

THE LOCAL-LEVEL CRISIS MANAGEMENT SYSTEM IN POLAND IN THE FACE OF CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES: EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

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Purpose: The primary aim of this article is to identify the extent to which the local crisis management system in Poland is prepared to effectively respond to contemporary threats and challenges. Furthermore, the article aims to define the most optimal policies that will enable the effective functioning of local crisis management systems in Poland.

Design/methodology/approach: The study was conducted in 2024 in Poland, on a group of 7 experts. Among them were three researchers specializing in crisis management studies in Poland and four practitioners representing various levels of the crisis management system. The research tool was a semi-structured in-depth interview scenario and the research method used was a semi-structured in-depth interview.

Findings: This study identified specific problem areas of Local Level Crisis Management Systems (LLCMS) in Poland, such as Knowledge Management, Operation of the Crisis Management System, Infrastructure, Communication, Citizen Initiative, and Complexity of Regulations. It confirmed that local crisis management systems do not possess adequate resources and competencies to effectively respond to new, previously unencountered threats.

Research limitations/implications: The study is subject to certain methodological limitations. Primarily, the limited number of interviews restricts the ability to generalize the findings to the entire population. Moreover, since the analysis was qualitative in nature, there is an inherent risk of subjective interpretation of the research material, despite adherence to principles of rigor and systematic coding.

Practical implications: The presented results can support local communities in developing effective local crisis management system. Recommended actions include implementing specific policies concerning the development and updating of the knowledge and skills of local authorities and residents in the field of crisis management. The recommended policies consist of two elements, namely: mandatory training for employed residents, and the establishment of formal requirements for employees holding positions related to crisis management within local government units.

Social implications: Improving local community resilience, and communication with authority. These activities also respond to societal expectations related to the effective local crisis management system.

Originality/value: The article provides a unique perspective on the issue of local crisis management system improvements in the context of societal security.

Keywords: societal security, resilience, crisis management system, local society.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

The Russian military invasion of Ukraine has underscored the urgent need to evaluate the readiness of national crisis management systems to minimize the effects of emergency situations. It also calls for an examination of possible strategies for enhancing the system's effectiveness and adaptability in the face of evolving threats.

Crisis management refers to an organized set of actions aimed at protecting life, health, property, and critical infrastructure in situations of significant risk. It is generally administered by public authorities and is embedded within the broader national security framework. The primary goal of crisis management is to limit the impact of emergencies and restore societal and institutional functioning as rapidly as possible.

In scholarly discourse, crisis management is frequently understood in a more holistic manner than as a set of reactive responses. According to Falecki, it constitutes "the management of an organization (system), carried out under pressure, aimed at resolving tense situations and limiting the effects of system destabilization through preparedness, response, and recovery". The author emphasizes the importance of pre-crisis planning and resilience-building as integral to effective management (Falecki, 2015). It is worth emphasizing that crisis management within a community or organization and crisis management carried out by public administration remain mutually interdependent (Kisilowski et al., 2021).

As noted by Nepelski, crisis response is a continuous process structured around four interrelated stages: prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery. Prevention involves identifying and assessing risks while implementing proactive measures such as spatial planning and infrastructural investment. Preparedness includes the development of contingency plans, emergency drills, and public education campaigns. Response refers to operational actions taken during a crisis, including alerts, evacuations, and emergency support. Recovery focuses on restoring system functionality, rebuilding affected communities, and learning from past events (Nepelski, 2013).

As for the legal system currently in force in Poland in the field of crisis management, in 2007 the Act on Crisis Management (Journal of Laws No. 89, item 590 of April 26, 2007) was adopted, which established the present system. Pursuant to the Regulation of the Prime Minister (Journal of Laws No. 86, item 471 of April 11, 2011), the Government Centre for Security (RCB) was established, responsible for monitoring threats, coordinating activities, and supporting the administration in crisis situations. An important role is also played by local

self-government units, which are responsible for crisis management at the local level, as well as by EU support mechanisms, such as the EU Civil Protection Mechanism, used during crises such as floods or pandemics.

In Poland, the crisis management system operates under a clearly defined, multi-level structure involving close cooperation among public administration entities. Each administrative tier—national, regional (voivodeship), county (powiat), and municipal (gmina)—has its own crisis management authorities, teams, and centers responsible for planning, coordination, communication, and execution of emergency operations.

