

Designing effective response structures: A discussion of established pitfalls, best practices and critical design parameters

A background paper prepared for the Swedish Tsunami Commission

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Preface

The Swedish Tsunami Commission has commissioned this author, Arjen Boin, (Leiden University Crisis Research Center) to write a succinct background report capturing the key insights that have emerged in the crisis research field with regard to the management of crises. The identification of these key insights should facilitate discussion within the commission on the future of the Swedish emergency and crisis organization.

This report captures theoretical notions that explain often-noted patterns in crisis development and crisis management (and their mutual relation). It does not present clear-cut recommendations to address any shortcomings in the Swedish crisis management system as observed by the Tsunami Commission. The notions provide pointers for prescription, but these should be discussed and subsequently adapted in light of the institutional characteristics of the Swedish crisis response structure. This author is not sufficiently knowledgeable of the Swedish system to provide more specific suggestions that are politically and administratively feasible.

Before the reader sets out to study this background report, a second disclaimer is in order. This report does not contain the “ten golden rules” of crisis management. Such rules do not exist. The design of a response system remains a political enterprise. The insights derived from academic research may inform a redesign process, but they cannot supplant it.

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A B.

1. Introduction

It is a perennial challenge for any government to design a response system that will effectively cope with a crisis without undermining the normal, everyday functioning of government. When a crisis does materialize, in spite of all previous design efforts, we expect governments to investigate what went wrong and repair the glitches in the response system. A good understanding of the dynamics of crisis and the possibilities of crisis management may benefit such an exercise in institutional design.

This report aims to enhance such an understanding. It culls lessons from a variety of sources: academic books and articles; government reports; media accounts; as well as the experience and insights of colleagues in the field of crisis management.

One of the key lessons found in this report holds that effective crisis management is served by a simple, coherent and evocative philosophy that guides governmental response in times of urgent adversity. An effective crisis management philosophy identifies pitfalls that can be avoided, incorporates best practices and fits with the socio-political environment in which it is deployed. It captures key principles that can guide decision-makers when there is no time to follow routines procedures of strategic decision-making. This report provides building blocks from which such a crisis management philosophy can be assembled.

The remainder of this report is organized into four sections:

Section 2 summarizes key assumptions about the nature of crises and the challenges they pose to government.

Section 3 identifies “avoidable pitfalls:” the patterns of failure that are common to most if not all crisis responses. It seeks to determine which pathologies can be avoided and which ones should be prepared for because they are inevitable.

Section 4 offers an inventory of those select practices that experts identify as “best practices.”

Section 5 translates the theoretical findings (presented in sections 2-4) into discussion points that may help the Commission to formulate recommendations for a more effective response structure.

2. The modern crisis: Trends and challenges

We speak of crisis when a threat is perceived against the core values or life-sustaining functions of a social system, which requires urgent remedial action under conditions of deep uncertainty. Crises are “inconceivable threats come true” – they tax our imagination and outstrip available resources. A recent list of crises includes the 9/11, Madrid, and London attacks, SARS and avian flu, Hurricane Katrina and the 2004 tsunami.

Policymakers typically experience crises as “rude surprises” that defy conventional administrative or policy responses and cause collective stress. They differ from

complex emergencies that have occurred in the past and for which they have prepared (hostage-takings, explosions, fires). A crisis presents policymakers with dilemmas that have impossible-choice dimensions: everybody looks at them to “do something”, but it is far from clear what that “something” is or whether it is even possible without causing additional harm.

Crises have always been with us, but it appears their character is changing. In fact, it is often argued that the crises of the near future will be increasingly frequent and generate higher impact. Some agents of adversity have changed, creating new challenges for crisis management. In addition, the forces of modernization have made social systems more vulnerable to routine disturbances. Three trends appear especially relevant in this regard:

