

Patrick Lagadec looks at the recent UN Climate Change Conference, COP 15, saying that for a truly sustainable future, we must find a shared desire to confront the realities of today, let alone those of tomorrow

Copenhagen: The lost battle?

I F WE DON'T ACT NOW, THE EARTH will be affected by major disasters in the 2050s." Those words were the guiding light, leading reflections regarding future sustainable development policies at the Copenhagen summit on climate change last December.

But there were serious pitfalls as everyone's eyes focused on the economic and financial issues of measures taken today, before considering the problems of tomorrow.

Unfortunately, the distant 2050s are not the only issue at stake. Our most immediate problem is that we will be confronted – in the very near future – with chaotic, manifold, entangled and very destructive phenomena.

Let us start from another vitally relevant standpoint where extreme situations dictate their own rules. This can be intolerable for our Cartesian spirits and precise methods, those that revere order, measure, reason and the return of normality. Without these, there are no elegant models, no structured debates, no accurate calculations, or maybe no calculations at all.

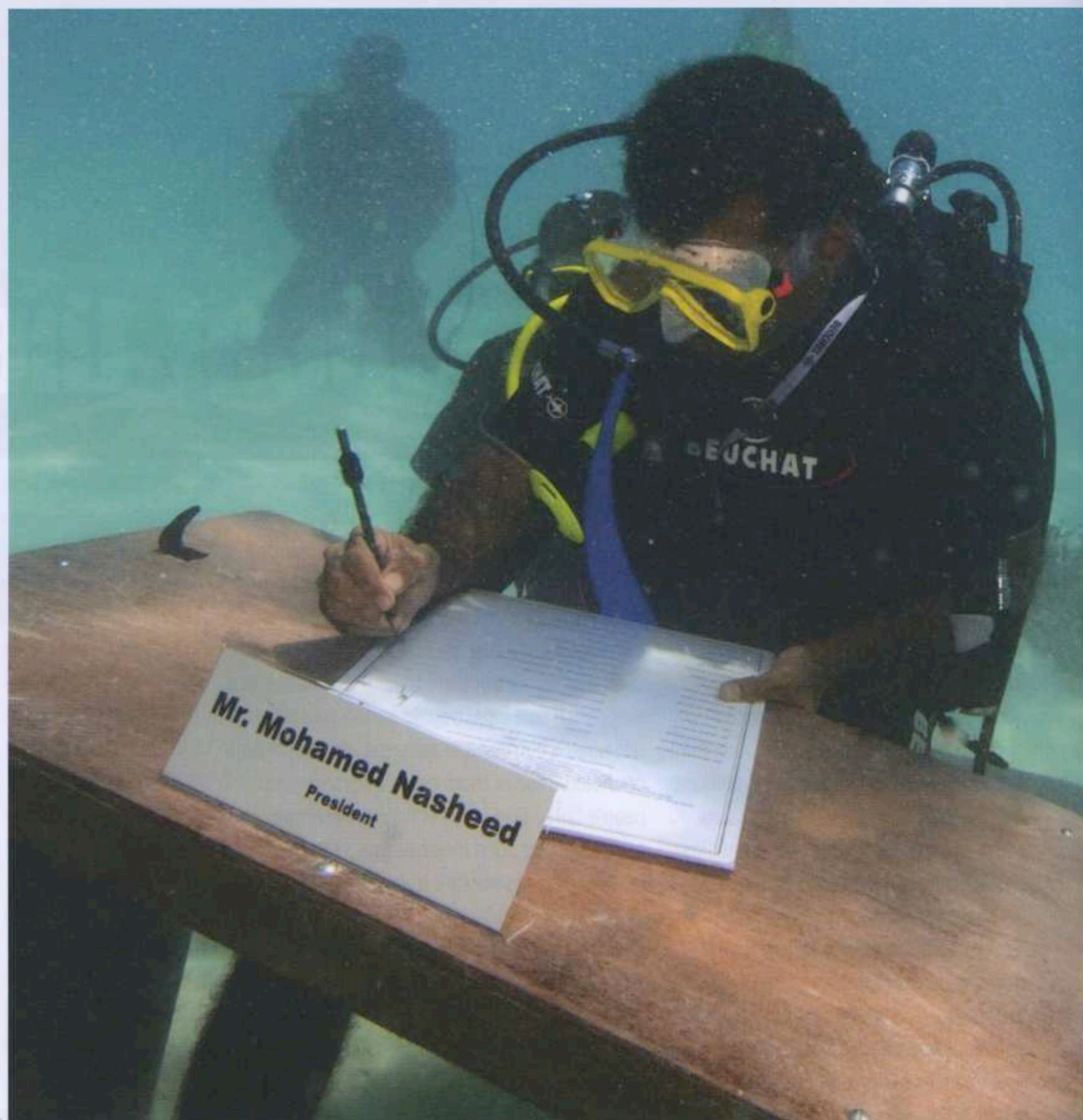
NON-MEDIAN EVENTS

But even if we feel more comfortable sticking with such Gaussian models, we ought to think about shifting the curve just a little bit to the right, and we will realise the new scale of non-median events.

Our first problem will not be the global rising sea levels but the climatic attacks we will endure and which will thrust us brutally into the era of mega-crises.

It only took a double storm, such as that in 1999, to destroy as many forests in France as had been lost during the previous two centuries. With the potential risk of endangering many ports, seaside areas and river banks, as well as major infrastructure (for example, the partial flooding of the Blayais nuclear power plant, near Bordeaux, in 1999), there are many other vulnerable sites, many of which are not as well protected.

Turn to Xynthia this February – a perfect global warning. Meteorologists sounded the alarm, warning that very severe winds would hit the Atlantic coast. But, as with



The Government of Mauritius held the world's first underwater cabinet meeting in a bid to push for a stronger climate change agreement at the upcoming UN summit in Copenhagen late last year. However, participants at the Copenhagen summit tended to become bogged down in the financial consequences of implementing sustainability policies, rather than focusing on the impact of climate change on society today, let alone the longer term effects

