Crisis Management in France: Trends, Shifts and Perspectives

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The object of this article is to give an idea of crisis management in France. I will look at two principal axes: firstly, a simplified outline of the system as it has evolved over the years and with regard to the major changes it is undergoing today; secondly, an overview of the efforts recently made by the most progressive actors in the field.

Traditionally, all analyses of this type have concentrated on the French exception, that is, a centralised country answering to a strong state, largely influenced by past references, doctrines, hierarchical rules, and technical dispositions. Although this image is still very accurate in many respects, France has been progressively losing its 'classicism'. This has come about as a result, first and foremost, of the growing number of crises which contradict the logic of long-standing references. Uncertainties, multiplicity of actors, masses of information, major surprises, cross-over events and abrupt changes are but some of the elements which are increasingly difficult to absorb within pre-established historical models. With the profusion of new actors and networks of people unaware of former royal or Napoleonic regulations, the cards are largely being dealt between the public and the private, the central and the local, the national and the international, and so on. Transformation is continuously occurring by the accumulation of new laws (e.g. decentralisation) or specific adjustments (e.g. critical infrastructures). International markets and new information technologies also play a key role in this transformation. But perhaps the most powerful motor for change are crises. More often than not, crises lead to a loss of faith in yet unquestioned references, with regard to legitimacy, credibility and responsibility.

France offers a highly contrasted scene as a country still resisting inevitable change. Although there is growing disorder, new opportunities are arising. Wishing to take a dynamic approach to these questions rather than a descriptive one, I have sought to distinguish the main themes and their interactions. I will particularly look at: problems raised by new crises in complex societies; the means necessary for ensuring progress (Boin; Lagadec 2000); resistance to these measures; and, finally, some of the most promising initiatives. The vocation of the European Crisis Management Academy is to share past experience as well as questions and answers in an area of great instability and critical stakes.

Challenges

Stakeholders: the norm and the emerging picture

At the heart of France: the state   Historically, in France, the state has played a central role in crisis situations. Present-day dispositions exist at three levels:

- *The prefect in the departments:*[1] Whereas the mayor is the first to be held responsible for every-day safety, it is the prefect — as representative of central power in his/ (rarely) her department — who takes sole command for all of the operations whenever an event of significant repercussions occurs. It is up to the prefect and his/ her administration to draw up emergency plans (polyvalent plans such as the ORSEC plan, i.e. rescue operations) and specialised plans (specific plans for industrial plants at risk, emergency plans in case of numerous casualties etc.). It is also up to the prefect to enforce these plans if necessary. Traditionally, response to a catastrophe leads to a fixed post in the prefecture and a post of operational command as close as possible to the event in order to co-ordinate services, information and queries, thereby favouring concrete decisions. Calling the ORSEC plan into action traditionally also means activating 5 operational cells: rescue-clearing; medical care; transportation and works; police and public order; transmission. To sustain these efforts, the prefect may also call on an entire range of public and private means.

- *An intermediary level: the 'zone':* In order to respond more adequately to serious events, the departments have been grouped within so-called zones, of which there are now 7

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throughout France. These zones have their own general staff and may call upon operational centres called CIRCOSC (Inter-regional centres for operational co-ordination of public safety). The zones are able to distribute available resources among different departments more judiciously and are supposed to perform syntheses of the situation, thus sparing the national level from having to respond too widely when a large geographical area is concerned.

- *At the national level: the Department of Defence and Civil Safety* (DDSC, within the Ministry of Interior): The Ministry of Interior, which is responsible for the prefects, has a central position in the government's response to serious accidental situations. The DDSC has a national operational centre at its disposal allowing and allows it to send reinforcements where most needed. It can also call upon the civil safety 'intervention and instruction units' (specialised units of 1700 men answering to the Ministry of Defense). In addition, it has operational and logistic support agencies, back-up forces, helicopters and air planes specialised in forest fire-fighting. Such means of support, largely specific to France, have often proved their usefulness, especially in recent crises when intervening parties suffered from limited capacities. This national operational centre directs French interventions abroad on the request of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Beyond these basic principles, there are several notable characteristics having forged the existing context (Dye, 1995):

- *A contrasted scene, even internally:* The present system has arisen as a result of very diverse levels of sedimentation: multiplicity of texts; disorderly concepts (such as 'passive defence', 'civil safety', etc.); diversity of implicated actors (voluntary, professional, military, etc. as well as the 2850 employees of the defence and civil security departments who represent 43 different kinds of professional status).
- *The historical importance of the local representative of central power:* It should not be forgotten that in our country, of which the administrative and political tradition resembles neither that of the United States nor that of the northern countries, the state representative within the department remains, more or less, the King's representative (or, today, the Republic's) and that he therefore incarnates collective aspirations to order, safety and social stability as they are perceived when the catastrophe occurs. Even if he were not to wish so, the prefect would be obliged to take the fore-front in crisis management, because French citizens expect

no less and because, were he not to do so, he would add an additional element to the crisis by his voluntary abstention! (Hurand, 1993: 14)

- *A cultural weakness in terms of anticipation:* Almost all the significant advances have come about as responses to an event or as lessons learned from catastrophes which were not all inevitable. Only very rarely have they been the product of anticipation strategies. (Dye, 1994: 8)
- *Traditionally, static references, oblivious to the notion of crisis:* The idea of 'crisis' does not appear in the law of 22 July 1987 [law on civil safety] whereas today what best qualifies the services intervening in these domains is undoubtedly their aptitude to manage situations of this nature. (Dye, 1995: 29) And yet, despite all of these cumbersome qualities, there have been significant adaptations:
- The national operational centre has been transformed into the 'Inter-ministerial Operational Centre for Crisis Management' (COGIC).

In case of need, relevant ministries and large national operators (such as electricity or telecommunication network directors) are called upon to be represented; there is also a vocation to include expert teams.

- The national level is capable of sending 'support missions' into the field at the prefect's request: these are support missions for media communication, meant for the chiefs of staff. In the future, as we increasingly face crises and not only natural catastrophes, civil safety will depend on the exchange between suppliers of operational means and the development of complex crisis management.
- Efforts have likewise been made to set up operational centres within the zones allowing them to fully perform their responsibilities.

