HURRICANE KATRINA, DEEPWATER Horizon, H1N1, the Eyjafjallajökull eruption (p40), snow over Europe (p36), the upheavals in the Middle East (p28) or the Japanese disaster (p18): what next?

Our formerly 'house-trained' crises are reverting back to the wilderness, but we appear frozen and incapable of rising to the occasion. We revert to the same defence of our responses: "But this was exceptional!" or: "You can't expect people in charge to deal with unconventional situations!" After a catastrophe, we reach the same tired conclusions: "We should have more plans... better co-ordination... smarter communication with the public..."

CASCADING EMERGENCIES

But it is time to accept reality: something is broken in our risk machinery. Global inter-connectivity and cascading emergencies have transformed the scale and nature of crises today. This is the time of mega-crises, but our responses remain as if we were dealing with the type of incidents common in the last century, or with medium-range disasters.

The last decades of the 20th Century witnessed stimulating advances in risk understanding and crisis management. But "more of the same" is no longer enough. Other theoretical foundations have to be developed to face our new world of risk, crises and structural turbulence.

Enormous crises have become part of the natural tempo and rhythm of the world, they are no longer unusual. The challenge is not to limit the eruption of specific events in an otherwise stable world, but to navigate through turbulent and uncharted environments. Stability is the exception to the rule.

Two urgent needs have to be addressed – today. First, a paradigm shift is needed, even if this is difficult, risky and unwelcome. Undoubtedly, it will be a long foray into the unknown. But in the meantime, we can and must, at the very least, clarify the radar screen used in crisis intelligence.

The most pressing duty is to launch a rapid audit of our organisations' ability to address crises, including mega-crises, as they sweep across our day-to-day lives. This audit should be launched at international, national, local levels; across international bodies (generally frozen), governments (in denial), agencies (still waiting for the experts), and major companies – especially those in charge of critical infrastructure (probably at the vanguard, but still acting defensively and reactively). Immediate action should follow the audit.

If we are to re-map our crisis territory,

New audits for new challenges

It is time to accept a disturbing reality: something is broken within our risk machinery, says **Patrick Lagadec**, who tells us that our preparedness audits have to change accordingly

Life in an evacuation centre in Yamada, Iwate prefecture, Japan: Empowerment of the public in disasters will be a key to future response

Kathy Mueller / IFRC

The Deepwater Horizon incident shows us that leaders of organisations have to be prepared to deal with unfamiliar territories

US Coastguard

four layers have to be clarified:

■ **Emergency:** This is familiar territory and involves serious, yet isolated, rare, yet familiar and 'reasonable' events. The management of such incidents calls for basic capacities that are well-known: Detect; act; report; mobilise; lead; and co-ordinate. Every single organisation should have such abilities;

■ **Crisis:** The event no longer fits into our usual frameworks; scale, domino effects and uncertainties make the 'reasonable' field of reference obsolete. Responding actors multiply, shattering the usual response map. External communication problems change the logic of operations and leadership. There is more at stake than the technical dimension of the emergency response. Visions, choices and values must be considered. This requires many new skills, which constitute the bulk of a crisis management toolkit. In a nutshell, the problem is to conduct an orchestra, not a chain of command;

■ **Systemic crises:** Global connectivity and coupling of our activities and needs are new factors. Those in charge have to combine new intelligence on these hyper-complex and unstable situations. Critical thinking becomes crucial, far beyond ready-to-use tools and plans. Leaders must also learn to detect 'aberrant' signals – those which do not fit into our usual framework and grids. They must develop new leadership capacities, including: Being on the frontline personally; opening questions and categorising the event; and widening the vision and action maps of those involved. Finally, a Rapid Reflection Force approach has to be developed and used (see Béroux, Guilhou and Lagadec, *CRJ*, 2007, 2008); and

■ **Dislocations:** Unconventional systemic risks are now emerging globally and are subject to severe and speedy dislocations. They can trigger massive, instant, global upheaval. Climate, economy, environment, health, geo-strategy, generational issues, the fabric of society – all interact continuously, generating an overarching instability that makes each new crisis a potential tipping point for larger, more complex crises.

The gulf between our normal vision and this new landscape opens the way for 'routine' global failures to be compounded by failures of imagination, leadership, cohesive community response and more. When such conditions spread, the response system exhausts itself, models no longer work, best practice loses its edge, trusted statistics become misleading. All this triggers paralysis, flight and confusion.

We need to invent a large body of new knowledge, but at least we have some landmarks: Being able to open questions, not shying into denial or blind implementation

This is the era of mega-crises, such as Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. New theoretical foundations must be developed to deal with them

Jocelyn Agostino/FEMA

GLOBAL ASSESSMENT GRID

Level -1: The crisis issue is not on the agenda and all attempts to have it considered have failed, from subtle rejection to brutal reaction and firing of the messengers
Level 0: The issue is ignored, or considered solved as a special division or agency is theoretically in charge
Level +1: The organisation is interested in having some responses in place in the event of a crisis. A specific organisation exists, at least on paper; top leaders have visited the crisis room, have validated crisis plans and drills are sometimes organised
Level +2: The organisation is positively open to the questions raised by crises. Leadership shows commitment, and progress is real
Level +3: Leaders and their organisations are fully committed and present on the front line. Leadership has fully understood that this was one of their core missions. This translates into preparation, exercises, initiatives, debriefings, benchmarking, selection and promotion of people, etc

TERRA INCOGNITA EXPLORER ASSESSMENT GRID

Level -1: Definitive rejection of those territories which are held as being outside the scope of intelligence, governance and high level serious education
Level 0: Just ignored
Level 1: Some advances have been made on such avenues; but the whole remains episodic. The leadership commitment is random and limited
Level 2: Real efforts have been made to try to structure some integrated action
Level 3: The mutation to be made is clearly on the agenda, held as essential by the leadership, and specific projects are launched, at local, national and international level, to learn, share and increase operational ability

of outmoded best practice; being creative enough to shape unknown futures with unknown actors; the ability to inject positive dynamics and trust, when everything combines to trigger distrust and despair.

