



## Pathways to Resilience

**Abstract** The COVID-19 crisis has tested public institutions, crisis leadership and societal solidarity to the core. Fault lines have come to the fore; unsuspected strengths have been noted. But will this be enough to initiate the necessary steps to prepare our societies for the future crises that will come? In this chapter, we offer the building blocks for an action agenda. We identify various pathways to enhanced resilience.

**Keywords** COVID-19 · Resilience · Civic responsibility · Experts · Trust · Public bureaucracies · Political leadership · Future crises

### PIVOTING FORWARD

None of us imagined a year ago that we would be wrapping up a book on a global pandemic that has dwarfed all other crises in living memory. For professional observers of politics and government, the COVID-19 crisis has been nothing short of a breathtaking global field experiment in societal resilience. It has shown how systems of government—institutions, leaders, plans, policies, programmes and partnerships—performed in the face of a very serious stress test. The crisis has prompted a smorgasbord of questions, voluminous data and comparative puzzles for political scientists, public administration scholars and students of crisis management.

As we write this, vaccinations are in full swing across the globe. Hopefully, this will mark the beginning of the end of the pandemic. But even in this phase, new critical governance challenges emerge with regard to vaccine production, approval and distribution; the logistical capacity of states to get vaccines into the arms of as many people as quickly as possible; the selection of those who will get the vaccines first; North-South solidarity in the purchasing and distribution of vaccines; the prospect of reaching the high levels of participation in vaccination programmes that are necessary to tame the virus; and the timing—and international synchronization—of the lifting of national and subnational border control, social distancing and lockdown measures.

After these challenges have been met and the immediate danger to public health has faded, the governance of recovery and renewal will take centre stage. A critical point of debate will be about direction: Are we going to try and ‘bounce back’ or ‘pivot forward’ on the wings of what COVID-19 has revealed about the vulnerability and resilience of our economies, our communities and our public institutions? This, in turn, gives rise to the question how the experiences of patients, families, corporations, schools, hospitals and governments will resonate in the public policy choices that are to move societies beyond the pandemic.

We cannot second-guess these developments here. We will use this final chapter to look forward in a different way. We view COVID-19 as a harbinger of a new, global, even planetary, species of trouble the world will face (Dror, 2014, 2017, 2020; Helsloot et al., 2012). We need to prepare. Building on the experience of governing COVID-19 as described in this book, we suggest five essential pathways for institutional learning that governments may pursue in order to enhance governmental and societal resilience in the face of the mega-crises that await us (cf. Mazzucato & Kattel, 2020).

## OVERCOMING ORGANIZED BLINDNESS

The COVID experience has highlighted what many risk and crisis management experts have long understood: most public organizations and indeed societies are not hardwired to look for, and appreciate, bad-case scenarios. We should not be led astray by the contemporary popularity of prospect theory—which tells us that once we frame issues as being in the domain of loss, we are willing to go further and absorb more risk in tackling them (Vis, 2011). The prospect of loss, even minimal

loss, has done little to propel a drive towards preparedness. The incubation period of this pandemic illustrates that we face a serious challenge: public organizations must develop the propensity and capacity to scan their environment with a crisis antenna.

The COVID experience demonstrated that in many countries politicians, public health bureaucrats, virologists and emergency planners alike were unconsciously invested in not-seeing, not-grasping, not-framing the signals of something enormously bad developing outside their borders. This ‘organised blindness’ came in many different forms. Reassuring, but misleading historical analogies suggested that an outbreak would be geographically contained, or at least less impactful than it was in other countries. Scarce attention easily shifted to other, less opaque, more politically pressing issues of the day. The virus was viewed a bit like climate change: potentially very bad, but taking its time before it would be really upon us. Nobody wanted to be the boy who cried wolf.

The drivers of organized blindness are well known (Kam, 1988; Turner & Pidgeon, 1997). Failures of imagination. Disjointed systems that make it hard to connect the dots. The dilemma of dealing with the low-probability, high-impact contingency (Why spend capital on something that is very unlikely to materialize?). The illusion of control, perpetuated by fantasy documents that don’t ask the hard ‘what-if’ questions. The propensity to stick to familiar ground—the ‘known-knows’ in the risk catalogue—in crisis planning. The tradition to ‘go soft’ on the participants of crisis exercises. The language of reassurance crafted for publics that do not like to get upset.