A multiplicity of actors   Following the laws of decentralisation, local communities today have considerable means in the area of safety (the chairman of the General Council is also chairman of the administrative council of the departmental fire and safety service). Elected representatives are also at the head of urban communities providing for numerous and varied means (e.g. busses for evacuating the local population). Even though the prefect may actually direct operations, the locally elected representatives, as tax-payers and managers, increasingly demand to be involved in the follow-up of operations (Gilbert, 1990, 1992). In fact, they seek more and more to take the lead.

Numerous ministries – Health; Environment; Equipment; Finances; Agriculture; etc. – increasingly faced with difficult situations, have tended to set up their own emergency responses, both nationally and locally. Certain particularly exposed – and dynamic – agencies such as the Department for Nuclear Installation Safety, the Office for Protection against Ionising Radiation, the Institute for Nuclear Protection and Safety have at times shown striking capacities for emergency response. In the realm of food safety, certain departments such as the General Food Department are dealing with more and more crises (a ten-fold increase between 1998 and 2000) and are striving to further perfect their preparation efforts.

Besides these departments, a certain number of agencies has been created since 1998 in order to respond to the challenges posed by increasingly visible risks: the French Agency for Drug Safety (Afssaps); the French Agency for Food Safety (Afssa); the National Public Health Monitoring Agency (INVS). These agencies, created in response to crises which degenerated into fiascos (Chernobyl, contaminated blood, asbestos, etc.) tend primarily to carry out risk evaluation but may also be called upon to give their opinion in a crisis situation.

Finally, critical infrastructures (energy, telecommunication, transportation, water, food, etc.) have foreseen emergency responses and sometimes dispose of crisis teams in order to handle their own difficult situations. The scene here is highly contrasted between those who are potentially faced with serious but well identified crises (energy sector) and those who have not had, for a long time, to confront crisis questions.

State services often express their concern regarding these networks of which power continues to increase. They readily emphasise that these large operators – especially those which are clearly part of shifting market strategies – tend to have their own very specific logic for crisis management – a logic less determined by public service than rapid restoration of those operational capacities most crucial to their income. The state is also reflecting on new vulnerabilities linked to the structure of these networks and responding more to imperatives of quickness, just-in-time flow, than to those of intrinsic safety. Another new element is the fact that these large networks respond increasingly to a non-hierarchical logic, with large margins of operational independence, even when the central state wishes to give general instructions. To complicate things further, exponential commercial development entities (such as telecommunication) do not always have a clear appreciation of their interdependence – which raises many questions regarding systemic crisis.

In addition to all of this, there is a large number of important actors who can turn out to be decisive in a crisis situation: expertise centres (the most diverse); associations (e.g. victim associations or self-help groups); and individuals – moral or media personalities who may appear on the scene of the crisis. For instance, Bernard Kouchner, Undersecretary of Health, has had a decisive influence in crisis situations because of his spirit of initiative and boldness, as well as his popularity.

The media enjoy ever greater means, even more than merely five years ago. Immediate coverage of issues makes government response much more difficult. Likewise, throughout the world, the arrival of the Internet, and with it a new form of logic, has revolutionised the world of communications, especially where delicate information is concerned (the few thousand calls of some years ago have been replaced by a few million connections, whereas the risk of deforming messages has been replaced by the autonomous development of a totally uncontrollable dynamic).

Last but not least, judiciary questions play a larger part than ever before in crisis situations. Today, whenever a significant event occurs, following just behind the fireman are the journalist, the psychologist, the politician, and just behind them the expert, the judge and the lawyer.

In a sense, the 'French garden' has traded in its classical Versailles rows for disorderly dynamic. This means new aptitudes must be cultivated if we are to remain efficacious and pertinent.

Contrasted and insufficiently developed aptitudes

A great variety of preparations Many actors, in particular those new to the field, have no kind of preparation for emergency situations. It would be in vain to search for crisis rooms, dispositions and even less ad hoc preparations. Numerous actors dispose of 'Crisis plans', so many formal models detailed in voluminous confidential binders, but often they have been established by central services poorly informed about local reality. In addition, such models are rarely tested.

Technical operators, long prepared to face emergency situations, do exist. Here, the difficulty is that these actors remain within the strict confines of specific, well known, technical breakdown and within those of specific, codified technical responses to limited dysfunction. Only conventional hypotheses are envisaged and there is little opening to the outside.

During the last decade, certain companies have shown awareness (usually due to serious public opinion crises) by engaging in crisis management efforts going beyond purely technical emergency. Their first step has been to acquire new competence in the field of media

communication, which is the aspect of crisis situations that caused them the most difficulties in the 1980s and 1990s.

Finally, one does find organisations capable of facing present-day challenges. They have engaged in efforts to prepare their teams for complex, open, uncertain, and unstable situations. However, it should be stressed that these efforts are for the most part recent, limited, and that they suffer from poor follow-up and lack of hierarchical support; indeed such decisive criteria are rarely found united.

It is true that the scene is evolving, but the weight of history and culture should not be underestimated: organisations remain deeply marked by principles of stability taking no account of surprise, of non technical means of preparation nor of the need to open up to the outside world. And it is not only the directors who tend to block necessary evolution.

Increasingly acute challenges Whereas not so long ago it was sufficient to have a specialist view on technical problems by applying accepted and unquestionable solutions, we are now suddenly confronted with new, structural demands.