- A. The growing complexity of social, corporate, industrial, financial, infrastructural and administrative systems – and the tight coupling between these systems – produces unforeseen disturbances that can assume previously inconceivable shapes and proportions. As the cause of the disturbance is typically unclear, it is easy to make wrong decisions that fuel rather than dampen the crisis at hand. Seemingly routine matters can rapidly escalate and migrate across functional and spatial boundaries, creating a deep crisis that threatens core values of government and society.
- B. The societal and political climate in which political leaders and public policymakers must try to manage crises has made it harder to deal with system disturbances. Politicians and citizens display low tolerance for even minor disturbances, but they show little interest in efforts to improve crisis management. When a crisis actually occurs, the media are all too willing to help identify the responsible parties. All this helps to create an environment in which crisis managers feel forced to take rapid and often ill-considered decisions that fuel rather than dampen the crisis at hand.
- C. The administrative structures and processes of crisis management in most countries are not designed to deal with unforeseen crises. Public organizations tend to prepare for known and expected emergencies, but the administrative toolbox for routine problems is of limited use in the face of crisis. Plans for crisis and disaster management tend to have a highly symbolic character, providing little guidance for those who must respond to unforeseen and unimagined events. Centralization and added layers of coordination mechanisms do little to improve the response capacity. Effective crisis management depends on principles and process; structures play a facilitative role at best. A quick recovery from system disturbances typically demands some degree of resilience, which, in turn, requires flexibility, redundancy and the capacity to reassemble available resources. A resilient response is facilitated by a generic crisis management philosophy that provides public authorities with cognitive anchors in times of deep uncertainty. Such a philosophy enables authorities to understand the dynamics of crisis and guides their interventions in the evolving response.

Challenges of crisis management

When a crisis occurs, public leaders face a set of challenges that together constitute the task of crisis management.¹ This set of interrelated tasks has never been easy to fulfill. In the contemporary context described above, it may well become what some have termed an “impossible job.” Let us briefly describe the challenges that public leaders face in times of crisis:

Preparing for crisis Public authorities must prevent known risks from materializing without unintentionally introducing new risks. They must engage in the art of planning without succumbing to planning pathologies. They must prepare for bad times that may or may not occur, while they are dealing with everyday problems that demand immediate attention.

Making sense of crisis developments The early stages of a crisis are hard to discern. Once a crisis has entered the escalation phase, it is even harder to make sense of what is happening. Crisis authorities must define the situation and continuously verify their definition against incoming information. They must weigh the possible consequences of a “false positive” (spending resources on a non-event) against those of a “false negative” (ignoring a crisis in the making).

Critical decision-making, coordination, communication Crisis authorities must identify which decisions they must make and which should be left to others. They must make critical decisions without sufficient or adequate information. They must enable cooperation between the various actors involved, and they must organize communication streams within and across the crisis management network as well as with the outside world.

Meaning making The definition of a crisis situation is the resultant of varying perceptions and the manifold efforts aimed at manipulating those perceptions. Crisis authorities will have to engage with media and external actors to get their definition of the situation across to a scared or skeptical public. Their definition of the situation is likely to be contested – if not immediately, certainly in the future. If they do not succeed, the effectiveness of the crisis management response is likely to be undermined.

Accountability and learning After the operational complexities of the crisis have faded, the time will come when politicians, media, and victims want to find out how this could have happened. Politicians, media and interest groups will try to allocate (and escape) blame. In this politicized context, crisis authorities must try to distill the right lessons from the crisis episode in order to ensure that it “won’t happen again.” At the same time, there will be pressure to move on and “return things to normal” (even if that is simply impossible).

Governments must be prepared to meet these challenges. They cannot afford to ignore crisis management requisites or deal with them in a superfluous, mostly symbolic fashion. In preparing for crisis management, they should avoid the pitfalls and

¹ This report concentrates on the public domain. There is a considerable body of literature that addresses the tasks of crisis managers in the private sector, but the findings are not always directly applicable to the public sector.

pathologies that have been well documented in the literature. These avoidable mistakes are surveyed in the following section.