Though these mechanisms have been well understood for some time, they have nevertheless undermined our alertness to pandemic risk. They have caused many governments to lose precious time to heighten public awareness. They hindered mitigation efforts in the most vulnerable sectors of society and undermined the preparation of systems for public health, aged care and emergency management. They have left societies unprepared for the unprecedented crisis that was on its way.

We must do better. We must get better at spotting looming trouble earlier, and responding to it more quickly and smartly than most governments have done in relation to the Corona pandemic. We have succeeded in domains such as mass transit systems, power grids, petrochemical and nuclear industries, civil aviation and food safety. Driven by a deep awareness that if mistakes are made, lots of people die, business models collapse, and institutional reputations are badly affected, regulatory regimes and

cultural practices have evolved in those sectors. They now routinely deliver steady, nearly error-free performance under even the most challenging conditions (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007).

In those ‘high reliability’ domains, professionals, managers and policy-makers alike adhere to norms and practices of ‘wariness’ in monitoring what is or might be happening in systems deemed to be high-risk (Christianson et al., 2011; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). What this means in practice is that the usual risk management premises are reversed: stakeholders are socialized into worrying about the potential impact of even seemingly small incidents rather than worrying about the potential stigma attached to devoting scarce resources to a low-probability problem.

The institutional learning challenge of moving from a propensity for blindness to a state of permanent wariness begins with the punctuation of deep-seated illusions of safety and security. We must open up to the discomfort of knowing that we are more vulnerable than we like to acknowledge. Political leaders must be willing to disappoint people and teach them to stare vulnerability in the face and take personal ownership of the risks they run (Heifetz, 1994). They must understand and explain the paradox that the very way in which we have organized successful economies and engaging lifestyles increases our exposure to existential risk (Perrow, 2011). None of this is going to be easy. All of it is deeply political in its implications. But what choice do we have?

## VIGILANT DECISION-MAKING

In this crisis, as in most crises, governments had to make stark choices under high levels of uncertainty. The uncertainty lasted a very long time. Political leaders dealt with uncertainty in different ways. While we await systematic evaluation of those decisions, we can offer some early insights. Transboundary threats are not to be navigated on the basis of gut instinct, standard operating procedures, personal caprice, or interest-group lobbying. Precisely because crises can surprise us and shatter our imagined certainties, we need the political responses to them to be both informed and constrained by the best available evidence we can muster under the circumstances. Flying by the seat of one’s pants is the inferior option (Janis, 1989).

That said, the crisis also revealed the inherent complexity of a ‘listen to the experts first’ strategy. Which experts are governments to listen to? What if those experts disagree? And what if some experts become

such revered figures that their authority outstrips the public credibility of the responsible office-holders? In some countries, *too much* deference may have been paid to all too narrowly organized expertise. It is not a good idea to provide a particular epidemiologist or group of medical experts privileged, even monopolistic, access to decision-makers. In some countries, this pattern persisted even when their views and claims were contested by their peers. Nor is it a good idea to rely exclusively on medical expertise to deal with a multifaceted societal crisis.

It easily gets cosy when key decision-makers rely on liked and trusted expert advisers. The effects can be severe. Some perspectives quickly earn prominence, others never get a hearing. Dissent is dampened. Empathy with the burden of responsibility faced by the politicians may begin to influence the advice that is dispensed, at the expense of professional stewardship and robust deliberation. In other words, we must learn to identify what we might call organized tunnel vision: structures of expertise and advice that take hold during the early stages of a crisis and remain in place regardless of the shifting nature of the challenges policymakers face as the crisis evolves.

Tackling complex and evolving crises requires organizing and weighing evidence from a broad swath of disciplines and professions. Much of this expertise is not by definition found in formal crisis advisory bodies. COVID-19 reminds us that the most challenging crises are those that traverse professional bodies of expertise.