- *The demand for information*: Officials have been propelled into an instantaneous, ubiquitous media-oriented world, where every insufficiently explained option is hotly debated on a television platform.
- *Uncertainty*: Until recently, the authorities could consult their official experts, secure answers, and handle specific questions as a function of this assured, unquestioned confidential data. But now, suddenly, expertise is no longer the monopoly of the authorities; it suffers from its incapacity to establish 'scientific truth' and is thus increasingly questioned by the public. Here too, our traditional notions of dealing with emergencies have been dealt a blow.
- *A multiplication of actors in increasingly open fields*: In the past, we were used to working in small groups, where everyone was reassured by references, limits, and well established rules. But now crises occur within large, independent and open networks, sometimes on an international level as well. And here too, we must be as much interested in global matters (the appearance of CNN) as in specific matters (an unknown individual suddenly becoming a media star).
- *New areas for emerging crises*: public health; food (with repeated crises, especially BSE); information systems; meteorology (an increasingly critical factor).
- *The demand for consideration of victims*: Families are becoming full-fledged actors and no longer 'nuisances' to rid oneself of as soon as possible. Overall, one can no longer act without the victims and even less against them. Respect for the victims, a criterion sorely missing in the past, has now become a must.

More recently, this picture has been further, and singularly transformed.

- *Overall and systemic phenomena*: Interdependency occurs on a large scale as for instance the lorry driver strikes throughout Europe. Our organisations are unaccustomed to having to deal with such large phenomena instead, they are used to segmenting realities: the more severe the problems, the finer the segments. This ends up by being counterproductive. Attention must now be turned to unforeseeable phenomena subject to probability calculus and to very large stakes; it no longer suffices to adhere to the good old 'probability-gravity' product by which illogical phenomena are largely evacuated.

Case study: increasingly severe tests

France has known many of the same difficulties as numerous countries faced with new imperatives in the prevention and management of crises. Any French specificity appears to be linked to the cultural legacy I have just described: secrecy, segmentation, difficulty to change, etc. The gap between poor preparation and the irruption of new challenges has led to some arduous tests.

Organisational fiascos As in the cases of Seveso or Three Mile Island, the post-accidental situation turned out to be an arduous test for systems which had only been conceived in order to sustain very localised and relatively limited accidents. The first great shock took the form of the sinking of the *Amoco-Cadiz*, a tanker of 230 000 tons which spilled out petrol along the coasts of Brittany in 1978. The most striking aspect of this catastrophe, both for the local citizens and the parliamentary investigators, was the lag between, on the one hand, a large-scale threat and, on the other, the total lack of co-ordination of the organisational response.

'What is at issue here is a complicated system in which information is shared amongst various agents who are more or less unaware of each other, and in which any bit of information is chopped up and circulates badly. Paradoxically, the information received finally results in the ignorance of the authority with competence to act. This is a system in which one administration has powers but no material means and must request the latter from another administration, which decides whether it would be advan-

tageous to grant them these means and, or inversely, an administration having material means does not receive the information that would stimulate it to use them, or does not have the power to use them. In short, this is a fractured system, deprived of any synthetic function.' (Colin, 1978: 223)

This is only one example amongst many (Lagadec, 1990). The problem with joint work, beyond administrative territories and bureaucratic demarcation lines, is a permanent challenge, becoming extreme in a crisis situation. Much more recently, more than 20 years after the *Amoco-Cadiz*, the same type of difficulties arose with the pollution produced by the sinking of the tanker *Erika* in 1999.

Communication fiascos This was what was most visible. Neither the bureaucratic systems nor the companies were prepared to express themselves outwards, instead they were prepared to be silent; they were not prepared to trust their partners, and particularly journalists. It was not solely a question of knowing how to speak in front of a microphone or a camera; their reflexes were at the opposite end of what an information society demands. A number of episodes marked these communication difficulties (Lagadec, 1984, 1987):

- *Tracing the 'Seveso drums' (1982–83):* Following the Seveso accident, in 1976, dioxin contaminated waste was disposed in drums. The French authorities (misled by Hoffmann-La Roche) immediately stated reassuringly that there were no such drums in the country. They were found in a terrible state after a long detective-like media story in the back courtyard of an abandoned butcher's shop. The chemical risk was next to nil, but the communication fiasco was of huge proportions. (Lagadec, 1988)
- *The askarel affairs, Reims (1985):* On 14 January 1985, a transformer exploded in the basement of a building in the northern French town of Reims. Immediately, the operator (Eclectricité de France) stipulated, on the basis of reassuring analyses, that there was no risk. The inhabitants of the building launched a series of their own analyses with alarming results. After an initial blockage, the polemic ended up by gaining national and even European attention. The official actors lost all their credibility and were replaced by the media who occupied the centre stage of the crisis direction.
- *The sinking of the Mont-Louis and its drums of uranium hexafluoride (1985):* The ship sunk off the coast of Ostende on a Saturday. The President of the maritime transportation company immediately gave his crew orders to

remain silent. He changed his mind at the end of the week-end, but the harm was done; the order to remain silent was immediately interpreted as a proof of the extreme danger of a project which such a threatening name. The President had decided to withdraw the order on Monday morning, but then received instructions to uphold it from the Prime Minister's cabinet. The silence was becoming heavier and heavier, as revealed by bolder and bolder headlines in the articles. The incident remained on the front pages for two weeks: 'Shhh, we have sunk'; 'Silence of the deep'; 'The miasmas of secrecy'; 'What France has been hiding'. A Belgian minister intervened on Sunday evening and declared on the waves of RTL: 'Since it's nuclear, France is not giving any information; but, you may rest assured that it's not dangerous.'

- *Chernobyl and the nuclear cloud, 1986:* This was the huge fiasco that finally made the authorities understand that a change in attitude was urgently required. The French public were under the impression that the authorities had claimed the nuclear cloud had not affected France, whereas in fact it had. Whatever the real effects of these events may have been, and for many critical commentators they are far from being nil, the effects on the credibility of the authorities was disastrous. Chernobyl has remained the reference that comes back in every delicate debate.