3. Avoidable failures

Crisis researchers have identified a set of crisis management practices that do not seem to work. This section catalogues those pathologies of crisis management that would seem preventable or avoidable (the next section explains how). The most typical problems of crisis management that should be avoided include the following:

- *Do not solely rely on preventive efforts.* Responsible politicians and public administrators understand the importance of prevention. In fact, modern governments invest quite heavily in prevention (especially when it pertains to terrorist threats). They translate crisis lessons into rules and regulations, so that the same crisis cannot happen again. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that any set of preventive measures could safeguard a society from all future crises. Most crises pose a complete surprise to politicians and policy-makers; they remain convinced until late in the game that the crisis at hand “cannot happen here.” The scenarios do not seem real to them. Examples abound: 9/11, SARS in Canada, the French heat wave, the 2004 tsunami and, most recently, Hurricane Katrina. It is precisely this quality – tricking the imagination – that makes crises so incredibly hard to manage. Avoidable failure: thinking that it won’t happen here, because preventive efforts have been taken.
- *The planning syndrome.* In preparing for adversity, a strong tendency exists to record procedures, routines, actors, and venues in detailed plans. It is true that plans may work well for predictable, routine events. A crisis is, of course, the opposite of such an event. The sense of urgency and uncertainty that defines crisis tends to render a crisis plan useless from the start. This is exactly what crisis leaders report after a crisis: “we never looked at the plan.” This is not to say that crisis planning is useless; it serves various symbolic and network functions (we will return to this point shortly). But by attaching too much value to the plan, and this is the avoidable failure, a false sense of security can emerge. This will undermine an effective response.
- *The paralyzing quest for additional information.* Once a sense of crisis holds policymakers in its grip, they will enter upon a quest for evermore information. They feel that crucial decisions can only be made once they have a complete picture of the situation. Unfortunately, facts and figures tend to be in short supply during a crisis. Moreover, facts and figures often turn out to be less than secure, which triggers new searches for better information. The subsequent deluge of incoming data is incredibly hard to analyze. Even though the search for accurate information is understandable, it also paralyzes the crisis management operation. Refusing to make urgent decisions in the absence of complete and accurate information is an avoidable failure.
- *Communication breakdowns.* The effectiveness of crisis management critically depends on communication: crisis managers need to exchange information

with the response actors in the crisis management network. Moreover, they need to communicate with the external environment, directly or through the media. During most crises, however, communication often breaks down for a variety of reasons. There are many ways to circumvent this inevitable problem. The avoidable failure is to concentrate on the means (technical solutions) rather than focusing on the end (getting the message across).

- *Total reliance on command and control.* A persistent myth has it that a crisis management operation is best organized in a military-styled command and control mode. The command and control model promises the best of two worlds: the bureaucratic division of labor with the speed and determination of military operations. This model works fine for routine emergencies such as fires and hostage takings. But in a crisis there are many unknowns and it is not always clear what the unknowns are. The first phase of a crisis will be marked by a lack of information, communication and coordination. Authorities (and those judging them) will have to accept that it is impossible to control each and every move of first responders, certainly in the initial phase of the crisis. Channeling information up and orders back down takes too much time and undermines the flexibility, improvisation and urgency we expect from crisis responders. An effective response is flexible and networked, recombining the joint potential of the response network. The authorities should limit themselves to making critical decisions, which are the decisions only they can make. Any attempt to command each and every aspect of the crisis response will produce unintended effects and constitutes an avoidable failure.
- *Underestimating the importance of media.* It is hard to believe that contemporary political-administrative elites could underestimate the importance of media in times of crisis. But it happens all the time. Media provide crucial channels of communication to both the crisis management response network and the outside world. They set the stage on which the performance of crisis managers will be evaluated. Yet, crisis managers all too often wield an instrumental stick at the media. They do not serve the media; they wish to be served. They often persist in an “us-versus-them” mentality. All this demonstrates a gross underestimation of media forces, which constitutes an avoidable failure.
- *Underestimating post-crisis challenges.* The most complex challenges to public authorities often emerge after the operational demands of the crisis have been addressed. When exhausted policymakers are ready to return to the “normal” issues of government, they discover that most crises cast a long shadow. They will have to engage in the politics of post-crisis management, which revolves around accountability issues and learning the right lessons. Not only are most policymakers unprepared for this crisis phase, they often fail to recognize the relevance of that phase. Survivor groups, journalists and opposition forces will quickly demonstrate just how important that phase is. Underestimating the potential for a “crisis after the crisis” is yet another avoidable error.

