Invited Article

Crisis Coordination in Complex Intergovernmental Systems: The Australia Experience
By Naim Kapucu[1]

In this short essay, I would like to share my experience during my visit to Australia as part of the Fulbright Distinguished Chair in Applied Public Policy and Democratic Resilience jointly hosted by Flinders University and Carnegie Mellon University- Australia, from October 2022. In addition to research on resilience (specific to urban resilience), I had opportunities to exchange ideas with scholars and professional practitioners. The most impactful experience for me was observing the creation of the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA). I was also able to participate in workshops on resilience and national recovery forums and visited bushfire and flood-impacted communities in New South Wales, Victoria, and South Australia. I would like to highlight in this essay Australia's policy learning and performance improvements during the COVID-19 crisis report.[i]

As disasters and crises grow in frequency and severity, the necessity for emergency planning and management has emerged as a paramount concern in policy and governance. Crisis coordination stands out in this context, given its pivotal role in ensuring effective response and recovery efforts (Kapucu, Ozerdem, & Sadiq, 2022). These efforts are crucial for maintaining the operational continuity of both governmental and business entities, which, in turn, supports the economy, health, and public safety. A network governance approach can be beneficial in addressing intergovernmental collaboration on crisis management functions in Australia, with a particular focus on the COVID-19 pandemic. This perspective offers insights into the importance of coordination among interdependent authorities in navigating and handling significant crises. It emphasizes the importance of fostering collaborative leadership, enhancing organization capacities, and cultivating a culture of collaboration. Such measures are vital for building solid, interconnected networks that can efficiently tackle crisis coordination challenges within Australia's intricate federal structure. This short essay discusses four interrelated sections of crisis coordination in complex intergovernmental systems in response to COVID-19.

Numerous studies have shown that ineffective coordination between key organizations can result in inconsistent policies and unsuccessful programs (Peters, 2015). Ineffective coordination can also lead to a reaction Gray calls a "maladaptive response" to significant challenges (1985, p.913). In light of these challenges, the foundation rests on identifying the key stakeholders in an organization and understanding their distinct roles and expectations. Doing so is essential for grasping how the interconnected members of the system can collaborate optimally. The focus on organizational aspects of this observation is crucial because government systems are naturally inter-organizational; that is, they have a relationship that involves at least two organizations. This collaborative nature is evident in federal systems within specific government areas and between different government levels. Additionally, when governments at any level interact with the private and nonprofit sectors for public initiatives and policies, they

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[1] Naim Kapucu is Pegasus Professor of Public Administration and Policy and former director of the School of Public Administration at the University of Central Florida (UCF). He is elected fellow of the National Academy of Public Administration. Dr. Kapucu received Fulbright Distinguished Chair Award in Democratic Resilience jointly hosted by Flinders University and Carnegie Mellon University Australia. He currently serves as associate dean for research and innovation at the College of Community Innovation and Education at UCF.

face further complexities in these inter-organizational relationships. Moreover, interactions between organizations can occur through formal and informal channels. Approaches to network governance focus on the links between institutions (through formal structures) and individuals and groups (via informal networks and community ties), aiming for improved coordination among all involved parties. This enhances the collective response of stakeholders and community members to emergencies and crises, ensuring a more effective overall outcome.

Disasters and crises serve as real-world tests for existing policies, plans, and the overall capacity of governments. When there is enough willingness and ability to learn and adapt, analyzing past responses to crises can result in better policies, systems, and operations. However, several factors may contribute to the ineffective adoption and implementation of strategies. These factors include inadequate financial and human resources, lack of leadership support, insufficient training and exercises, and organizational and political hurdles. As disasters and crises become more frequent and prolonged, with events often overlapping or triggering one another, governments may face the next crisis before they can fully apply the lessons learned and implement improvements learned from dealing with past events. Thus, despite the potential for improved government responses to disasters and crises through learning and adaptation, various challenges, including resource constraints, leadership gaps, and organizational barriers, may impede the practical application of lessons learned, mainly as such events grow more frequent and complex.

Australia is officially a constitutional monarchy, where the monarchical aspect, largely a symbolic remnant of its British colonial past, plays a minimal role. Its legislative body mirrors the bicameral system found in the U.S. Constitution, with both a House of Representatives and a Senate. In contrast to the U.S. system, the Prime Minister, who leads the national government, is a member of the House of Representatives, reflecting the parliamentary system's structure rather than the separate presidential system seen in the United States. Australia's Constitution, lacking a 'Bill of Rights' similar to that of the United States, outlines its federal system of governance. The country is a federation comprised of six states: New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria, and Western Australia. Australia is additionally comprised of two territories, the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory. The states, as sovereign entities within the federation, and the territories, which could be subject to federal oversight, both possess autonomy in decision-making. The Australian Constitution clearly defines the powers, roles, and duties of the Commonwealth (their national government), leaving any powers not explicitly mentioned to the States. The States are primarily responsible for emergency management, public health, and public safety within this governance framework.