The crisis management system is an aspect of national security and has a direct impact on one of its domains, namely societal security (Gromek, 2018). It concerns the organization of the protection of human life and health, as well as material and cultural assets and the natural environment to the extent necessary for human survival (Kitler, 2010). Other aspects of national security include, among others, civil protection, rescue operations, and social security (Kitler, Skrabacz, 2010; Gromek, 2015; Gierszewski, 2013). The realization of the idea of societal security consists of the responsibility of the system/society for resisting normal disruptions caused by events from an incident to a crisis (Ewertowski, 2022). One of the most important measures aimed at reducing the costs of incidents is pre-incident action, implemented through the planning of procedures for emergency situations resulting from potential threats. When undertaking such planning, the first step is to identify potential emergency scenarios (Dahlke, Idczak, 2021). It should be remembered that a fundamental feature of crisis management systems is the necessity to operate in real time, usually under constant time deficit (Ficoń, 2007).

At the national level, the Council of Ministers, the Prime Minister, and the Government Centre for Security (RCB) play key roles in managing country-wide crises or situations that exceed the capacity of lower levels. The voivode leads regional operations with support from the Voivodeship Crisis Management Team and Center. At the county level, the starosta oversees activities through the County Crisis Management Team and Center. At the municipal level, the mayor, commune leader (wójt), or city president is assisted by the Municipal Crisis Management Team and, where applicable, a crisis center.

Crisis management centers are central to the system's functionality. They operate on a 24/7 basis, monitor potential threats, coordinate the activities of emergency services, archive documentation, and ensure the timely flow of crucial information across administrative levels. Furthermore, they manage early warning systems and issue alerts to appropriate stakeholders, functioning as focal points of coordination, analysis, and communication.

Efficient communication, cooperation, and clearly assigned responsibilities are foundational to effective crisis management. As Ciekanowski and Marjański argue, the Polish system adheres to a vertical model where response efforts are initially launched by the administrative level most suited to address the specific scale of a threat. When local resources prove insufficient, support is escalated to the county, regional, or national level. This vertical

delegation enables flexibility and optimized resource use across varied crisis scenarios (Ciekanowski, Marjański, 2017). It is also worth emphasizing that, transparency in crisis communication fosters public trust and underpins sustainable development through engagement and openness (Erdeli, 2024).

Despite the theoretical clarity of the structure, several shortcomings hinder system efficiency. Zakrzewska highlights the fragmentation of legislation, with more than 40 legal acts governing crisis management and civil protection. This dispersion of legal norms generates inconsistencies, hampering system cohesion across administrative levels. The absence of a single comprehensive legal act that delineates the roles and responsibilities of all actors, combined with an ambiguous definition of a “crisis situation”, further complicates operational decision-making (Zakrzewska, 2021).

Organizational and human resource deficiencies are particularly visible at the local level.

For the purposes of this article, it is assumed that the Local-Level Crisis Management System (LLCMS) is an organized set of structures, processes, and resources operating at the level of local government units, whose goal is to ensure effective response to crisis situations and to minimize their effects within the area of a municipality or county.

The LLCMS includes:

- Crisis management authorities: mayors, town mayors, and city presidents (at the municipal level), as well as county governors (at the county level), supported by the respective crisis management teams.
- Organizational units: county and municipal crisis management centers, as well as services, inspections, and even private sector carrying out tasks in the field of public safety.
- Processes and procedures: planning, monitoring threats, coordinating activities, responding to crisis situations, and conducting recovery operations.
- Resources: material and human resources necessary to carry out rescue operations and to support the local community during a crisis.

In addition to cooperation between services and public institutions, the Polish crisis management system must also pay particular attention to the needs and information of the civilian population. As emphasized by Cieślarczyk and Grzywacz, the effectiveness of the system largely depends on the level of awareness and social engagement (Cieślarczyk, Grzywacz, 2014, pp. 60-81). It is obvious that in a community every person wants to be safe and, at the same time, to have a sense of security (Wolanin, 2005). Ensuring security and a sense of security for citizens is possible only through the actions of multiple actors, including those from both the public and private sectors (Jagusiak, 2018). In short, the responsibility of the local community rests with all those who function within the given community (Wiśniewski, 2021).

Crisis management functions are often marginalized, and responsibilities are delegated to understaffed departments. Based on audit reports by the Supreme Audit Office (NIK), Zakrzewska points out that many local centers fail to maintain around-the-clock readiness, and funding and personnel shortages often reduce the management process to a formality. Other critical problems include the absence of emergency power supplies, infrequent training and simulation exercises, and the replication of crisis plans from higher levels without adaptation to local risk profiles (Zakrzewska, 2021).