These lessons are hard learned (with the proverbial exceptions that confirm the rule). In response to crisis episodes and related management failures, policymakers all too

often introduce reform that incorporates these well-documented failure factors. In their efforts to improve crisis management structures and policies, policymakers end up reinventing the wheel. If the findings of crisis management research are taken seriously, a list of prescriptions would be adopted that is similar to the one outlined in the next section of this report.

4. Principles of effective crisis management

It is impossible to provide a list of simple prescriptions that are guaranteed to raise the quality of crisis management practice to such a level that no crisis-related damage would be suffered in the future. It is, however, possible to identify a select set of administrative principles that have served policymakers well in organizing and managing a crisis response network. These principles do not aim to prepare a planned response for every conceivable type of crisis. Quite on the contrary. Recognizing that crises are always unforeseen and often unimaginable (as explained in section 2), these principles aim to enhance the resilience of a social system. They make it possible to rapidly form response networks that are most adequately equipped to deal with any sort of crisis (regardless of its origin).²

- It all begins with the basic response mechanisms that every crisis response network will need: warning; mobilization; registration; evacuation; sheltering; emergency medical care and after care; search and rescue; protection of property; information dissemination. These generic functions of crisis management should be ready to use, up to date, and staffed with well-trained officials. In most (but not all) Western countries, these mechanisms do not present the biggest problem as many improvements have been made in recent years. The response to Hurricane Katrina, however, demonstrates that nothing can be taken for granted in this regard.
- Policymakers must be trained to deal with crises. They must learn the regularities of crisis management: the organizational issues that will emerge, the faltering information flows, the complex dilemmas and the impossible choices, the tolls of stress and the continuing politics. They must learn to use simple checklists that will improve their crisis management performance: balance short and long-term effects of a decision; make sure you hear contrarian views; leave operational decisions to the professionals; stick with the political decisions that must be made – and make them; facilitate emerging coordination rather than imposing ready-made designs; engage with the media in a proactive manner.
- Crisis exercises and simulations make for better crisis management. The mayor of New York City, Rudolph Giuliani, credited the series of crisis management exercises held before the 9/11 attacks in explaining the effective response of the New York City response network. Experts agree. Regular simulation exercises nurture awareness of crisis management complexities,

² The immediate response to the London bombings provides an instructive example of administrative and societal resilience.

hone decision-making skills, and allow members of the response network to get to know and understand each other.

- In preparing for future crises, policymakers must adopt a new planning approach. Rather than compiling detailed procedures outlining who will do what, policymakers in all departments should create brief documents that capture the key principles of crisis management. These principles are not given, but should emerge from extensive and informed discussion about an organization's known threats, vulnerabilities and capacities. This contingency planning should be an ongoing effort, continuously updating new developments that pertain to the organization's ability to handle rude surprises. The planning should, of course, pertain to all phases of crisis management.
- Effective preparation of crisis management includes the active formation of networks with media representatives, external stakeholders, and a variety of experts. Once a crisis has materialized, there is usually no time to look for the right people and interact with them on a basis of trust. Effective crisis response operations can draw on networks that have existed for years. It takes a consistent, long-term effort to create such a network.
- Policymakers must learn to understand the dynamics of (international) media reporting of crisis events. They should know what media representatives look for in making a story, how they work, how they beat deadlines. This understanding enables policymakers to take a look at their own actions; they become aware of the magnifying effect that media exert, but they also learn how to work with the media to get their message across.
- Policymakers must prepare for the post-crisis phase (even if they do not know if or when a crisis will hit them). They must have in place a system that facilitates the accountability process that will most likely follow any major crisis. They should at least consider the involvement of external bodies of expertise that can manage the learning process (these bodies can be involved in the study of near misses).
- Policymakers should have their crisis management systems audited at a regular basis by independent experts (a mix of academics and experienced practitioners is recommendable). The critical examination by outsiders can be a helpful instrument in assuring a high-quality crisis management system. It forces policymakers to explain why the system looks the way it does and it invites new insights that can make the system more effective. In addition, policymakers should learn from the experiences of others (these lessons come free of charge).
- Effective preparation for crisis management will not happen without the active involvement and visible commitment of political-administrative elites. They must nurture a culture of inquiry, in which everybody is invited to consider vulnerabilities and propose better ways of organizing a resilient system. Their words and deeds must signal that crisis management is a crucial activity – also in times of normalcy.