The Commonwealth holds a significant advantage in public finance due to its exclusive control over income tax, allowing it to influence state jurisdictions by offering conditional grants. Additionally, the Commonwealth's power to enter into international treaties under its "external affairs" capacity can affect state policy autonomy, especially when these involve areas typically managed by the states, such as health services in line with WHO agreements. While some view these mechanisms as centralizing forces that bolster the Commonwealth's power at the expense of the States (Fenna, 2019), others argue that States retain substantial policymaking and service-delivery autonomy. The State's in-depth jurisdictional knowledge supports this autonomy, the professionalization of service delivery at the state level, and the political strength of state governments, suggesting Australia operates as a federation with solid states rather than weak ones (Parkin, 2003, 2007; Birrell, 1987).

Various official mechanisms have been implemented to promote cooperation and information exchange across different levels of government, such as through regular meetings between Ministers or officials in charge of specific policy areas. Key among these has been the formal gatherings of government leaders, initially known as the Premiers' Conferences and later evolving into the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in the 1990s. Notably, the COAG was replaced by the National Cabinet in 2020 as part of the COVID-19 response. The focus across all government levels on a comprehensive, collaborative approach offers additional chances for state governments to collaborate with their counterparts at the Commonwealth level. Another critical aspect to consider is how Australia's federal system interacts with local communities.

In the early 2000s, a growing focus was on health disaster preparedness and planning. Notable large-scaling drills included the 2003 "Supreme Truth" exercise at the Royal Adelaide Hospital, which tested elements of the South Australian Health Major Incident Pan and led to various improvements, and the 2004 "Explorer" exercise in Sydney. The emergence of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003 spurred health disaster preparedness efforts, culminating in the creation of the Australian Health Protection Committee (AHPC) later that year. This committee brought together representatives from the Department of Defense, Emergency Management Australia, and the health sector, including representatives from New Zealand. By 2005, these initiatives had led to the development of the Australian Pandemic Influenzas Action Plan. Furthermore, the Commonwealth Biosecurity Act of 2015 expanded the central government's statutory powers, including quarantine measures, to bolster health disaster responses. In 2011, following the "Black Saturday fires" of 2009, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) endorsed the National Strategy for Disaster Resilience. This strategy marked a pivotal change in emergency management policy, emphasizing the importance of a collaborative approach to responsibility across different levels of government.

Australia has a tradition of conducting post-disaster reviews, focusing on the event's specifics, the causes, lessons learned, and strategies to avoid repeating errors during the response and recovery phases of significant disasters. For example, Royal Commission inquiries, known for their authority and prestige, are particularly impactful because of their ability to probe into possible mismanagement. However, adopting recommendations from inquiries is not always guaranteed; while some inquiries have resulted in policy and practical improvements, others have not. In other words, although these reports are adept at pointing out the "lessons that have been learned," this does not always translate into significant policy and practical adjustments. The Australian Government Crisis Management Framework outlines a comprehensive strategy for the Australian government to prepare for, address, and recover from all types of events, whether natural or caused by humans, by utilizing a whole-government approach. Within this framework, a pivotal role is designated to the Commonwealth Department of Health and its health Minister, highlighting its central responsibility in navigating health crises through coordinated efforts with other key agencies.

In 2022, the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) was established by merging Emergency Management Australia and the National Resilience and Recovery Agency into a single entity. NEMA offers a variety of plans to assist the States and Territories of Australia. To illustrate the force of the collaborative structure of Australia, the Commonwealth Department of Health has been tasked with collaborating with NEMA to orchestrate recovery efforts during health emergencies. Federal agencies are also expected to synchronize their actions with State health departments and other agencies tasked with emergency and crisis

management. Operating under the guidance of the COAG, now succeeded by the National Cabinet, the Health Council comprises the leaders of the Federal, State, and Territory health Departments. Apart from the Australian Government Crisis Management Framework, a policy document, no federal legislation or constitutional mandate guides NEMA's role in developing national Emergency Management policies and plans to support States and territories. While NEMA and its predecessors lack the power to impose Emergency Management policies on States and territories, they aim to collaborate with them to achieve common goals. NEMA also works with the private and voluntary sectors to tackle disaster and crisis management challenges through coordinated efforts, necessitating a solid trust foundation. It adopts a nationally consistent approach to all types of emergencies, encompassing prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery phases and its interactions with various sectors.