'Political' fiascos As a result of these various incidents, France has undergone a 'political' fiasco far deeper than the organisational and communication fiascos: a fundamental mistrust of piloting systems (going beyond the accusation of the highest placed political authorities). With the emergence of AIDS, and within that crisis that of the post-transfusional transmission of AIDS, France underwent problems common to numerous countries: major surprises; unhinging of the health system (until then assured of its success); the imperative of breaking with the past regarding modes of action. But in France, more than in other countries, the context was 'dominated by inertia and indifference' (Setbon, 1993). What came across clearly was the incapacity of the system – whatever the institutions concerned – to pose itself non conventional questions: it was incapable of detecting a signal before it became strong and could be scientifically 'proven'; it was incapable of mobilising action coherently, of avoiding slogans ('Volunteers cannot be contaminated', Setbon, 1993: 110). Beyond specific health questions, what the drama of the contaminated blood clearly showed up was the fragility of the country once confronted by infinitely more

furtive, 'systemic', multidimensional crises than in the past.

The asbestos drama, the problem of GMOs (Chateauraynaud, Torny, 1999) and every public discussion dealing with highly uncertain risks now take place on this background of loss of faith.

Systemic fiascos   At least two events should be taken into consideration.

- *The 'false alert': Y2K:* The passage of the year 2000 gave rise to many fears which turned out to be unfounded. The planet prepared itself for a large scale risk to no avail. So was the question of systemic risks in fact a mere illusion? Many deciders thought so: 'There was no risk, we were misled.' It would have been more pertinent to question the vulnerability of our complex societies. But, before this could be done, a far more important storm troubled the teapot.
- *The December 1999 storms:* Until 1999, one could assume that the national emergency-response system was still robust as far as natural catastrophes were concerned. The hurricanes of late 1999 (92 dead) indicated that, on the contrary, this system had to be rethought. The entire country was swept by storms of unprecedented violence (winds up to 200km/hr), the damage was considerable (some 15 billion Euros) and the response system was almost overloaded. Critical infrastructures (electricity, roads, railways, telecommunication etc.) revealed their critical importance whereas their operators were hardly integrated within the response structures; dispositions on article, lacking effective preparation, revealed their limits; the army was obliged to stress once again that it was no longer the inexhaustible reserve of labour it had once been (and still is in the minds of many).

As the investigation (Sanson, 2000) indicated, the collective response was remarkable. But many questions were raised.

Regarding the risks to be taken into consideration

- Had the storm not struck at such a favourable time – a Sunday morning following Christmas when schools and public places were closed or empty – the number of casualties would undoubtedly have been much higher (1000 immediate deaths were hypothesised);
- The sum of reparations disbursed for this event was equivalent to that of all those for the period 1928–1998;
- The volume of destroyed trees (numbers for Europe) was equivalent to all of those trees lost to stormy weather since the mid 19th century;

- It has become evident that the overlapping of critical infrastructures has multiplied the risks of domino effects, by a rapid contamination effect and the speed of the spread of dysfunction was quicker and quicker as a result of the just-in-time flow logic in all areas.

On the new conditions of response

- Privatisation has removed the network operators from state services;
- The internationalisation of aid has become commonplace;
- The private sector is called on more often.

On the insufficiencies

- The dispositions had been insufficiently run in; there was no national plan despite a law which passed 13 years earlier; the national crisis centre (COGIC) was insufficiently recognised by its numerous partners. There appears to have been no zone plan. The departmental ORSEC plans were largely outdated and based on hypotheses which were no longer pertinent to contemporary threats; the crisis teams were outdated and suffered from too much improvisation, to much hovering about state services. These difficulties prevented the strategic distance necessary for presenting syntheses of the situation to the government;
- Communication on the crisis was outstripped by the events.

On new requirements

- The logic of alert had to be rethought and adapted to large surprises;
- The multiple actors required improved co-ordination which meant tracing the reasons for the lack of follow-up and insufficient communication which still characterise the administration;
- It had become essential to prepare for the unforeseeable, going beyond the logic of codified response;
- The authorities had to be informed in order to advance in destabilising environments; whereas, in fact, the exercises had often been neglected and their content was too conventional;
- The training in crisis management was still hesitant; the insufficiencies of strategic reflection was evident;
- Debriefing was neither systematic nor constructive.

It is on the basis of all these elements – references inherited from the past, new vulnerabilities; learning from the past and from notable insufficiencies – that one must today

strive to develop dynamics of progress (Lagadec, 1993).

Efforts to progress

Well identified requirements

Towards the end of the 1980s, following the communication fiascos mentioned above, companies strove to train their spokespersons in media techniques. 'Crisis communication' became a must. This tendency began in state services in the 1990s (although certain administrations were ahead of others) and acted as a powerful leverage for change. The directors of communication were now better placed to make the hierarchy understand the necessity of paying attention to external preoccupations. But crises cannot be solved only on the basis of communication, especially if the other sectors of the organisation remain little involved, little aware and unprepared.

Multifarious action

- *Awakening the awareness of directing teams*: The first step is to place the problem firmly on the deciders' agenda. It is essential that they understand that crises cannot simply be delegated to a technical team, but involve the responsibility of the highest officials; codified response on the part of specialists is no longer sufficient: collective questioning at a high level is now required.
- *Debriefing*: In a collective spirit, there has been an effort to learn from past experiences and to understand the chain of events which occurs in managing crisis questions. Past experiences have become an opportunity to advance together, rather that an exceptional episode best forgotten. Debriefing must be pertinent for directors and go beyond mere technical feedback: it must clarify the piloting and co-ordination difficulties which arose at a high level and for all actors. It is very difficult and perhaps impossible to learn constructively from the past if the interested parties are too weak: in such cases, questions tend to turn into too painful an awareness of shortcomings to ensure positive lesson-drawing. Minimum training for teams in debriefing techniques is a prerequisite if the debriefing itself is to be a powerful leverage (Lord Phillips, 2000; Lagadec, 2001).
- *Simulation exercises*: A non-trained organisation has the greatest difficulties to take charge of an abnormal situation ('t Hart, 1997). In addition, it is irresponsible to fall back only on real experiences in order to train collectively, especially if the real experience is rapidly withdrawn from learning experiences (through fear of judiciary proceedings seizing

such analyses – a powerful hindrance). Continuous practise is required with training for surprises and not for well codified failures. Regarding debriefing, simulations can take many forms and are nowadays becoming increasingly creative, avoiding long, heavy exercises. Simulations must be followed by rigorous debriefings.

