boundaries.** Finally, all three of the discussions explicitly or implicitly highlighted the difficult challenge of creating new ways to collaborate across sectoral boundaries. Challenging traditional models of engagement and operating outside of structured contractual, regulatory, or compliance-based constructs can be uncomfortable and difficult to gain acceptance for, making trust, openness to new ideas, and catalyzing leadership of paramount importance in charting new ways to confront today’s complex problems.

**DISCUSSION**

Our findings indicate that alliance members from the public, private, and civic sectors all seem to have an equal appreciation of the value their alliances offer; and there is general agreement that developing and fostering new and existing alliances offers a valuable resource in an increasingly complex and interconnected world. Understanding of the key elements that enable alliance success, while commonly held, remains at a strategic level and may lack the detail required to operationalize this knowledge in support of the creation of new alliances. For instance, organic growth and trust, while identified as essential, are not elements that can be easily modeled and transferred from one alliance to another. Individual alliances will have to work through the challenges of
building trust and establishing norms on their own, while at the same time working through many nuanced hurdles such as developing mutual understanding, addressing legal issues, ensuring reciprocal benefit, and balancing the appropriate level of support from public, private and non-governmental members.

Additional discussion occurred concerning how best to realize value in aggregate from existing alliances, possibly even linking together the localized alliances in a national network. During the NORTHCOM Conference, this issue was raised in the context of establishing a national level mechanism to bring sectors together through development of a national level “umbrella” organization.\footnote{27} Such an approach, however, would likely involve standardizing aspects of how these networks operate and interact vis-à-vis one another, which would run counter to the flexibility and adaptability alliance members cited as critical to their success. This is an important point of disagreement between the federal government and many members of existing alliances. Creation of a formalized national level organization of alliances is very much at odds with the principle of organic formation, and may produce a centralizing effect that undermines the very value that these networked alliances represent. Similarly, FEMA’s stated objective in sponsoring its session was to better understand how to engage and draw upon these alliances to support federal preparedness efforts; in response, participants in this session recommended that FEMA adopt a very different approach, engaging not as a principal seeking to direct, control, or harness other’s activities, but as a strategic partner seeking to support, share, and learn.\footnote{28} These examples provide a cautionary note concerning the traditional impulses of government—the federal government in particular—to organize and direct the activity of others, and its frequent reluctance or inability to engage as an equal partner, sharing decision making authority.

**Shaping Future Discourse**

Participants in all three seminars embraced a collaborative approach to regional emergency preparedness, and noted the value gained from the exchange of ideas and experiences among different alliance members during these seminars. There also appears to be widespread agreement that the core question of how to best realize the value of a cross-sector collaborative approach merits additional, broader discussion. Rather than focusing on formally organizing alliances, federal leaders may find the greatest value in using their resources to initiate and sustain ongoing discussion on these issues. Following, then, are thoughts drawn from this analysis that may inform such future discussions.

- **Scaling trust.** One starting point for bridging sectoral divides could be the common appreciation of trust. Future joint discussions could work to understand what specifically would help actors from different sectors gain and maintain each others’ trust. One aspect worthy of consideration is how individuals and organizations view each others’ credibility; this is important because it matters how these actors approach engagement. Each members’ approach to engagement must be viewed as credible by others for these networked alliances to work. Developing effective strategies to successfully build, repair, and sustain trust
among both individuals and organizations is of paramount importance, as previously discussed, but understanding how to do so can be difficult. Moreover, organizational relationships, especially newly developed relationships, frequently hinge on trust between key individuals, which can be hard to rapidly scale to multiple organizations. In his recent book, *The Speed of Trust*, Stephen Covey calls out the importance of credibility to fostering trust. He defines credibility using a four-part framework: integrity, intent, capabilities, and result.\(^{29}\) Applying this framework, to be credible, organizations must clearly communicate their motives and intent, act in accordance with that intent, fully execute their commitments, and have a demonstrated history of delivering results. Viewed this way, Covey’s framework offers a roadmap to better understanding how organizations can foster trust and build relationships outside of structured contractual, regulatory, or compliance based constructs. Further discussion aimed at developing a deeper understanding of how to build trust quickly and on a larger scale would prove a valuable contribution.

- **Enabling strategic leadership.** Effective strategic leadership requires new concepts for how to create and catalyze a collaborative vision among many players, how to lead horizontally. As participants in the FEMA sponsored seminar noted, it is essential, be it as a catalyst or as a member, for actors to remember that successful engagement in collaborative alliances means being a strategic partner who seeks to support, share, and learn, not a principal who seeks to direct, control, or harness others’ activities. Developing a better understanding of how to engage as a strategic partner, and how to lead that engagement, if traditional government impulses to organize and direct are to be channeled into constructive engagement.

- **Learning from failed efforts.** Both the CNA and FEMA sponsored reports highlighted the importance of studying and learning from collaborative efforts that were initiated, but did not take hold. Understanding why these efforts were not successful and learning from this understanding would go a long way to further developing a body of knowledge in this area.

- **Building educational support and mentorship.** One promising recommendation arising out of the FEMA sponsored session was for the establishment of an independent educational forum for government, private, and civic sector participants. Such a forum could serve as a resource to new and existing alliances, acting as a clearinghouse for best practices, conducting research, and facilitating mentorship opportunities. It could also develop a deeper body of knowledge around horizontal leadership models, and how they can be effectively employed.

- **Advancing civic sector engagement.** While some of the alliances participating in the discussion seminars include representation from the civic sector, many are more focused on public-private collaboration. In the United States we rely on local residents to be engaged public citizens every bit as much as we rely on the professional expertise of our public servants and private sector professionals. Just
as trust is at the center of effective cross-sector alliances, so is trust at the heart of our social infrastructure. Expanding upon the ways in which we connect to and engage the American public through civic organizations and other means is just as essential as creating new ways to foster collaboration among government and private sector entities. After all, the public elects our government leaders, drives our markets, and comprises the very society we seek to protect in times of crisis.

For networked alliances to be successful, actors from different sectors must benefit from engaging each other outside of their traditional comfort zones. Private and civic sector actors must understand and appreciate that public sector actors have broader societal obligations, for example, and in turn, public sector actors must be sensitive to private sector actors’ need to maintain profitability and their competitive edge and civic sector concerns and interests, and to the importance of engaging the American public.

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3 Beres, Timothy; Martin, James; Kaufman, David; Felix, Tammy. Multi-Organizational and Networked Alliances Executive Session Report; 2008 April 20; 1 p.
4 A formal report was not published following the NORTHCOM conference; however, detailed meeting minutes were produced which provide insight into the nature of the discussions held.
6 Ibid.
9 Beres, Timothy; Martin, James; Kaufman, David; Felix, Tammy. Multi-Organizational and Networked Alliances Executive Session Report; 2008 April 20; 1 p.
The All Hazards Consortium provides a good example of such an approach. The concept of overlapping interests was advanced in two of the seminars by representatives from Booz Allen Hamilton, and is discussed in great detail in the book, Megacommunities: how Leaders of Government, Business and Non-Profits Can Tackle Today’s Global Challenges Together, by Mark Gerencser, et al., Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

Beres, Timothy; Martin, James; Kaufman, David; Felix, Tammy. Multi-Organizational and Networked Alliances Executive Session Report; 2008 April 20; 4 p.