Government of Mauritius

Katrina, the wind was not the key problem; water was the challenge on two fronts. Dykes could not withstand the surge from the sea; swollen rivers flooded from the land side.

The crisis did not stick to pre-ordained plans. Evacuation was not considered, let alone ordered. The result was low-lying land that had been densely built up in recent years, was submerged at night. Fifty-three people died.

A few weeks previously, a prolonged snow episode had a global impact on Europe: planes, trains, roads, supermarket deliveries and global technical processes were affected by what hinted at the beginning of a systemic crisis.

Hurricane Katrina destroyed New Orleans in 2005 and, one year later, two hurricanes gave the US another serious scare when they struck Houston. When a major strategic

centre for the most powerful nation was under threat, the stakes shifted up a notch. Not long before, the vulnerability of Cape Kennedy had put the whole US space sector at risk.

In 2006, the authorities once again appeared confused when confronted by a succession of hurricanes. Yes, prevention plans were better prepared, but how could anyone evacuate areas so crucial to the economy five to seven days in advance on the basis of as yet uncertain information? To evacuate Houston for ten days three times in one summer because of a non-existent catastrophe would be unthinkable.

Another frontline to consider: it will take but one mildly serious drought in the US or China for the world to (re)discover what large scale famine means, according to H Bruins, in his research on risks to food security and contingency planning for mega-crises. We never really imagine this kind of scenario; it sounds straight out of the Middle Ages.

At the same time, we need to consider the fact that we have seriously damaged our resilience capital over the past few decades. As the director of security for Schiphol Airport, Amsterdam, pointed out during a conference organised by the European Commission in Brussels in November 2007, our hubs are vulnerable to any turbulence occurring somewhere on the planet. Our supermarkets are completely dependent on transportation, with only half a day of food stocks. We would not know how to make our systems work without the Internet, a web that is dependent on electric networks, which are themselves vulnerable to heatwaves and drought, or simply failures. Our world – transportation, cities, technology – is now organised in hubs, on just-in-time logistics, global interdependencies and global tight couplings. Any dysfunction in this structure has devastating and staggering consequences.