- *Specific perfecting*: It is crucial to train a certain number of officials specifically to carry out their functions in crisis situations, starting with the most delicate roles:
  - the leaders, who will have a key political role to play in a crisis;
  - the crisis team facilitators who will have to lead extremely complex systems;
  - the 'strategic observers' whose role it is to reflect, taking a distance throughout the crisis, on behalf of the leader; their role is pivotal, although it is hardly recognised and rarely filled;
  - the spokespersons who will have to intervene on the complex media terrain;
  - the experts who will suddenly be expected to provide elements of judgement, having to face glaring television cameras, whereas their analysis tools are not foolproof;
  - support teams which can be sent out in order to assist a given entity in its strategic thinking, communication, technical interventions.
- *Inter-actor learning*: Since crises take place within complex networks, it is important to widen learning. This process must be engaged as soon as the concerned institution feels more comfortable and less disarmed.
- *Personal implication on the part of leaders*: Since it is of the very essence of crises to involve the fundamental elements within the life of the organisation, nothing serious can be done without the manifest and lasting implication of its keystone: the engagement of all in the learning experience changes fundamentally when the 'boss' is personally implicated.
- *General programming for the intervention*: one must refrain from spectacular operations with no tomorrow since they exhaust energy, good will and budgets. Instead, tests and contributions should be progressively introduced, gradually implicating growing numbers of actors.
- *Mastering the process*: One must know at all times where one stands and engage in a critical follow-up of methods used and results obtained. This presupposes debriefing with regard to the learning process itself.

Bold innovations

- *The necessity of new kinds of support*: In order to move about intelligently within the new

territories of systemic risk, the question is not so much one of finding a central point from which to 'manage', but of developing new dynamics of civic responsibility implicating the largest number of actors possible. To forge ahead, one must develop new areas for stimulating collective intelligence in matters of crisis and collective safety and assist deciders in supporting this dynamic. This is precisely the challenging vocation of the new entity established by the British Prime Minister and placed within the Cabinet Office. We have no such support structures, until today, in France.

Taking stock: what has been acquired in face of efforts and resistance

A very contrasted picture   As I have already indicated, within crisis management the level of actors is extremely contrasted. This reflects in turn very unequal levels of preparation.

- In many organisations, the issue of preparing questions arising during crises remains unidentified.
- Sometimes, an awareness has been organised but remains without follow-up, just like the exercise organised 'five or ten years ago'.
- Very often, actions engaged do not reflect the fundamental policy of the institution but the dynamism of one person and thus the action ceases as soon as that person is called to other functions.
- Within the realm of the state, preparation efforts are overall less developed than within industry. Here the problem is how to ensure that the two work together, free from assumptions, from bureaucracies with little experience of collective work and caught up in hierarchical, segmented cultures little likely to open up towards the outside.
- In large public companies, solid advances can be noted but also a background of reticence with regard to crisis questions that are too destabilising for these large institutions: certain efforts are being made, but not without reserve.
- In the most modern private companies, on the contrary, the difficulty is more to succeed in securing the collaboration of entities working in very different realms, at high speed, following hierarchical structures which no one can really pinpoint. Certain operations can be organised, but the principle of continuous action is often out of reach.
- In some rare cases, on the other hand, one finds organisation leaders personally implicated, anxious to support a movement of continuous anticipation. Most often, however, the large advances are operated by exceptional

individuals who, for a period of time, were able to take hold of the reins and to introduce particularly bold transformations. Even so, such gains can rapidly fade away. A well managed crisis can also be a trap, since success, especially when given publicity by the media, can extinguish all desire to progress or even to maintain skills. Thus, a 'success story' can become the building block of future failures.

Deep resistance   To date, deep resistance is the dominant characteristic of preparing for crisis situations in France. It cannot be said that the French have a monopoly in the area ('t Hart, 1997), but it is possible that cultural, deeply-rooted characteristics of the exercise of power – underpinned by the idea of Honour (d'Iribarne, 1989) – are even more penalising in France that in other countries.

Whoever has attempted to develop learning techniques knows well such reactions as rejecting, avoiding, opposing proposed projects:

- 'We already have made plans';
- 'They already made us go through useless exercises';
- 'We don't have the time';
- 'This is not the right moment';
- 'It's not a priority for us';
- 'This is much too sensitive stuff;: you're going to open Pandora's box';
- 'It will be impossible to include the leaders, there are far too many conflicts higher up';
- 'You are not actually going to tell me that I don't know how to carry out my own job!';
- 'If a delicate situation arises, I shall know how to handle it';
- 'There exist emergency and communication services for what you're talking about';
- Etc.

On the basis of Allison's work (1971), one can define three types of obstacles:

- *The bureaucratic phenomenon:* Whereas each person feels safe within his/her area, the crisis situation blows up the protective walls, exposing the entities to the outside, pushing everybody to his/ her limits, demanding answers not only in technical terms, but in terms of meaning, identity, etc. Organisations seek to avoid all of these demands. Each entity is used to imposing its own methods of operation, its own terms of collaboration on the others; and now it is told to work with others in little known areas exposing itself dangerously. There is no real crisis that does not make people tremble. Thus, the very idea of preparing for them is rarely well received.
- *The 'political' disarray:* before all, the crisis is a situation setting out limits and posing fundamental questions as to identity, values,

strategic options. Very quickly, the management function loses its references. As Ralf Stacey (1996) explains, management references could hardly have prepared it for such undertakings:

'At least ninety per cent of the contents of all the textbooks on strategic management that I know of, apart, of course, from this one, are devoted to that part of the management task which is relatively easy – the part that has to do with running the organisation 'machine' in as surprise-free way as possible [...] The task that justifies the existence of all managers has to do with instability, irregularity, difference and disorder. Furthermore, there is evidence available that conventional wisdom – all explanations and prescriptions that encourage managers to focus on uniformity, stability and regularity – leads to failure rather than success in rapidly changing and highly competitive conditions [...].' (p. XIX–XX)

- *Fundamental reservations on the part of leaders:* the mere idea of responsibility at the highest level in terms of discontinuity, surprise, navigating through muddy and turbulent waters is not yet comprehended as being part and parcel of the job, in fact it is seen as frankly intolerable. In the case of France, rich in a royal past of divine law, these difficulties are further accentuated: the legitimacy seems to come from Olympus and protects itself first through silence, secrecy, indignation at being put into question. These tendencies which one finds at all levels are a poor preparation for the collective reactivity required by a world in full mutation.