The COVID-19 crisis teaches us that expertise matters. It also teaches us that this expertise has to be actively managed and adapted as the crisis evolves. In terms of institutional design, governments would do well to create a series of multi-disciplinary webs and networks of expertise, each primed to be mobilized in relation to key threats in their risk catalogues. In terms of process management, there should be dedicated knowledge brokerage capacity, organized right at the edge of the most senior crisis decision-making bodies. There is a need for ‘chief advisory officers’—people whose job it is to exercise stewardship over the quality of the advisory process. To do this job, they need a licence to monitor and manage the composition of the expertise that is made available to crisis leaders, the rules of engagement between experts and policymakers, and the relational climate that develops between them.

## MANAGING FRAGMENTATION

One of the most challenging aspects of forging effective responses to large-scale emergencies is to overcome the stymying effects of entrenched professional, jurisdictional and sectoral boundaries and mindsets. Professions and organizations have strong views about ‘the way we do things around here’. When finding themselves in a situation of having to align their actions to those of other organizations in order to forge holistic responses, they may not be immediately inclined to give up their cherished practices, the beliefs and assumptions upon which these practices rest, and the social identities they confer.

The compartmentalization of authority, budgets and other resources that sustains bureaucratic silos is driven by formalized responsibilities. Public officials tend to serve political office-holders who are held to account for things that happen (and do not happen) in *their* assigned playing field only. Agencies may be more interested in hugging (or avoiding) the spotlight and in protecting their ‘turf’ than pooling resources and surrendering their autonomy for the benefit of joined-up crisis responses (Rosenthal et al., 1991; Wilson, 1989). Moreover, organizational behaviours and interorganizational relationships are path-dependent: agencies, sectors and jurisdictions—including nation states and international organizations—that routinely squabble over mandates, money, policy priorities and political differences are not likely to suddenly trust each another when a crisis appears on the horizon.

Both the potential and the fragility of interorganizational and inter-jurisdictional coordination in crisis response and recovery operations have been well-documented (Dynes, 1970; Rosenthal et al., 1991). The COVID-19 crisis has merely confirmed these research findings (Alemanno, 2020; Arias et al., 2020; Hattke & Martin, 2020; Zao & Wu, 2020).

The COVID experience is a stark reminder that there are strong drivers of persistent fragmentation even when there is a great functional need for integration. Overcoming fragmentation in how we organize and coordinate crisis responses across boundaries is both an urgent necessity and a formidable institutional learning endeavour (Pacces & Weimer, 2020). Acknowledgement of these realities is crucial. *Laissez-faire* is not an option.

It starts with accepting that the contingencies we face are so big, complex, intertwined and urgent that to ‘go at them alone’ is not just

predictably ineffective but foolishly reckless. To overcome all the formal and informal incentives that point in the opposite direction will require wisdom, humility, strength of purpose and tenacity in public leadership. Former top Australian public servant Peter Shergold (2008) captures poignantly what is needed: “[it] requires public servants who, with eyes wide open, can exert the qualities of leadership necessary to forsake the simplicity of control for the complexity of influence... [T]hey need to operate outside the traditionally narrow framework of government, which they have for so long worked within” (p. 21).

But strengthening centripetal behaviour will require more than an organized epiphany. We also need to consider how to overcome existing institutional disincentives. In the absence of a winning formula, this will require a strategy of experimentation with other institutional mechanisms. Some may argue for the appointment of national and transnational coordinators: honest brokers imbued with soft power—the power to persuade, convene and shame—needed to seduce key stakeholders inside and outside government to come out of their rabbit holes and embrace interdependence. Others will argue that nothing short of far-reaching centralization of power, authority and accountability will do if we are serious about building the governance capacity required to deal with the most extreme form of transboundary crisis: planetary emergencies (e.g. Dror, 2014, 2017).

Perhaps the least controversial, no-regret option is to build integrated crisis management from the ground up by investing in boundary-spanning administrative capacity and planning repertoires. Low-politics, backstage platforms upon which epistemic expert communities can flourish. These platforms exist to stimulate joint fact-finding, joint development of risk catalogues and scenario planning, joint exercises, joint formulation and harmonization of standards. These bridging mechanisms help to fill the institutional void that exists in the spaces between jurisdictions, sectors and professions. None of this is heroic, nor is it likely to produce swift results. It is grinding work, but it is the first step in designing joined-up crisis management capacity (e.g. Ansell et al., 2010; Boin et al., 2013; Blondin & Boin, 2020).

