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Standard operating procedures (SOPs) are important as a basis for effective emergency response. These procedures specify roles, tasks, and steps to be taken during different stages of an incident. The different first responder agencies and other organisations involved in emergency response have SOPs specifying their operations and communication protocols, both for internal operations and for joint operations involving collaboration between several organisations. These procedures exist in different forms and formats, involving varying degrees of computer support.

While the SOPs are part of the training of first responders, experience from real events as well as exercises show that the use of the SOPs are often varying and somewhat inconsistent even within the same organisation. The procedures are also typically underspecified regarding from where relevant information should be collected, how this information can be accessed, and whether this information should be shared with other responders. Also, first responders argue that the format of the SOPs often is not perceived as effective for supporting their operations in time critical situations, in terms of level of detail, accessibility and presentation clarity. Experienced emergency dispatchers in command and control centres report how following rigid communication procedures sometimes is considered to be non-conducive for an efficient dialogue with the caller. Also, procedures for efficient combination of various data sources to gain optimal value from these while also avoiding information overload, are also often missing in these command and control centres.

The presentation is based on findings from the INSITU project funded by the Research Council of Norway, investigating current practices for information sharing among organisations involved in emergency preparedness and response in Norway. From workshops, interviews and observation in exercises, we analyse existing use of SOPs and possible improvements of these. In a recent digital tabletop exercise using a multiple forest fire scenario, we collected data on how situational reports and common operational pictures were shared from the local incident command and fire services to the affected municipalities and county, to providers of critical infrastructure (energy grid, telecommunications, road administration), and to the national level of emergency management. The findings show how efficient SOPs for situational reports and information sharing are either missing or have limitations negatively affecting the support from these procedures.

We will discuss factors influencing the adoption and use of SOPs among emergency stakeholders, and present recommendations for developing and implementing procedures that can effectively support emergency operations through consistent and widespread use.

Exploring Future Work Practices for Information Sharing and Achieving Common Situational Understanding in Disasters