Innovative initiatives

In order to stimulate exchange, I will now point to some of the most interesting advances made over the last years in France in the area of crisis management without pretending to be exhaustive.[2]

A growing awareness and exploration of new challenges: working in depth with prefects (1995-2000) In the second half of the 1990s, on the direct and continuous instigation of the director general of the Ministry of the Interior's administration, a number of seminars (lasting an evening and a day) were organised bringing together some 15 or so prefects. The principles guiding these seminars were the following:

- With a central focus on new crisis areas, new attitudes to be developed, these seminars were conceived as being highly favourable moments for exchange of and elaboration on past experiences rather than as 'training sessions' with pre-established contents;
- Consultation with each prefect before the operation so that he could express his opinion on the general structure of the operation, the desired contents;
- Contribution by each person of his/her own crisis experiences in the form of presentations lasting about a quarter of an hour and examining: key data on the case; difficulties and surprises; logic of responses; lessons and questions for the future;
- Invitation of a certain number of 'key actors', people from outside the administration who contributed their own experiences in crisis situations;
- Case studies based on past experiences and conducted specifically by animators in collaboration with the prefect having lived through a crisis situation in the recent past.

Thus, during the last seminar that was devoted to the December 1999 hurricanes and Erika sinking, several prefects who had been directly involved in these events were contacted before the seminar so that the main lessons they had learned was shared with the group. The seminar took place in La Rochelle, one of the towns most effected by both events. The 'key actors' chosen were a high official from Météo-France, the person responsible for crisis questions at Electricité de France and the local director of that company, the director for safety matters of a large world-wide group and a specialist of crisis solving on large operation theatres such as ex-Yugoslavia.

The key of the entire project was the direct, personal and continuous involvement of the director general of the administration, called to other functions in July 2000. This case validated the model satisfactorily; without his involvement (including in matters of detail, given the strength of resistance), this type of project is not foreseeable nor workable.

Debriefing: The innovations of EDF In January 1998, the electric network of Hydroquebec was severely effected by exceptional downpours of freezing rain. EDF quickly engaged in an exercise of learning from the key lessons drawn by their Quebecois colleagues after an unprecedented episode which brought about, by a domino effect, the successive collapse of a number of critical infrastructures (water, refineries, telephone, etc.). EDF sent out a mission to spend one week in Quebec, led by the director in charge of crisis matters, with specialists from various departments as well as an outside expert and two journalists. The mission travelled to Montreal as soon as the local situation had stabilised (April 1998).

In Quebec, information was gathered, but even more emphasised were the marking

characteristics of the experience, the logic of response as it was or as it should have been:

- an unprecedented situation: the importance of a phenomenon totally outside norms;
- appropriate mindset; it was not a cut that had occurred in the network but a large physical destruction of that network; thus, it was not a question of repairing a localised dysfunction, but of reconstructing a network;
- the extreme difficulty of giving an initial diagnosis, notably because of the inaccessibility to the most critical zones and bad weather;
- the necessity to foresee a response with the support of technical and human resources throughout the continent;
- the necessity to ensure strong internal pedagogy since internal specialists would have to apply temporary reparation methods that were spontaneously deemed 'beneath' an operator;
- the difficulties of communication once those zones the most effected, the most avid for information, were deprived of energy, and thus of television;
- the necessity of strong involvement on the part of the president who had to be present directly in the field, within the central teams drawing up the main lines of strategic response and also next to the Prime Minister for the daily press conferences;
- organisational innovation to be brought to intervention teams; Hydroquebec set up 30 missions of 150 people, including technicians, people in charge of receiving reinforcements (notably from abroad), people in charge of information and relations with the locally elected representatives, etc.;
- the establishment of a complex organisational capacity, capable of facing the multiple surprises and instabilities of the situation, while keeping tabs on the short, the mean and the long term.

In turn, the French mission largely distributed technical and strategic notes on these experiences. It went even further by organising seminars in its foreign branches and in several regions of France, inviting state services (defence zones) to share the lessons of the Quebecois experience and reflect upon what might happen in such a case in France by simulating scenarios and responses to such a possibility.

Less than a year and a half later, EDF took the first place in responding to the two 1999 hurricanes. The main lessons learned in Montreal were immediately recalled, adapted and applied. The result was that every one understood instantaneously that EDF was prepared to face these abnormal situations.

What should be retained from this episode is above all a capacity that has been to date little developed; that is, that we can learn from the crises of others, that it can be very helpful for our own pedagogy to study other crises in depth and — by an innovative process — include external actors (authorities, journalists) in open forums on potential vulnerabilities for the company or the country.

Along the same lines, as soon as the storms were over, EDF engaged in a large consultation on the Internet in order to conduct an open process of learning from its own handling of the hurricanes which had recently affected France and its electricity networks.

Learning from an innovative measure taken by a motorway company after a network blockage (2001) On February 27th and 28th 2001, after an unprecedented heavy snow fall in the South of France (80 cm of snow in only a few hours), the motorway linking Aix-en-Provence to Nice was cut off at various points. 4000 to 5000 motorists and thousands of lorries were trapped. As if by miracle, there were no casualties. Immediately, however, the motorway company in charge of the network fell prey to criticisms: Why was the motor way not closed sooner? Why was there a total absence of information regarding the motorists? Why was there an almost total lack of emergency help ?

The ESCOTA company (Autoroutes Estérel-Côte d'Azur-Alpes), had it followed the usual course, could have put the blame on other 'guilty parties': the meteorological services which had not predicted such extreme conditions; the lorries which had not respected the ban on circulation thus determining the blockage of the network; the state services which were slow to authorise the shutting down of the motor way (the operator has no power in this regard) and then to enforce that measure; etc.