## CREDIBLE CRISIS NARRATIVES

Together with other recent crises, the COVID experience has demonstrated just how precarious the contemporary communications environment has become for policymakers. There is a perennial concern about misinformation. There are recurrent claims and complaints about transparency, cover-ups and conspiracies. There are painful contrasts between upbeat governmental rhetoric about harmony, solidarity and consensus about ‘fighting a common enemy’ and the observable realities of non-compliance and widespread dissent. As the crisis divides the public, dominating contentious ‘framing contests’ soon proves elusive.

And yet, some leaders and governments did an admirable job of making their narratives dominate for an extended period of time. What seemed to be a common thread between those relatively successful meaning-making performances was a sense of directness and realism, authenticity and consistency in the deliverance of official messages (Arden, Merkel and Trudeau come to mind). No sugar-coating the nature of the threat. No upholding of the illusion that the government was—or even could be—‘in control’ while the house was so evidently burning. No hiding of the dilemmas policymakers faced, or of the emotions the crisis invoked in them, too. No paternalistic fear of panicking citizens, but mature engagement with them. Not walking away from errors and misjudgements but owning up to them. Not assuming the nation will get a particular message simply because the head of government has included it in a press conference.

The key building blocks for credible strategic crisis communication are well known (cf. Frandsen & Johansen, 2020). There is no rocket science involved, but it always proves extremely hard to make such a strategy work: aligning the will, the abilities, and the discipline among heads of government and ministers, their minders, the subject matter experts, the communication specialists, the information flows between policy and operations. Given the fragmented, high-speed, politicized nature of today’s communications environment, we should not have inflated expectations about the level of narrative dominance that any single actor can be expected to obtain. But we must try. In a crisis, fragmentation of narratives can quickly undermine the legitimacy of a national response.



## MANAGING COLLECTIVE STRESS

From a governance point of view, navigating crises is not just about dealing with physical destruction, lives endangered or uprooted, and financial costs incurred. It is also about attending to the collective stress that a crisis causes. This brings us into the domain of social and political psychology.

The levels, distribution and expressions of collective stress triggered by crises are highly unpredictable. Who could have foreseen the massive outpouring of grief, sympathy and, eventually, indignation by the British public in the wake of Lady Diana's death? Was this the same nation that had stoically 'kept calm and carried on' during the devastating Battle of Britain? Who would have thought that in the midst of a deadly pandemic, a large group of Americans would storm the Capitol because their candidate had lost the election?

Clearly, the material and psychological realities of crises are not self-evidently intertwined, and may, in fact, be uncoupled. It is hard to predict how a crisis activates people's levels of fear, anger, disappointment, hope, confidence, patience, capacity to forgive and inclination to get on with their lives. We know this much: collective stress can remain pent-up in crisis-affected communities long after the material dislocation has occurred—even long after the material recovery. Some crises cast very long shadows, enduring years or even decades. They fester because rituals of closure have not been performed. Botched investigations, railroaded accountability, scapegoating and empty rhetoric of reform, injustices left unaddressed, organized forgetting—these are the factors that feed societal resentment.

Leaders and institutions may, for valid or not so valid reasons, be keen to 'move on', to turn the page and put the crisis into the past. Emotionally aroused citizens and stakeholders may not allow them to do so. In contemporary, 'monitorial' democracies, disgruntled citizens have ample avenues to make themselves heard (Keane, 2018). The resultant politics of investigation, accountability, liability, blame and compensation typically produce more losers than winners.

To avoid such messy endings, leaders and institutions must learn to recognize, respect and address collective stress. It is not an ephemeral by-product of material discomfort or momentary shock and fear. Collective stress is the thermostat of a crisis. When left unaddressed, it fuels the

public discontent and contestation that drive the escalation towards a full-blown political or institutional crisis.