5. Building a more effective crisis management system: Points for discussion

This final section of the report translates academic findings into agenda points for discussion within the Tsunami commission. Based on the findings presented above, this section outlines a set of prescriptive dimensions that the members of the Tsunami Commission might wish to consider. These are rather generic prescriptions, which should be refined and adapted to the Swedish context. The following prescriptive issues are proposed for the discussion agenda:

1. Formulating a crisis management vision

An encompassing vision on crisis management clarifies the role of government before, during and after a crisis or disaster. It identifies the limits of government capacity, specifying where the government's role ends and citizen responsibility begins. It defines what are acceptable risks (and how this is determined). It describes the outlines of a strategy, identifying who will be in charge (and who will not be), what is being done to prevent crises from materializing, and how government plans to learn from crises that occur at home or abroad. Such a philosophy would be simple to understand, easy to remember, a source of inspiration, and effective in use (especially for first responders).

This is not meant to imply that such a vision should be formulated at and imposed from the top. In fact, it may be advisable to make such a vision the outcome of a deliberative process of some sorts. Nor is it a detailed plan (one could typically fit it on a few pages).

2. Translating vision into policy

A philosophy or vision on crisis management is unlikely to be very effective unless it penetrates the various policy fields that together define the responsibilities of public government. One way of doing that would be to require policy departments, public agencies and local administrations to explicitly formulate crisis management policy (preferably in line with the encompassing vision discussed above). It would require politicians and administrators at all levels to assess crisis management capacity. It would fuel a broad discussion on what can be expected from government in case of adversity. It would help to formulate conditions for "up-scaling" (centralization during crisis) and (international) cooperation.

Such a process of local policy formulation will undoubtedly result in a variety of perspectives. There is no reason to suspect that the absence of complete unity of thought will undermine the effectiveness of crisis management. It is of utmost importance, however, that officials at all levels proactively engage with the complex issues of crisis management.

3. Issues of institutional design

The academic literature on crisis management strongly suggests that the design of a crisis management system should be decentralized in nature. During a crisis, central authorities should facilitate, assist, and be ready to take over when a lower-level unit cannot cope. In addition, they must make all critical decisions: they must decide when

choice situations emerge that cannot or should not be handled at the operational level. Most Western countries have adopted this design in recent years.

An effective response structure is characterized by a clear division of labor and a well-enunciated philosophy guiding the response at the different administrative levels. Responsibilities should be well defined and appropriately facilitated. But it is important to realize that formal designs only provide a stepping stone to preparation. A crisis may render existing structures meaningless within a very brief period of time.

Recent crises such as 9/11 and the 2004 tsunami suggest that a new type of crisis has emerged, one that is geographically unbounded. What is needed to deal with these crises is a high degree of coordination of all the administrative units that are brought to bear on the crisis.

It is important here to distinguish between the immediate and long-term aftermath of a crisis. Central authorities may *facilitate* coordination of operational actors in the early phases of a crisis, but it would be an illusion to think they can *impose* coordination on an operational crisis management network. In the longer term, however, central authorities can and should assume a strong position in the administrative chain.

A central crisis management unit may enhance strategic-level coordination. However, investing it with formal responsibility to manage the entire crisis response operation in a command-and-control fashion, taking charge of on-the-ground response, will do little to increase the effectiveness of crisis management in the immediate aftermath of a disaster.

An effective response in the immediate aftermath is best served by continuing preparation efforts. To this effect, a facilitative institute for crisis management may be initiated at the central level. Such a center could assist other administrative units and nurture a shared vision of crisis management. In addition, the initiation of a rapid reaction force may be considered. Such an operational team would always be on stand-by, ready to deploy a variety of services across the world.