But ESCOTA chose a new kind of strategy, organising a debriefing session with the public, with all who wished to join in (this was largely publicised in the articles): state services; mayors; journalists; trade unions; motorist clients; associations concerned with the automobile network (often very critical); petrol station directors; etc.

The public meeting took place on June 20th 2001, four months after the events. Its function was twofold: learning from the experience and the complaints sent to the company; listening was placed at the centre of the meeting: no platform, only tables favouring exchange with each table speaking after a time of reflection;

- collective work on innovations to be brought in order to devise new safety modalities in the area of large motorway networks. On this

second point, the company presented technical projects laying within its responsibility; but they engaged each representative (for example lorry drivers; petrol station directors; clients; etc.) to reflect on the new functions they might assume in order to contribute to the general safety of as complex a network as a motorway.

The overall impression was one of positive surprise on the part of numerous participants who realised that an experience had not been immediately forgotten: those responsible were drawing the necessary lessons. Each of the actors was invited to take part in a new reflective exercise on the safety of these networks which, until now, has largely escaped all systemic and 'citizen' examination.

Simulation exercises: The CSSIN investigation (2001) For many years, the actors of the French nuclear system have been called upon for crisis simulation exercises, about once a month. These exercises are indispensable in order to test the reactivity of the actors, the co-ordination of responses between operators and authorities, between local and national levels (both for the operators and the public authorities); in order also to test everyone's communication capacity.

There is however some difficulty in the fairly conventional character of the simulations that are carried out: very few surprises in scenarios which are organised only by official organisms; poor participation on the part of ministerial cabinets; involvement of civil society only in terms of applying official instructions; etc.

The Superior Council of Nuclear Safety and Information (CSSIN — consultative agency mainly charged with an advisory role for ministers in charge of industry and the environment on questions involving public and media information and related to the safety of nuclear installations) took charge of this matter. Informed of the regularly occurring insufficiencies, the council decided to launch a large and open consultation process to gather as many views as possible to improve simulations.

At the moment, this consulting activity is looking at innovations sought by the actors themselves, appealing openly to any actor who might feel him/herself more implicated. For example, a school principle, a mayor, etc. might wish to indicate something he/she wishes to see tested (instead of contenting him/herself with passive submission to administrative decision at every exercise) and stipulate the role he/she could play beyond merely carrying out orders.

This consulting activity is now being carried out. Beyond the technical improvements it may bring about, it ought to be able to generate different conceptions of these exercises, different forms of involvement for civil society. In view of the remarks that will be made, the CSSIN will produce a statement which will be circulated amongst the various ministries.

Specific training preparing crisis room directors, SNCF (1995–2001) The SNCF (French Railways) is engaged in numerous activities in order to develop its prevention and crisis piloting capacities: systematic attention to past experience for each significant crisis; renewed exercises at the level of the Executive Committee; training for crisis communication; etc. An unusual point should be noted in its preparation activity: ongoing training for high level employees called upon to direct the national crisis team. This team is in charge not of regulating train circulation (there is a special operational centre for that) but of the strategic analysis of crisis dynamics, the preparation of fundamental options for action and communication on the part of the board of directors. Since 1995, there has been ongoing training for crisis team leaders; they gather two to three times a year in order to specify their roles and train on the basis of surprise scenarios — scenarios which are less and less conventional (for example, public health problems).

This multifarious action is underpinned by a crucial and constant element: the investment of a person in charge of animating the politics of the preparation for crisis situations. Even in organisations sued to dispensing energy on the preparation of delicate episodes, in the absence of strong and continuous motivation, even the best resolutions are quickly forgotten.

Crisis anticipation: The EDF's 'young hares' Anticipation and monitoring should be part of any professional crisis policy. And yet, efforts remain relatively restricted on this front and are often too conventional; this in turn leaves one helpless when faced with surprises, a phenomenon which is becoming more and more regular in a context undergoing major mutations. One should note here the considerable advance made by a small team of Electricité de France, the 'Environmental monitoring team' which, for several years, has sought to detect crises potentially affecting the company (Madet, 2001). The animators of this team have described their work as 'catching young hares before they become big ones' (or rather, as has been lately added, 'before they become mad cows').

The team is made up of about thirty experts, selected in order to reflect a diversity of experience and functions according to the principles of the network. Detection methods include naturally common means such as indepth observation and analysis of events abroad (for example, Quebec as mentioned above) or

other industrial sectors: in-depth tendencies in our evolving society; theoretical proceedings of experts in terms of prospecting and creativity; familiarisation with actors. The team bases its work very often on the detection of alarm signals coming explicitly from the inside of the company but which are also at first neglected. The team has noticed that such means of deciphering are very fertile and tend to provide very precise information on highly probable events. The difficulty lies in being able to detect these signals and convictions since they are naturally disturbing for any kind of organisation. The response has been the establishment of an informal network for alert detection with each member of the company being entitled, in all confidentiality, to inform the team about his/ her feelings regarding possible surprises. In order to support this action, the team has launched an 'Observatory of Mood and Fashion' (Observatoire de l'Air du Temps) in order to observe the tendencies and breaks in various spheres such as communication, culture, health, law, economy, and new technologies.

Several dimensions have been pinpointed for encompassing the 'young hares':

- probability, ranked at 4 different levels: highly probable; very possible; not to be rejected; accidental;
- possible impact, ranked also at 4 different levels: crucial (company survival); major (functioning of company endangered over time); medium (difficulties for functioning of company); minor (some difficulties in overall running of the company);
- appearance timing: progressive (no surprises); chaotic (probability of a relatively rapid appearance with an unforeseeable outcome); unforeseeable (resulting from risk subject to probability calculus, e.g. an accident); hostile (possibly immediate appearance if such were the wish of a third party);
- the degree of technical control over the problem: strong (technical problem which can be resolved by the company); medium (solving the problem depends above all on a party other than EDF); poor (the problem is of a societal nature, escaping company influence).