In light of these challenges, it is essential to pursue legal consolidation, increase financial investment, and professionalize staffing at all administrative levels. Furthermore, stronger oversight mechanisms should be introduced to ensure greater operational efficiency and resilience.

Finally, issues related to organizational culture and administrative mindset have become increasingly important. As Magiera emphasizes, effective crisis response depends not only on institutional frameworks or material resources, but also on the mentality and engagement of public officials. Given rising societal expectations and the growing complexity of modern threats, the crisis management system requires continuous modernization—not only in terms of tools and procedures, but also in attitudinal openness to innovation, learning, and proactive adaptation. Without committed and capable personnel, even the most advanced systems will fall short of their potential in safeguarding public safety (Magiera, 2015).

Therefore, the research problem can be formulated as follows: Therefore, the research problem can be formulated as follows: To what extent is the local crisis management system in Poland prepared to effectively respond to contemporary threats and challenges, and what policies should be implemented to operate the system more effectively?

Thus, one can state the following research questions:

Q1: What areas of the local crisis management system need improvement?

Q2: Do local crisis management systems possess adequate resources and competencies to effectively respond to new, previously unencountered threats?

Q3: What policies are most effective to achieve improved local crisis management system efficiency?

2. Methods

A methodological approach was used in the research, which consisted of five stages: (I) Analysis of the content of academic literature dedicated to the functioning of the crisis management system in Poland; (II) Analysis of the content of current legal acts related to crisis management in Poland; (III) Designing an in-depth interview scenario based on insights from

the initial stages; (IV) Conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews with representatives of public authorities and experts; (V) Analysis of research results.

For certain stages of the study, the authors partially relied on their report addressing the literature review, methodology, and the advancement of knowledge in the field of crisis management (Revtiuk et al., 2024).

The study was conducted in the first half of 2024. The authors conducted seven in-depth interviews with experts. Among them were three researchers specializing in crisis management studies in Poland and four practitioners representing various levels of the crisis management system: municipal (gmina), local (county/powiat), regional (voivodeship), and central levels.

The in-depth interview is a qualitative research method that focuses on a thorough understanding of the studied phenomenon through the analysis of experiences, behaviors, and social context. Unlike quantitative methods, which rely on numerical measurements, qualitative methods provide a rich description and interpretation of organizational processes. The in-depth interview is widely used in various fields, including the social sciences and evaluation research (Miński, 2017).

Based on the literature review in the field of crisis management, the following main questions during the interviews were formulated:

- 1) How do local authorities in Poland carry out tasks related to crisis management?
- 2) In what ways does cooperation between local authorities and residents take place at all stages of the crisis management process?
- 3) How does the existing cooperation between authorities and residents affect the effectiveness of crisis management processes at the local level?

As a result of the conducted research, the main problems characteristic of the crisis management systems in Poland were identified.

The data analysis process was conducted in accordance with the principles of thematic analysis (see Figure 1). In the first stage, all statements recorded during the interviews were transcribed. The research team then repeatedly reviewed the empirical material, which allowed for an in-depth understanding of the content and context of respondents' answers. Based on this, preliminary codes were identified to reflect significant issues raised during the interviews.

These codes were then grouped into coherent themes and analytical categories, enabling the identification of key research areas. Ultimately, the data were interpreted in relation to the research questions and the broader body of literature, leading to the formulation of conclusions and recommendations.

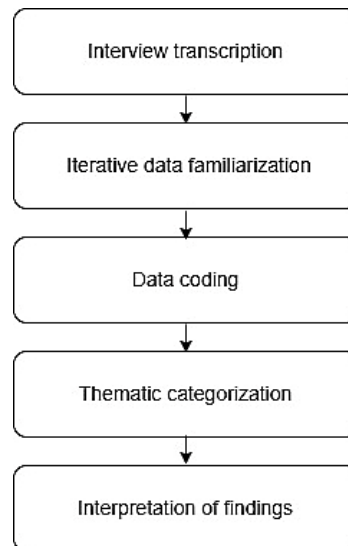


Figure 1. The Data Analysis Process: A Thematic Analysis Approach.

Source: Own elaboration.

For the purpose of the data exploration the MAXQDA Software was used. It supports qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches, offering tools for thorough data exploration across various types of data.