To ensure an effective recovery operation, it is helpful to have a central coordinating actor in place. Which agency or department assumes this role is likely to differ with the type of crisis.

4. Legal resources

An important issue to be discussed is the level of legal resources needed for effective crisis management. In the wake of a badly managed crisis, policymakers often call for a widening of legal provisions. This, they argue, will give them more leeway in managing crises.

A crisis may indeed highlight some legal constraints that are outdated and dysfunctional, which would warrant their immediate removal. The literature, however, documents few cases in which a crisis management operation was seriously hampered by legal constraints alone. More often, a crisis will highlight the existing tension between administrative power and the personal autonomy of citizens. It would be a mistake to sacrifice legal principles on the altar of crisis management effectiveness.

The law usually provides ample leeway for administrators to take decisive measures in crisis situations.

5. Communication in crisis

It is no easy task to communicate on risks and crises with the public, the media, and other government organizations when little information is available. A crucial tension exists between centralized and decentralized solutions. One option would be to centralize all crisis communication in one office. This would help government speak with one mouth, but it would limit both the speed of the message (as all information must first be channeled to the central office) and its immediate applicability (messages from the center tend to be less detailed). A second option would be to strengthen the capacity of decentralized units to communicate in times of crisis. This will enhance the speedy delivery of accurate information, but it would also generate various interpretations of the government's position.

An effective compromise between both perspectives is the option of initiating an expertise center on crisis communication, which would have the task of assisting all government organizations in preparing for improved crisis communication.

6. Training for crisis management

It almost speaks for itself that all those who could end up "in the hot seat" should be properly prepared. In reality, this rarely happens. One reason is the lack of training capacity. It should be a governmental responsibility to ensure that sufficient capacity exists (in universities, private sector or training institutes) to train and retrain all prospective crisis managers. If such capacity is found lacking, the establishment of a national training institute for crisis management may be a good solution (the Swiss Institute for Strategic Leadership Training may serve as an interesting example).

Training is not just an individual matter; crisis management is a team effort. Therefore, training must take place at the organizational level as well. All public organizations should regularly engage in crisis simulations (intra and interorganizational simulations). A national training institute could assist these organizations in creating and conducting effective crisis simulations.

7. Reaching out to victims and survivors

During and immediately after a crisis, much energy is usually directed to alleviate the suffering of surviving victims and their families. When the crisis abates, this group of people often gets lost in the bureaucratic wilderness. In the long term, they may feel abandoned. To avoid a festering "crisis after the crisis", it may be advisable to create a small, specialized and multidisciplinary group that can guide these people through the bureaucratic labyrinth back to normal life.

8. Creating procedures for learning and accountability

The crisis aftermath offers an opportunity for change: learn what went wrong and make sure those errors are not repeated in the future. The crisis aftermath is also a highly politicized period, during which many parties attempt to push their assessment

and reform plans. Accountability processes can easily degenerate into so-called “blame games.” To ensure a fair accountability process that does not interfere with lesson learning, it may be helpful to formulate procedures for investigation and accountability. These procedures then become beacons for navigation in the dynamic post-crisis phase.

9. Institutionalizing international cooperation

It seems likely that more crises will occur that have transnational dimensions. This raises interesting questions of institutional design, which are hard to answer with the current state of crisis management research. One obvious route to improved international coordination and cooperation would lead to the European Union (EU). The EU has become increasingly active in the realm of crisis management (in part due to the efforts of Sweden), but the Union does not offer a functioning substitute for bilateral interaction. Other international organizations may offer a proper platform.

As a note of caution, it is observed here that more research may be necessary to assess the available options in the international arena.

10. Resources

An effective crisis management system requires sufficient resources. It should be evaluated whether the available resources in Sweden warrant an expectation of substantial improvements. In line with the suggestions made above, resources should be made available at all administrative levels and in all public agencies.

6. Key literature

The author has elected not to burden the text with extensive references to the available literature. Precise annotations will be provided upon request. This section lists some of the key literature that informed this background report. It may be helpful for those interested in further reading.

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