Once these 'young hares' have been encompassed, strategies for action may be followed, using the following references:

- reduce the probability of the appearance of dreaded events;
- influence the timing in the direction of less uncomfortable situations;
- diminish unfavourable consequences;
- and especially: be ready to use appropriate means for encompassing the 'young hares':

here we find the close link between crisis management and risk prevention. However, the decision to do nothing may also be a viable treatment for certain 'young hares'.

A debriefing operation carried out in 2000 indicated that out of the 26 crises which marked the company between mid 1997 and mid 1999, 80 percent had been 'seen' by the environmental monitoring. The 1999 hurricane crisis, in particular, had been identified, so that the company was not caught completely off guard.

Beyond the possible crisis identification, the mere fact that such a team exists has brought about a change in mentality which, as noted by its initiators, is encouraging in a perspective of prevention.

Cross fertilisation – The Villette-Entreprises Foundation (2001) The profitability of exchange between diverse organisations on the subject of prevention and crisis piloting is often stressed. However, the difficulties inherent to organising such exchange are mentioned just as often. The work carried out by the Villette-Entreprises Foundation (part of the Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie in Paris) over six months (January – July 2001) is thus particularly noteworthy. Twenty or so very diverse companies (automobile, insurance, pharmacy, electronics, transportation, etc.) were brought together on questions of 'crisis' and 'trust'.

On the basis of interviews with correspondents in involved companies and of initiatives launched after those interviews and plenary meetings, the participants were able:

- to situate themselves within the vast domain of crisis preparation: from the total absence of preparation for the most recent innovations, to the medium level with only basic dispositions;
- to share elements of common interest, such as:
  - how to engage minimal preparation even in the most reluctant organisations; how to overcome organisational fragmentation; how to involve top level leaders;
  - how to go beyond deficits in preparation which subsist even when emergency dispositions are believed to have been developed; how to develop new exercises, lesson-learning from past experiences;
  - how to prepare for emerging crises, especially those most complex and surprising ones; how to favour strong innovations indispensable for dealing with the challenges of environmental mutations and the crises provoked thereby; how to recruit men and women adapted to an environment of strong mutations; what structures to be sought so that the organisation profit from these mutations;

how to progress when the basics have already been guaranteed; in case of progress, how to operate internal transplants;

- to share also more sensitive questions:
- What should be done when a situation is blocked? How should one make room for inextricable questions, those for which the organisation is precisely not fashioned?
- How should one rebuild trust? How should one deal with a layer of mistrust?
- How should one overcome collective fatalism? How should one introduce breaks with the past in an atmosphere where everyone sees destiny as inevitable?

Naturally, over such a short period of time, it was not a question of finding immediate, operational 'answers' to all these questions. But the essential point was to open up opportunities of exchange on sensitive questions which often cannot be dealt with internally.

Conclusion: a new pack of cards for Europe

France has been able to lean on public intervention structures in case of catastrophe which have proven their efficacy in many circumstances – including in recent crises. But the operations theatre is in full mutation; as all developed countries, France is faced with increasingly serious, complex, surprising crises (Quarantelli, 1996). It is an established fact that this 'new card game' is still largely embryonic, accidental, and not followed up in time; the logic of preparation and intervention is usually far behind on the demands of the moment. Resistance is strong, and directly proportional to the fear provoked by any one who brings up the question of crisis. More often than not, the issue cannot be put on the agenda, and the boards of directors are usually a decisive obstruction. And yet, a number of initiatives have been launched, even if they remain dispersed, engaged by particularly innovative parties, and usually isolated and vulnerable. Today, it has become crucial to move on from confidential tinkering to development backed by political will and strategic leadership. The stakes are ensuring decisive progress, without real crises versus the fear of legal proceedings, as the only motivation for progress.

In order to overcome these obstacles, there are obvious means to increasingly open up to foreign experience; to broaden questions; to facilitate cultural mutations; to share know-how. These imperatives are undoubtedly not limited to France (European Commission, 2000; Rosenthal, 2001).

The European Crisis Management Academy might include in its vocation favouring exchanges amongst countries, companies, and diversified social actors (associations, journalists, universities etc.) in the field of crisis situations.

One particularly stimulating and positive way to forge ahead would be to favour first and foremost sharing the best initiatives that have been launched – which is why I have stressed French innovations in this article. Other roads to follow would include capitalising on experience, methodological aspects of work to be undertaken; training of actors not for emergency techniques but for strategic leadership in situations of great uncertainty and large mutations.

Nor should one forget the necessity for research which should delve into the increasingly difficult questions posed by emerging crises: locating vulnerabilities; opening up responses to civil society (going beyond military and cold war traditions); understanding the effects of complexity, of arbitrariness and crystallisation in contemporary crises.

True, these issues are difficult and people are often reluctant to deal with them. But should we not try to change perspectives and see the opportunities offered by crisis thinking? At a time when general distrust has become prevalent in society, when disarray has permeated decision-making circles, taking a resolute head start crisis questions might well facilitate dealing with the issue of governance in our ever more complex societies (European Commission, 2000). There should be no mistake about the stakes nor the imperatives: the question is not about reducing such and such an operational crisis, but about determining for which questions veritable qualitative advances ('creative break-throughs', Lagadec 2000) and changes in paradigms are necessary. The question is no longer only one of knowing how to face a local flood or a specific public health problem, but of knowing how to approach and treat questions such as AIDS, BSE, urban violence, the G8, information system vulnerabilities on a continental scale, climatic chaos etc. It is high time that we introduced a creative break-through in order to be equipped for the task.

Notes

1. France is divided into some one hundred geographic units which are each headed up by a prefect, a civil servant representing the central government and named by the Council of ministers.
2. See Bertrand Robert's contribution. Robert has a long experience of innovation in the area of training teams for crisis situations. Having taken stock of the fact that strategies of preparation,

prevention, and crisis management are often infertile or even counter-productive, Bertrand Robert has developed a number of innovative models in order to renew practises of learning from the past, simulation exercises and crisis leardership tools.

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