

# What MH17 has taught us about international disaster investigations

March 9 2020, by Merijn Van Nuland

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For the Dutch Safety Board (DSB), the investigation into the MH17 plane crash was unprecedented in scope. It wasn't easy, but it provided valuable lessons for international disaster investigations, says Sanneke Kuipers, a crisis expert from the Institute of Security and Global Affairs.

## **Lesson 1: Be aware of a potential 'organisational jam'**

"In 2014, the DSB had a staff of around 70, so when MH17 was shot down it suddenly found itself facing an immense task. It had to investigate a [plane crash](#) with many Dutch victims, and what is more, a crash that had happened in an active conflict zone. Added to that, the victims came from different countries and the conclusion of the investigation might have major geopolitical implications. Quite simply, this was something that the organisation was not prepared for. The investigation would require almost 250 people. All other investigations had to be postponed and many outside experts had to be hired in. This makes it important for safety boards—also ones abroad—to appreciate that a major incident can happen at any moment: so keep in touch with external experts."

## **Lesson 2: Do not rule out any hypothesis**

"Many other investigations into major disasters or attacks have been generally conducted behind the scenes. That enables the [investigators](#) to work in peace, but can also feed conspiracy theories. The DSB decided

to take a different approach, deciding to work as transparently as possible and to investigate all possible explanations, even if these did not appear plausible in the least. Had the plane been shot down? And if so, could the Ukrainian army have been the culprit rather than the pro-Russian rebels? No single alternative hypothesis, how improbable it may have seemed, was summarily rejected. The DSB only rejected hypotheses if there were sufficient grounds to do so. That significantly increased [public confidence](#) in the investigation."

### **Lesson 3: Employ a clear communication strategy**

"The DSB endeavoured to find answers for the relatives of the victims as quickly as possible, so it set an ambitious deadline for the investigation. This placed the organisation under pressure but gave the impression that no expense was being spared to discover what had happened. A good example of this is how the MH17 cockpit was reconstructed from the debris found in Ukraine. This meant the whole world could see how the missile had struck. It was a unique and expensive reconstruction but a good showcase for future large-scale investigations. Sceptics and the relatives of victims could rest assured that the research organisation had done all it possibly can."

**More information:** Sanneke Kuipers et al. Lessons from the MH17 transboundary disaster investigation, *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management* (2020). [DOI: 10.1111/1468-5973.12288](https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5973.12288)

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