Governments should get better at the relational work of listening to the voices of those most affected by a crisis. They should not wait until response operations have ceased, but use these voices as data in targeting and adjusting their response efforts. They should aim to create rapid social feedback cycles. Governments should also keep in view that in times of crises the ‘how’ of government action remains as important to citizens as the ‘what’. Governments should not cut corners on procedural fairness, transparency, the rule of law and other essential public values to ‘do what it takes’ in the face of crisis. Going *praeter et contra legem* invites critical scrutiny that may compromise support for everything else that governments are trying to do in response to the crisis.

Finally, in their desire to close the book on a post-acute crisis and nudge the community to move on from it, governments should avoid some predictable mistakes. Promising too much or declaring victory too soon. Attempting to curtail investigations. Refusing to stage or participate in rituals of mourning, solidarity and remembrance. The enormity of the hurt and loss needs to be acknowledged, again and again. It is only by not walking away from the collective stress and by realizing that it is not ‘over until it is over’ that governments truly exercise their duty of care and create conditions for wounds to be healed.

## WHAT MATTERS NOW

COVID-19 has demonstrated that come the arrival of a transboundary crisis of mega proportions, good governance—buffeted by social trust, civic responsibility and astute leadership—makes a real difference in forging effective and legitimate responses. The underlying conditions of good crisis governance can help societies meet future crises. We end this book by listing the conditions that matter for the development of administrative, institutional and societal resilience.

*Trust matters.* When the chips are down, an effective crisis response may well hinge on citizens complying with new rules of appropriate behaviours. Erosion of citizen trust in politics and political processes has been a societal feature from the 1960s onwards and escalating since the turn of the millennium. Perhaps it matters less in ‘normal’ times when political systems can continue to function with containable levels

of distrust. It matters ‘big time’ when there is a whole-of-society threat and a dire need for temporary adherence to new rules and new norms.

*Civic responsibility matters.* One can easily bemoan the decline of community bonds and civic virtues or explain these trends as the product of new technologies, changing demographics, evolving labour markets and so on. Nevertheless, civic responsibility matters when government crisis policies are predicated on societal-wide behavioural change that requires strong doses of altruism. If societies are to develop long-term capacities for resilience in face of the next mega-crisis, then cultivating a sense of civic duty is essential.

*Science matters.* There is no such thing as a universally agreed, unambiguous and cohesive body of knowledge that provides a combination of effective and feasible crisis solutions. Still, the sciences—from public health and biology to economics, law and psychology—matter greatly when complex, inter-woven threats emerge and the best we can do is gather scarce data in real time and use our expertise to sift through and gauge it before offering advice to decision-makers. In a crisis, we will always need intuition, hunches and good judgement, but this does not mean we should jettison and vilify ‘science’. Respect for expertise (and we should be critical and probing when we need to be) is essential for dealing with future crises.

*Public bureaucracies matter.* Mega-crises require massive engagement of the private sector, non-governmental organizations, political parties and ordinary citizens. But the public bureaucracy remains pivotal for orchestrating an effective and legitimate crisis response and recovery strategies. Only public institutions have the legal and political authority, as well as the financial resources and the capacity to direct a societal response—especially if it means shutting down large sectors of market activities and business operation. We cannot expect future crises to be managed without deeply embedding crisis resilience and vigilance in the structures, processes and culture of our public institutions.

*Leadership matters.* If we want to be prepared for whatever crises lurk around the corner, from superbugs to climate change, the quality of crisis leadership is crucial. Effective crisis leadership isn’t a top-down exercise. It must remain constrained by democratic checks and balances, particularly so when executive powers are being expanded to meet threats that are

deemed to be extraordinary. The work of public leadership in crises is to ensure that governments not only strive to do ‘what works’ but always consider the social and political legitimacy of their actions.

*Political choices matter.* Ultimately, societies have to make political choices about the envisioned state of resilience and the price that will be paid to accomplish it. These choices are constrained by all manner of path dependencies and political powers, but they are choices nevertheless. Do we want to follow the usual rituals of post-crisis learning where we end up with packages of ring-fenced reform that lead us straight back to the ‘pre-crisis normal’? Or do we recognize that our systems of public governance have been closer to breaking point than we could ever have imagined, and that we should seriously consider the case for reinvigorating public sector governance capacity—not as a symbolic reflex but for the sake of enhancing resilience?

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