The key research areas was presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

The key research areas and the type of responders

The key research area	The number of indications	The type of respondents
Knowledge Management	4/7	Researchers and practitioners
Legal Provisions	6/7	Researchers and practitioners
System Operation	2/7	Practitioners
Residents Engagement	3/7	Researchers and practitioners
Infrastructure	3/7	Practitioners
Communication in Crisis	5/7	Researchers and practitioners

Source: Own elaboration.

As with most qualitative studies, this analysis is subject to certain methodological limitations. Primarily, the limited number of interviews restricts the ability to generalize the findings to the entire population. Moreover, since the analysis was qualitative in nature, there is an inherent risk of subjective interpretation of the research material, despite adherence to principles of rigor and systematic coding.

An additional challenge was the varying level of openness among respondents, influenced by their professional roles and the sensitive nature of the topics related to security and crisis management. Some participants may have consciously or unconsciously limited the scope of the information they shared, which could also affect the comprehensiveness of the research findings.

3. Results

Based on the results of interviews with experts, the authors identified the following problem areas which, in the respondents' opinion, require improvement in local crisis management.

- 1) Knowledge management issues. Experts pointed out the following aspects of this problem: insufficient knowledge of crisis management among local authorities, especially regarding interaction with residents during crisis situations; lack of systematic practical training and exercises, as such activities are usually conducted only formally; lack of uniform training standards for specialists in community safety and for advanced training of local authorities; insufficient knowledge of procedures in crisis situations, or in some cases a complete lack of such knowledge.
- 2) Operation of the crisis management system. In this area, the interviews revealed: absence or poor quality of strategic planning at the local level, including the lack of strategies for war or terrorist attack scenarios; insufficient coordination among different services (fire brigades, police, military, etc.) during crisis response; the need to test the developed crisis response measures; and the lack of clearly defined accountability of local authorities for the consequences of crisis situations.
- 3) Infrastructure problems. According to respondents, these stem from insufficient resources for the development of the local crisis management system, related, among other things, to the lack of government programs financing risk management processes (equipment, warning and response systems, personnel availability, shelters, etc.).
- 4) Communication problems. These include the absence of a strategy for communicating with residents in the area of crisis management; ineffective communication with higher-level authorities or between different services, which is partly due to shortcomings in legal regulations.
- 5) Low citizen initiative and weak social capital. Experts indicated that: residents are usually willing to cooperate with the authorities to solve urgent problems, but local authorities need to build greater trust among residents; there is also a lack of public initiatives related to crisis management.
- 6) Complexity of regulations. Experts pointed out the following issues: the current regulatory framework does not allow for the creation of a coherent crisis management system; there is a need to improve coordination of crisis management; the complexity of laws, their ambiguity, intricacy, excessive number, and legislative gaps are problematic; there are no uniform financing regulations. The existing regulations need to be simplified.

In the authors' view, among the above-mentioned problems that require the development of the functioning of the local crisis management system, the most important is the issue of shaping and updating the knowledge and skills of local government authorities and residents in the field

of crisis management. It should be noted that it is necessary to distinguish two areas on which recommendations in this regard should focus, namely:

- 1) The development of essential knowledge and skills among local government representatives and services responsible for preventing and mitigating the effects of crisis situations. A lack of the necessary skills and qualifications to perform specific functions in crisis management and security—particularly in the case of critical infrastructure (Kunikowski, Kisilowski, 2022) or specific types of risks (Swoboda, 2018)—may create additional challenges in planning and implementing crisis management activities.
- 2) The development of basic knowledge and skills among residents, which will help them strengthen their individual resilience and their ability to partially or fully cope independently with the effects of a crisis situation, as well as provide them with the knowledge and skills needed to cooperate with specialized crisis management units (Marjański, 2018).

4. Conclusions

The identified specific problem areas, such as Knowledge Management, Operation of the Crisis Management System, Infrastructure, Communication, Citizen Initiative, and Complexity of Regulations, provide answers to the first research question, Q1. Their content clearly demonstrates that local crisis management systems do not possess adequate resources and competencies to effectively respond to new, previously unencountered threats. This provides an answer to the second research question, Q2.

