The International Maritime Rescue Federation Mass Rescue Operations Project:

General planning guidance

Overview

The IMRF’s mass rescue operations (MRO) guidance is provided in 30 separate chapters at www.international-maritime-rescue.org. For downloadable documents referenced in this chapter please use the drop-down menus or return to the MRO project main page under ‘Resources’. For a general introduction please see chapter 1, ‘Complex incident planning – the challenge: acknowledging the problem, and mass rescue incident types’.

This chapter discusses:

- who should be involved in the planning process
- how the planning should be done
- what should be included in the plan
- the continuing planning process

It also includes a planning checklist.

1 The need to plan

1.1 The need to plan specifically for mass rescue operations is discussed in chapters 1, ‘Complex incident planning’, and 4, ‘The capability gap’.

1.2 Setting mass rescue planning in the more general context of planning for complex or ‘major’ incidents is discussed in chapter 1, and below.

1.3 The MRO planner should also refer to the IAMSAR Manual, Volume I, Chapter 6.6, and Volume II, Chapter 6.15 and Appendix C.

2 The fundamentals of MRO planning

2.1 At the simplest level, it can be said that there six stages in MRO planning:

1) Identify the stakeholders who should be involved in the planning process: ‘stakeholders’ here means authorities and organisations with emergency response roles and/or responsibilities
2) Identify the capability gaps
3) Identify the means of filling those gaps
4) Prepare the plan
5) Train as appropriate
6) Test the plan and the training, and revise both as necessary.

2.2 Capability gaps and means of filling them are discussed in chapters 4, 13, 14 & 15. Training is considered in chapter 26. We discuss the likely stakeholders here.

3 ‘Ownership’ of plans

3.1 MRO plans should be understood and ‘owned’ by all those who may have to implement them. The SAR Coordinator – the individual or organisation with national or regional responsibility for response planning (see chapter 18) – is likely to lead the planning process, but all response organisations and their staff, at sea or ashore, should be encouraged to regard the plan as theirs too, so that it will work better when put into practice. This principle is discussed in chapter 2.

4 Who should be involved in the planning?

4.1 One individual or organisation should be given lead responsibility for MRO planning. The IAMSAR Manual suggests that this will be the SAR Coordinator. The SAR Coordinator is usually (but not necessarily) a government official with overall planning responsibilities: the role should not be confused with that of the SAR Mission Coordinator (SMC). Chapters 18 & 19 discuss the two roles in more detail.

4.2 Having identified the need to plan and the lead planner, the next stage should be to invite as many as possible of the likely response organisations to participate in the planning process. As discussed in chapter 1, and in addition to the SAR Coordinator, this will include, for the area(s) to be covered by the plan:

- the commanders and operators of **POTENTIAL CASUALTIES**, such as ferries, manned offshore installations, etc
- the organisation(s) responsible for **SAR MISSION COORDINATION**
- the organisation(s) which provide designated maritime, aeronautical and/or land **SAR UNITS**
- organisations likely to be able to provide **ADDITIONAL SAR FACILITIES** such as ships nearby (this may include government and port vessels, ferries and/or offshore industry vessels), aircraft, land transport, etc
- the **SHORESIDE EMERGENCY RESPONSE AUTHORITIES** who will receive those involved in the incident as they are brought ashore by the maritime responders – this is likely to include a wide range of organisations, including the land emergency services, port authorities, health authorities etc
- **OVERSEEING AUTHORITIES** who, while they do not have a response role themselves, have a responsibility to ensure that planning is done and that it is effective.

4.3 The aim is to involve as many stakeholders in the planning process as possible. This is likely to be a long list. But it is important to involve as many as practicable at the planning stage to minimise confusion when the plans have to be put into effect. An organisation which responds to an incident without being involved
in the planning will not understand how the plan is meant to work. Their own and other organisations’ efficiency will be diminished as a result.

4.4 In some cases – the commanders of ships or aircraft that just happen to be in the area at the time of the incident, for example – involvement in the planning is not practicable. But the planners still need to ensure that these units can be included efficiently in the response. This will include a process of quickly explaining to their commanders their proposed role(s) and who they should report to. They do not need to know the whole plan, but they need to know that there is a plan, and how they fit into it.

