



# Mutual aid in The Netherlands

Public-private collaboration in emergency response can save money and improve services, argue Philip Stohr and Kees Kappetijn from Kappetijn Safety Specialists.

**I**nvolvement in a mutual aid organisation as municipality, safety authority, or public stakeholder can significantly improve the quality and efficiency of public emergency response. How? Because these organisations combine resources, streamline processes, build expertise, and address area-specific risks. They also save money.

Historically, firefighting and rescue services have been classified as a public responsibility. As with public order, the availability of sewers and street lighting, a public government organises these types of services because they are essential for a well-functioning society.

However, the fact that firefighting is a public responsibility makes it more difficult to effect change to improve how these services run. A certain quality level must be guaranteed, but taxes must also be spent in a cost effective way. While it might seem controversial at first, the solution to bringing about improved quality and efficiency in public services could lie in collaboration with private industrial partners.

## Industrial emergency response services and mutual aid

Besides the public emergency response services, larger industrial companies – often in high-hazard industries – maintain their own emergency response services. Typically, these companies have a risk profile that requires specific measures to protect the health of a company's employees and the environment, both on site and in the immediate surroundings. They also need to protect assets and stocks.

Private companies often invest heavily in dedicated emergency services that can provide a 24/7 response. However, while they might not need their services often, as the risk of an incident is low, the costs of equipping and training a permanent professional, risk-focused emergency team are relatively high. This is particularly the case when specialised equipment and training is required to deal with specific scenarios.

In industrial areas where sites are located relatively close to each other, companies can join forces. If two or more

companies share the organisation of emergency response services, or share emergency response procedures or equipment, it is called mutual aid.

One of the main areas of advantages is in efficiency. Without mutual aid, every company must have its own emergency response service. When they start to share services, the number of services, teams, equipment and, in larger geographical areas, the number of service stations can decrease. Costs will also be reduced.

The reduction in costs is far from the only argument for companies to work together in this way. Mutual aid collaboration can also help to improve the quality of emergency response services. It simplifies day-to-day management and can unify preparation and attack procedures. And, because the incident frequency of a single industrial site is usually very low, company emergency response teams are generally less experienced in real incident situations. Working on a larger scale will ensure that the crew are more experienced, and make developments in the training programme possible.

## Public-private partnerships

In areas with large public and private interests, such as harbours and centralised industrial areas, public stakeholders can be part of a mutual aid organisation. In this case, public emergency response tasks and industrial emergency response tasks will be performed by one organisation.

There are several models for public-private partnerships in mutual aid. A robust example is an independent mutual aid organisation, set up as a separate legal entity, which is managed and financed jointly by public and private partners.

There are also several other variations of PPPs. For example, public emergency response tasks can be outsourced to one or more of the private stakeholders, or industrial stakeholders can outsource the required capabilities to a public fire and rescue service. The stakeholders involved have a contract with KPIs for the required performance, cost sharing, governance, and quality standards.

In the Port of Rotterdam all major container terminals are members of a mutual aid organisation. Pictures by Bettina Smak-Gregoor and Rob Jastrzebski.

## PPP-MUTUAL AID MODELS IN THE NETHERLANDS

PPP-mutual aid has been commonplace in The Netherlands for 25 years and has been adopted nationwide.

High-hazard industry is spread all over the country, but it is concentrated in industrial and harbour areas, which often consist of dozens of companies. In these areas, industrial companies, municipalities, safety authorities, and harbour authorities work together to provide industrial firefighting, hazmat teams, and emergency response.

All the main ports in the country have some form of PPP, but they all differ. In the Rotterdam area, the municipality, the regional safety authority, and 65 companies have set up a mutual aid organisation for all types of incidents from fires in buildings, industrial facilities, tanks and on ships to road traffic accidents and search and rescue operations.

In the Amsterdam port area, the tank storage industry and two safety authorities have joined forces specifically to deal with incidents concerning tank storage.

At Schiphol Airport, the municipality, the safety authority (fire, police, and ambulance), the airport, and the companies that run the airport's gasoline station and the maintenance department of KLM have joined in a large mutual aid/PPP that combines tasks for public fire and rescue, industrial fire and airport firefighting.

The nuclear research facility in Petten is run by NRG. NRG provides fire and rescue services for all industrial facilities on site and provides public suppression services for the municipality and safety region.

In Sittard-Geleen, Chemelot, the former industrial area of DSM, works with a large mutual aid organisation for all chemical companies on site. The mutual aid is broadened to a PPP with the regional safety authority by sharing a hazmat team and a foam tender for chemical incidents outside the industrial estate in public areas.

Finally, both in the industrial area of the municipality of Delfzijl and the train yard of the municipality of Zwijndrecht, private owners and public bodies have chosen a mutual aid model in which the responsibility of organising fire and rescue services is shared, but the performance is put in the hands of Falck as a specialised service provider for these kind of services. This is the outsourced version of mutual aid/PPP.

Incidents are never on- or off-site.

Picture by Bettina Smak-Gregoor and Rob Jastrzebski.

The PPP model that is best for a specific area will depend on the local circumstances and the characteristics of that area.

A good example of public-private collaboration in emergency response is the Rotterdam harbour area, where the Unified Industrial Fire and Rescue Service (UIFRS) has

performed both public and private firefighting, rescue, and emergency response management tasks since the 1990s.

The UIFRS serves an area with over 100 SEVESO companies. It is 40km wide and only has eight fire stations. Only the five refineries within the area maintain a small personal emergency response service.

Without this collaboration, the industrial companies in the harbour area would all have to organise their own firefighting capabilities. This means that there would be around 65 separate industrial fire brigades. The municipality of Rotterdam would also need four fire stations to take care of fire and rescue services in the public domain and the two suburbs that are close to the industrial area.

With the industrial and public stakeholders working together, the number of fire stations is reduced from 69 to eight. And the educational level of the firefighters is highly specialised and focused on the credible scenarios in the area, as are the vehicles and equipment.

Efficiency is not the only advantage of public-private collaboration, however. Quality is another. The larger scale of the resulting organisation enables the development of a high-end training programme tailored to the specific risks and needs of the area. More call outs also mean experienced personnel who have attended more real-life incidents.

The UIFRS is highly trained to deal with the risks specific to its service area, and also performs a number of specialised additional services such as tank and bund firefighting, maritime firefighting, high-angle rescue, and oil boom services for chemical spills on surface waters in the harbour.

Another important advantage of public-private collaboration is the alignment of working methods between the public and industrial services. When public and private services only work together during an actual incident, issues can often arise with communication, the compatibility of equipment, alarm and scaling, and sufficient availability of foam stocks. When there is one mutual aid organisation, the emergency response capability is centralised in one organisation, so these problems don't occur.

The biggest advantage of public-private collaboration, however, is that stakeholders can demonstrate that they are taking responsibility for the risks that arise from their activities and that they are choosing to trust and work with each other to place safety over self-interest.

Mutual aid through PPPs is a proven concept in The Netherlands, where it operates in various guises and in locations as diverse as large industrial areas with chemical plants and tank storage, nuclear facilities, train yards, container terminals, and airports. If you think it could work in your area, start talking to local industrial companies and find out.

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

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