Considering the fact that the knowledge and skills of residents and local authorities in preparing for and dealing with crisis situations have different impacts on the effectiveness of the local crisis management system, it was decided to divide the proposed recommendations into two components. These are:

- 1) Knowledge and engagement of residents

Human knowledge and skills are shaped throughout life, with basic knowledge acquired at a young age both through interactions with others (parents, friends, neighbors, etc.) and through formal schooling. At the same time, the knowledge and habits passed on by parents to their children are no less important in developing the ability to respond to crisis situations than formal school education. Therefore, greater attention should be given to developing knowledge and skills among adults. The following recommendation options are proposed for consideration in this area:

- a. Maintaining the status quo by developing the knowledge and skills of adults through passive educational campaigns, such as posting information on recommended behaviors in crisis situations on government websites, information stands, and distributing short informational materials in the form of brochures, videos, etc.
- b. Active education, i.e., increasing efforts to raise awareness and engage residents regarding:
 - crisis situations that may occur in the local community,
 - ways of preparing for specific threats,
 - methods of interaction with emergency services, government officials, and other residents in the event of a specific crisis situation.

To implement the chosen recommendations, local crisis management units should prepare detailed annexes to the Crisis Management Plan for the local community and develop instructions and guidelines for residents. The preparation of such plans, instructions, and guidelines may involve individuals or groups of residents to facilitate the dissemination of crisis management knowledge. The developed informational materials should be distributed through communication channels that allow maximum resident engagement in their discussion (e.g., discussions with high school students, during meetings of public, party, or religious organizations operating within the municipality, initiated by residents of the municipality or its districts, etc.).

- c. Mandatory training, i.e., the introduction of compulsory periodic training on desirable behaviors in crisis situations and civil defense for certain population groups (employees of local administration, government agencies, enterprises, and organizations operating in the local community) as part of occupational safety and health exercises.
- d. Activating training, i.e., engaging residents or their specific groups in the local community in training related to eliminating potential crisis situations through simulation exercises that include developing scenario elements based on specific facilities (institutions, organizations, NGOs, enterprises, government agencies, etc.).

2) Qualifications of local government representatives

The second component of the proposed recommendations is raising the qualifications of local government representatives. The following recommendation options are proposed:

- a. Maintaining the status quo, i.e., placing the responsibility for the development of knowledge and skills of crisis management unit staff on the head of the local government unit.
- b. Establishing formal requirements concerning: 1) the qualifications of crisis management staff, such as education in security or crisis management, a minimum length of service in relevant units, etc.; 2) the number, topics, and duration of training sessions to be carried out in the local community / with the participation of the crisis management team leader and staff.

- c. Creating a national training and certification system for crisis management staff and local government unit leaders, which would require periodic certification by an independent certifying body for employees holding relevant positions in public authorities.

On this basis, the proposed references were evaluated according to the following criteria:

1. Time required for implementation of the recommendations.
2. Effectiveness, i.e., the impact of the implemented recommendations on improving the quality of the local crisis management system.
3. Cost of implementation, i.e., funds to be spent from local and central budgets to implement the recommendations.
4. Feasibility of the implementation of recommendations, i.e., the level of resistance/support among local authorities and residents and how this will affect the effectiveness of implementation.

The summary of **evaluations** of the proposed recommendation alternatives is presented in Table 2.

Table 2.

The evaluations of the proposed recommendations alternatives

	Time of implementation	Effectiveness	Cost of implementation	Feasibility of implementation
Knowledge and engagement of residents				
Maintaining the status quo	Not required	Low	Not required	-
Active education	Multi-year	Medium	High	Low
Mandatory training	1-3 years	Above average	Medium	High
Activating training	Multi-year	High	High	Below average
Qualifications of local government representatives				
Maintaining the status quo	Not required	Low	Not required	-
Establishing formal requirements	1-3 years, requires a transitional period	Above average	Medium	High
Creating a national training and certification system	Multi-year	High	High	Medium

Source: Own elaboration.

As a result of evaluating the proposed reference options concerning the development and updating of the knowledge and skills of local authorities and residents in the field of crisis management, the optimal recommendations selected consist of two elements, namely: mandatory training for employed residents, and the establishment of formal requirements for employees holding positions related to crisis management within local government units. This selection answers the third research question Q3.

In summary, it should be stated that:

- The local system requires simplification and standardization.
- Better communication between authorities and residents is needed.
- Investments in education and infrastructure are crucial.
- Science can and should support crisis management.

Due to the limitations presented in the research, additional surveys should be carried out with more experts. The next important step is the development of the Local Level Crisis Management Systems (LLCMS) in Poland for specific territorial units.

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