4.5 Compiling the list of stakeholders should be commenced by the SAR Coordinator – but the stakeholders initially identified should be encouraged to extend the list based on their own knowledge and practice.

5 Industry planning and response

5.1 Industries whose activities may give rise to an MRO, or whose facilities may be of use in response, should be involved in the planning if practicable. See the guidance in the IAMSAR Manual, Volume II, Chapter 6.15.20 and 6.15.39-41, and Appendix C, ‘MRO industry roles’.

5.2 Under the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) Convention, regulation V/7.3, passenger ships on international voyages are required to have cooperation plans with relevant SAR services. Some administrations extend this requirement to domestic passenger ships. The plans provide for a preliminary exchange of information, including emergency contact details, and for periodic exercises to test mutual understanding. They should be borne in mind when planning for MROs. See chapters 25 & 28.

6 How should the planning be done?

6.1 Face-to-face meetings are recommended, especially in the early stages of the planning process and at its end. Such meetings facilitate the exchange of information and mutual understanding.

6.2 While it will be beneficial to gather all the stakeholders for the first and last meetings, it will not be necessary to do so throughout. The workload can be broken up between working groups considering, for example, the identification and use of the additional resources required for MROs; the at-sea, ‘shoreline’ and on-land components of the response; the command, coordination and communications structures; particular risks; liaison with the public and the news media; and so on.

6.3 While particular risk areas may be identified and planned for (ferry routes, for example, or offshore industry operations), the overall planning should be generic. It is often best to plan for MROs as part of the planning for any major incident – that is, an incident which will require special arrangements to be put in place in order to deal with it – to ensure that the different priorities and responsibilities are efficiently coordinated. An MRO may be a sub-set of the response to a wider incident involving, for example, counter-pollution and salvage operations. However, if planning in this wider context, care should be taken to ensure that the particular challenges of mass rescue operations are not overlooked.

6.4 MRO planning should not ignore or contradict stakeholders’ ordinary emergency response planning. MRO response should be an extension of normal responses, not an alternative to them. (We note in passing that experience shows that MRO planning has a beneficial feedback effect on organisational relationships and on SAR response generally.)
6.5 MRO planning should begin with risk and gap analyses (see chapter 3). Each stakeholder should identify what their own emergency response capabilities and responsibilities are, and bring these to the planning table for comparison. An honest and open appraisal of actual capability is essential here.

6.6 The rescue capability gaps inherent in the MRO concept can then be identified. So can other gaps – in the communications network, for example. The basic questions may be summarised as:

- Who can do what?
- Who should alert whom?
- How can we fill the capability gap?
- Are there particular risks for which we should plan in more detail?
- What is the command and control structure?
- What is the coordination structure?
- How can we share information most efficiently?

6.7 The MRO planning process can be thought of as a jigsaw puzzle. Each stakeholder has a part to play, and their own ‘normal’ emergency response plans which explain their roles. Each represents a piece of the puzzle. The aim is not to produce a whole new plan, but to link the existing plans together, and to do so efficiently, so that there are no gaps and no overlaps – that is, nothing is overlooked, and two organisations are not trying to do the same thing.

6.8 The pictures above represent the situation before and after the MRO planning process. The picture on the left shows several pieces of the puzzle – individual stakeholders’ plans – and it looks like they will all fit together. But look again! They do not quite fit. The picture on the right shows the ideal scenario.

6.9 It is important to emphasise that the gap analyses should be open and honest appraisals of real capabilities. This should not be a public relations exercise. Nor should it be seen only as an opportunity to enhance individual stakeholders’ positions. If the analyses show that improvements can be made and that the resources are there to make them, that is fine, of course. But ultimately MROs are, by definition, beyond a sustainable level of response capability. This still needs planning for.