With regards to auditing crisis response, the goal is not to check whether people and organisations are prepared for success. The urgency lies in checking that they are not doomed to fiasco in the face of catastrophe. This five-level framework, which delineates performance zones, could be useful:
● Level -1: Fiasco
● Level 0:   Danger
● Level +1: Basic
● Level + 2: Encouraging
● Level + 3: Advanced

It is not difficult to sound out organisations and people; the test questions are simple: What is the date of your latest exercise? What kind of scenario did you test? What was the level of difficulty? Who was involved? What kind of debriefing was organised? What lessons were learnt – and implemented? Other questions include: Who is in charge of the crisis planning? What is his or her position with regards to, and links with, the CEO level? Is there any clear assessment of the level of preparation of the system? What initiatives have been taken to improve levels of professionalism?

Emergency response capacities must be checked, including the existence and maintenance of specific instant reaction capacity, as well as the capacity of other bodies – not just those specifically in charge of emergencies and risk control. If no tests have been run, the system must be labelled as being potentially vulnerable to large scale failure.

Crisis management capacities will also have to be checked. As a minimum the existence of basic tools must be verified. These include whether there are basic tools, such as written plans, in place and whether people – especially at senior levels – can use them. Further questions also arise: Have crisis rooms been set up and can people use them effectively? How realistic is team training and exercises?

It is vital that those in charge are trained to detect elusive problems, to report and mobilise on unclear issues; they should also be taught to lead crisis teams and to focus on strategic questions that lie beyond an immediate emergency. And, of course crisis team members must be specially-trained to work in unconventional environments; all must be prepared to cope with trans-organisational issues.

A number of experiences, launched and developed in some leading-light organisations

▶ around the world, have afforded some progress. Committed and stimulated people, in close co-operation with the very top level of one organisation, are working on complex and surprising scenarios. The goal is not to fix robust responses in order to avoid surprises, but to prepare people to be surprised, to detect

from – and work with – all those who make up a community and empowerment will be a key; people must continue to learn and take responsibility for their communities.

Education and research have a decisive role to play: as long as key questions and the global environment are ignored or excluded

> As long as key questions and the global environment are ignored or excluded by distinguished academic courses, it will be difficult to mobilise leaders and organisation and we cannot expect creative leadership "

aberrant signals, to mobilise and work together creatively in ambiguous and unknown contexts.

Debriefings on internal and external complex crises have also been launched to learn from those involved, to recognise mistakes and to identify promising and innovative responses. Specific work with senior leaders prepares them to confront unknown situations – an occasional ten-minute focused drill can prove helpful. Finally, benchmarking against other, similarly advanced organisations, is also taking place.

We must assess innovative abilities to deal with major dislocations and prepare for discontinuity and chaotic contexts. The objective is to train people to confront the unthinkable and to prepare leaders to mobilise and lead creatively.

But we must also envision a swing towards civil society as future crises will both emerge from, and affect, the fabric of society. The answers will have to emanate

by distinguished academic courses, it will be difficult to mobilise leaders and organisation and we cannot expect creative leadership.

It is important to appreciate the dynamics of severe crises and chaotic contexts. Situations are complex and, in crises, any swing from the norm is generally violent. Yet it is not so difficult to evaluate how organisations and systems would probably react should a rogue wave occur. At the very least, it is our responsibility to ring the alarm bells when so little is being done to avoid the certainty of defeat. **CRJ**

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ASSESSMENT GRID 'ADVANCED COMPETENCE'

Level -1: The leadership refuses to consider any questions beyond 'crisis management' as learned in the 1990s. This closed attitude is disguised with over-investment in hardware purchase and media-training sessions with well-known journalists or ex-journalists. Any other line is rejected with the definitive and protective argument: 'Do not scare our leaders'
Level 0: There is no opening towards 'outside of the box' issues, but no opposition to that kind of question either
Level 1: Some advances have been made on these avenues; but the whole remains episodic; leadership commitment is accidental and limited
Level 2: Real advances are made, the whole process is conducted, continuously, and somewhat robustly
Level 3: Leaders and organisations have made the crucial step, and are now open to explore, prepare and invent in the new unknown territories of large dislocations, unstable contexts, and incredible discoveries

BASIC COMPETENCE ASSESSMENT GRID

Level -1: Whatever the item, the assessment shows critical failures and more: a strong in-depth resistance to taking the issue on board. If a crisis occurs, one must expect catastrophic failure from the very beginning: signals rejected, paralysis, flight, optimistic protestations – 'everything is under control'– bunker mentality, etc
Level 0: The organisation does not possess minimal capabilities, but is open to upgrading efforts
Level 1: The organisation has basic essential know-how and tools, but will not be able to navigate through turbulent environments with skill and creativity
Level 2: The organisation shows a good level of ability to control conventional crises and is interested in developing its competencies and its external links and networks to learn, share and explore
Level +3: The organisation is working beyond 'crisis management' as developed at the end of last century. The focus is on issues without answers, leadership commitment, reflection groups next to CEO level, and bold initiatives with outside stakeholders in order to learn, share and explore

A water pipe spews water into the frosty morning air after being damaged by the tsunami in Japan. Unconventional systemic risks can trigger massive, instant, global upheaval, affecting climate, economy, health, environment and even the fabric of society itself

US Military/Master Chief Petty Officer Daniel Sanford