In Australia, a disaster declaration by States and territories does not guarantee financial aid from the Commonwealth; however, non-financial help is also an option. States and territories have the prerogative to seek assistance from the federal government during significant disasters and severe events. They are primarily responsible for crafting plans, policies, and resources to enhance community resilience and preparedness for disasters. The dynamic between local councils and state governments differs across states, with states assuming the bulk of emergency and crisis management duties and engaging in varying degrees of collaboration with local city councils.

The states are responsible for providing services and carrying out immediate management actions necessary for pandemic responses, such as emergency services, law enforcement, hospitals, schools, and transportation in Australia. Thus, as the potential magnitude and effects of the impending COVID-19 pandemic became apparent in the early 2020s, states independently implemented measures like quarantine enforcement, shutting down businesses and government operations, and enacting contentious border closures to mitigate virus transmission (Moloney & Moloney, 2020). Acknowledging the possible shortcomings of persisting with such decentralized measures, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) was rebranded as the informal National Cabinet to ensure a unified approach to the pandemic response. The term "National Cabinet" is somewhat misleading since, according to the Westminster system, in a parliamentary democracy, a cabinet should be an executive group within a specific government jurisdiction accountable to a parliament. This description does not fit the multi-government structure of the Australian National Cabinet. The national cabinet introduced the structure that somewhat mirrored Australia's national counterterrorism framework for non-terrorist scenarios; political leaders determine policy, while the States and territories handle the operational aspects. The concept of a meeting of government heads, as facilitated by the national cabinet, was not a novel idea, merely replacing the long-standing council of Australian governments. However, the innovation is late in its name and effectively conveys a solid, cross-governmental political unity in crisis response.

Bolstering the National Cabinet was the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPCC), the latest iteration of the earlier Australian Health Protection Committee active during the COVID-19. The AHPPC convened explicitly for the COVID-19 outbreak in late 2019, in addition to its routine meetings. It aimed to guide the National Cabinet while striving for a uniform and coordinated implementation of health policies and regulations across each state or territory. However, this was not always fully achieved. To further assist the COVID-19 response, the Australian government launched the National Coordination Mechanism. This initiative was distinctive in that it unified Australian and State Governments

with the industry and private sector to tackle specific emergency response and recovery challenges. Several meetings under this mechanism were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic to manage issues that arose through a collaborative and unified method. Following the pandemic, the National Coordination Mechanism has continued as a critical component of Australia's ongoing emergency response, per the Department of Home Affairs in 2023.

At the State level, coordination of the COVID-19 response involved each State and Territory activating their emergency management laws and protocols and implementing measures for prevention, response, and recovery tailored to the situation within their domains. For instance, South Australia declared a Major Emergency under its Emergency Management Act, with the declaration lasting 793 days and involving the activation of the State Emergency Center. This center unified state agencies to support the health response, led by the Commissioner of Police for coordination. In addition, the Emergency Management Council (which later became the Emergency Management Cabinet Committee) was established according to South Australian emergency management protocols, ensuring consistent governance, policy support for operational response and recovery efforts, and coordination between State and Australian Government actions. While similar measures were adopted across all States and Territories, the impact of the pandemic varied significantly; Victoria, for instance, underwent one of the world's longest lockdowns at over 260 days, in contrast to Western Australia, which experienced just 12 days of lockdown.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the effectiveness of Australia's new National Cabinet as a leadership coordination body, enabling prompt and uniform decisions across all levels of government. States and Territories reaffirmed their roles as primary responders, showcasing their significant autonomy and confirming their vital position in the federal system. Despite efforts like border closures mitigating the worst impacts, the absence of a national data clearinghouse was a notable shortfall, emphasizing the reliance on State and Territory data for evidence-based solutions (Comfort et al., 2020). The pandemic underscored the necessity for enhanced intergovernmental coordination in disaster response and resilience, leading to collaborative innovations such as the National Cabinet and National Coordination Mechanism. These developments, focusing on building capacity and a national review of disaster governance, aim to refine Australia's emergency management. The proposed establishment of a national Center for Disease Control and Prevention signals further strides toward preparedness, though its future impact remains uncertain due to the decentralized health services structure. Continuous learning, updated planning, and a network governance approach emphasizing collaboration and shared responsibilities are pivotal for improving disaster response and building resilient communities amidst complex intergovernmental systems and emerging challenges.

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[i] A detailed manuscript on Australia's experience recently published in *Public Administration Review*. Kapucu, Naim, Andrew Parkin, Miriam Lumb, and Russell Dippy.2024."Crisis Coordination in Complex Intergovernmental Systems: The Case of Australia." *Public Administration Review1–11*. https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13830