7 What should be included in the plan?

7.1 It is recommended that the plan should contain the following:

- a description of the plan’s purpose, with a summary of the risks identified
- a description of the geographical area(s) covered by the plan, with maps etc
- a list of the stakeholders, with contact details for use in emergencies (at least as regards first alerting of the organisation) and for planning purposes
- a summary of each stakeholder’s responsibilities and capabilities
- a description of the overall concept of operations – how the response will be organised
- a summary of the additional resources identified to fill the capability gap(s)
- a description of the command, control and coordination network
- a description of the communications network for use when the plan is implemented
- a description of how the additional resources will be incorporated in the response
- a summary of any on-scene support available (medical, firefighting, salvage, etc)
- a list of agreed ‘places of safety’ to which survivors can be delivered
- a summary of agreed public relations procedures
- a summary of the procedures for training, testing and reviewing the plan
- document control measures, to keep all copies of the plan complete and up to date.

7.2 The items above are suggested for the ‘hub’ of the plan. Each stakeholder should then determine how their own plans will connect with it. The overall aim is for every responder, at whatever level, to know that there is a plan, and what their own roles are within it. With this in mind, each stakeholder should develop and/or amend their own piece of the jigsaw puzzle so as to fit into the ‘big picture’.

7.3 The plan should be a controlled document, to help ensure that each copy is complete and up-to-date. It should therefore include document control measures: a contents list, a distribution list, a record of changes, a list of effective pages with dates and amendment numbers as appropriate, and an audit record.

7.4 A template plan is contained in chapter 6. This is a skeleton plan, intended to provide an initial framework structure which planners may choose to build on if no pre-existing plan is in place, or to use as a tool when checking such a plan for completeness. It is not a complete plan in itself: that can only be produced by the local stakeholders, working together.

8 Particular considerations

8.1 It is recommended that consideration be given during the planning process to a number of issues known from previous MRO experience to be problematic. Each of these issues is discussed separately, as follows:

- Command, control and coordination – see chapter 17
- Maritime / shoreside coordination – see chapter 24
- Communications – see chapter 25
- Incorporating additional resources in the response – see chapter 13
- Different types of mass rescue operation – see below, and chapters 1 & 8
- Recovery of people from survival craft or from the water – see chapter 8
- Accounting for everyone involved – see chapter 9
- Supporting survivors during rescue – see chapter 10
- Transfer to places of safety – see chapter 11
- Remote areas and other special cases – see chapter 12
- Use of surface units – see chapter 22

1 It is useful to have these as stand-alone documents too, so that response organisations can quickly ‘introduce’ themselves to partners they do not usually work with.
8.2 The wide range of potential mass rescue operations presents particular planning difficulties. Examples of MRO types are given in chapter 1. One of the main variations is that people may need to be recovered from survival craft or from the water, or they may still be aboard the vessel or other unit in difficulty. Abandonment of a ship or offshore installation, or an aircraft ditching, are examples of the first scenario; but a great deal of work has been done in support of the concept that ‘the ship is the best lifeboat’. Abandonment of a large modern passenger ship is not necessarily the safest or even the most likely course of action. The ship may be ‘in distress’, but can keep her people aboard.

8.3 MRO planners have to consider both possibilities. There may be large numbers of people who have to be picked up at sea; or there may be a need for specialist assistance to a ship in difficulty, designed to prevent the need to recover large numbers of people: see chapters 8 & 15. The situation is further complicated by the fact that, in many cases, and often at the outset of an incident, it will be unclear which of these possibilities is the case. It may be, for example, that, at the outset, the master feels that people can be kept aboard, but the situation worsens and abandonment becomes necessary. Response organisations have to be ready for either possibility, as well as intermediate solutions such as precautionary evacuation of non-essential personnel.

8.4 Other types of MRO also need to be borne in mind at the planning stage. In MROs resulting from multiple simultaneous incidents – fishing vessels or leisure craft overwhelmed by unexpected bad weather, for example – there may be a mix of retrieval options: people may be in the water, or in survival craft, or still aboard disabled craft. Migrant rescues present additional challenges relating to what to do with the people rescued. And land-based emergencies requiring evacuation by sea (following a natural disaster, for example) require a different approach again: can ships go alongside to pick people up, or will small craft have to be used as ferries; and so on. See chapter 12.