Admiral Thad Allen, who was finally assigned to be in charge of the Federal relief effort after Hurricane Katrina, hit the nail on the head when he told Hans de Smet: "This was not a hurricane. This is a weapon of mass destruction with no criminal intention. We evacuated two million people in just a few days and weeks. The Dust Ball of the 1930s only affected 400,000 over the course of several years. And we did not know if these people would be able to come back. This was exactly like an attack by non-conventional weapons."

One of the problems is that our emergency logic remains one-sided, whatever we say. It will thus collapse before systemic and very large-scale realities.

And no communication wizardry – the magic decoction of the 1990s and 2000s – will

save either citizens or the authorities. This is all the more true as we witness a large-scale fragmentation of our societies, with confounding ever-increasing complexity of the vulnerabilities of human systems. All around the world, our emergency relief plans are based on the assumption of homogeneous populations.

“We never really imagine this kind of scenario; it sounds straight out of the Middle Ages”

One must therefore ask: how can we organise – today – a response to such non-conventional crises, which will inevitably happen in the near future, including in the most privileged of countries? Bear in mind that these are those same countries who seem unable to absorb even limited disturbances compared to the devastating potential that Copenhagen has agreed to accentuate.

This entails some major initiatives in terms of risk management, international civil security, insurance and reinsurance, refugee fostering, as well as massive investment in terms of minimal resilience and the mobilisation of grass-root actors – because the official agencies won't be enough.

This also presupposes changing the type of education and training received by crisis managers, and leaders in general. This won't be about giving them the right toolkits to avoid surprises. This will be about preparing to be surprised, as professor Todd LaPorte from Berkeley rightfully says, because that's where the real challenge will be.

Those who are unable to deploy theoretical and practical intelligence when confronted with these chaotic situations may well end up bulldozed by the crisis. If you roll your eyes at this point, please remember what most of the authorities in charge at the time of Katrina were actually able to accomplish. And let's not claim, that: "In my country, we would have known what to do," under circumstances that involve half your country being destroyed, crucial networks collapsing within three hours and the almost complete loss of communication infrastructures.

I know this can be a slippery path because it sometimes leads to feeding drama and fear.

And we could be wrong about this, as we have just seen with the 'Pandemic of the century' that decided not to fit in with our plans. Yet what amazing talent our management systems have for flexibility, adaptability and strategic intelligence!

Since the road to wisdom stumbles over a short-term predetermined vision, and

because reality won't ask for permission to invade our agenda, we'll have to take into account such unthinkable scenarios, preventing anyone from saying: "Nobody could have foreseen that..." after the event.

Copenhagen was but one lost battle – we need to open a new field of discussion concerning those highly unexpected crises of the near future whose systemic consequences will be 'unthinkable'. This should be done before the next big international meeting on this agenda. We could suggest concrete strategies to develop co-operative and positive dynamics, rather than fear and staggered paralysis. And we need to do that before the next major crisis knocks us down and leaves us helpless.

As with any difficult discussion, there will be major disagreements. But will those who refuse the debate be also coherent enough to refuse international relief should a major disaster occur in their country? Are they ready, in case of such a disaster, to pay for the colossal recovery themselves?

LUCIDITY AND RESOLUTION

We also will need to initiate a civic engagement of the victims themselves by rebuilding infra-local logics. These may appear irrelevant today, but they are bound to become a crucial component in the fight against upcoming crises. This is the one lesson to be learned from the current battle to rebuild New Orleans bit by bit (see Julie Hernandez on page 60).

Self-styled champions of optimism will object, saying that one must not lapse into defeatism with regards to catastrophes and that they completely trust in human nature to be able to improvise... Yet, these people are usually the first ones to jump ship when the alarm bell sounds. Today we need to blend lucidity and resolution – this is the only type of optimism that is worthwhile, optimism that affirms, through determination and action, the will and the capability to confront realities as they are.

The failure of last year's Copenhagen summit must trigger a shared desire to reinvent our common home, not only for the day after tomorrow, but also for today. This is the shift of focus that must guide all our discussions on sustainable development.

AUTHOR

Patrick Lagadec is Director of Research, *École polytechnique, France*, and Member of CRJ's Advisory Panel