8.5 Planners and responders also need to consider the different types of people they may have to recover. Will they be trained in survival – offshore workers or ships’ crews, for example? Will they have survival equipment? (Migrants and people being rescued from the land probably will not.) Will there be language difficulties? Will there be injured or disabled people – including those disabled by cold or seasickness? Will there be very young or elderly survivors, unable to help themselves?

8.6 The list of possibilities is a daunting one. In the end, however, responders need to be able to provide help to a wide range of people, ranging from those otherwise unaffected but aboard a disabled ship, for example, to untrained and unequipped people in the water, unable to help themselves. The planning, therefore, needs to be comprehensive. Chapter 8 considers the ‘retrieval’ part of rescue in more detail.

9 Cyclical planning

9.1 There is a danger that, even with high-quality planning involving all the stakeholders and covering all foreseeable possibilities, the resulting document will be seen as a ‘job done’, an end in itself. In fact, planning should be a cyclical and continuing process.

9.2 Planning should be followed by training as an essential next step. The plan will be useless unless responders know what it is, how they fit into it, and what it expects them to do. See chapter 26.
9.3 Both planning and training should then be tested by exercises or drills. The results of each exercise, and of any actual MRO or other complex incident case for which the plan has been implemented, should be carefully analysed and any shortcomings identified. These shortcomings should be analysed to determine whether they arose from a failure of training or in the underlying plan.

9.4 Potential improvements to the plan can be identified from things that went well, too. There is an understandable tendency for post-action analysis to focus on things that went wrong – but examples of initiative and good practice should be given equal weight. See chapters 28, 29 & 30.

9.5 Experience gained during exercises and from real incidents should be fed back into the plan. The SAR Coordinator or other responsible authority should establish a positive review process to facilitate this, and to keep the plan updated. Without such a process the risk is that the plan will simply gather dust on a shelf, getting out of date and being forgotten. This can have serious negative effects when an MRO is required. However, with a positive review process in place, the stakeholders will periodically revisit the plan to ensure that it remains factually correct (as regards capabilities, contact details etc) and that it is fit for purpose. Periodic review also serves as a timely reminder of the plan’s requirements.

9.6 The overall planning process is illustrated below. The end result is continuous improvement – but, yes: it is something of an uphill struggle! However, without some effort things will not improve. They might even get worse: the wheel can roll downhill as well as up...

10 A planning checklist

10.1 In complex operations it is always useful to maintain a checklist. This goes for MRO planning too; although beware the risk of being bound by the checklist and not thinking beyond it – see chapter 26. A basic planning checklist is as follows:

- Identify the lead planner – the SAR Coordinator or other responsible authority
- Identify the geographical area(s) to be covered by the plan
- Identify the stakeholders who can participate in the planning process
  - Government agencies
  - Maritime emergency response authorities and organisations
  - Aeronautical emergency response authorities and organisations
  - Shoreside emergency response authorities and organisations
  - Port authorities
  - Passenger shipping industry
  - Offshore industries
Shipping regularly in the area
Others with relevant responsibilities and/or capabilities
- Decide how this MRO plan will fit into, or link with, wider, generic ‘major incident’ planning
- Agree a planning process, including communications between the planners – see section 6 of this chapter
- Conduct a risk analysis, including identifying any areas of higher or lower risk and/or response capability
- Identify the capability gaps, and means of filling the gaps – see chapter 4
- Decide what should be included in the plan – see sections 7 & 8 of this chapter
- Agree a training and review process
- Agree a document control process
- Draft the plan and circulate it for comment to all participating stakeholders
- Complete the plan, and commence the training and testing process
- Revisit the plan regularly and in the light of post-action analyses, and revise it as necessary.

11 Summary
- Planning for MROs is essential to their success: appoint a lead planner with clear responsibility and powers to prepare the plan.
- Identify the stakeholders.
- Agree a planning process, and what should be included in the plan.
- Identify the capability gaps.
- Identify the means of filling those gaps.
- Plan to include all the necessary resources.
- Train as appropriate.
- Test both the planning and the training, and revise both as necessary.
- Planning is a cyclical process, not a ’one-off’: encourage ownership and active review.

12 Further reading
12.1 The MRO planner should refer to IAMSAR Volume I, Chapter 6.6, and Volume II, Chapter 6.15 and Appendix C.