

# What happens when response is not enough?

Assumptions of relative underlying stability have been sufficient since World War II. **Eric McNulty** says that today, this is no longer true. Yet leaders seem slow to challenge the orthodoxies that bind their thinking and actions

**H**ow will public safety agencies and the communities they serve deal with a world where adverse incidents overwhelm the capacity to respond effectively? I refer not to a massive episodic event, such as an earthquake, but rather to a prolonged series of episodes, large and small, which exhaust the system physically, financially and psychologically.

This is, unfortunately, the landscape ahead without the significant shifts in preparedness, policy and investment in capacity and capability required to confront sustained turbulence. Assumptions of relative underlying stability have been sufficient since the years after World War II. This is no longer true, yet leaders seem slow to challenge the assumptions and orthodoxies that bind their thinking and action.

In 2008, the CEO of a Global 100 company asked me to help forecast what the world would look like in 2025. After my initial research, I reported that I could do no better than guess. However, I could state with confidence that there were four trends which, individually – and, more importantly, together – would shape the context in which the company would operate around the world through the mid-century. Each was global in its potential impact, and each represented threats as well as opportunities. The precise consequences could not be known, yet the arcs of the trendlines were clear. None was a big surprise. Yet, as hyper-specialisation is common in research, few people were looking at them together to see their interconnections and interdependencies. The four trends are: Rapid urbanisation; ageing populations in the global north; climate change; and increased interconnection through trade, travel and technology.

## From interesting to essential

What were interesting insights for a CEO in 2008 have become essential knowledge for everyone concerned with preparedness, mitigation, response and recovery in 2022.

Let's take urbanisation. At the time of my initial research, more than 50 per cent of the global population was living in urban areas for the first time in history. In 1950, it was 30 per cent, and by 2050 forecasts suggest that it will be 65 per cent or more. Numerous trends are driving these moves, from the mechanisation of agriculture to the rise of the knowledge economy. However, crisis leaders must grasp that the most rapid growth is happening in the developing world. London or New York will not double in size. In the near future, these exemplars of 'big cities' will no longer be among the top ten in terms of population. Mexico City, Dhaka, Lagos, Karachi and Mumbai are

among those passing them by. The global south will dominate the list of top ten most populous urban areas.

Much of the growth in the urban areas of the global south will be through informal and semi-formal development. While some deride these areas as slums or squatter cities, I call them 'cities of desire', as their growth is driven by a combination of aspiration and desperation. People have moved to cities seeking a better life for as long as there have been such urban areas to move to. People relocate to cities when rural life is no longer economically or environmentally sustainable. We should not vilify the residents. Rather, we should be concerned that these

informal settlements lack robust public safety and public health infrastructure and governance. In the absence of the policies and regulations that set basic standards of safety and security, along with the agencies that carry them out, these urban areas are ripe for infectious disease outbreaks and social unrest, as well as exceptional human and structural damage from severe weather events.

As we know too well, infectious diseases spread everywhere. High crime, health and housing insecurity and economic hopelessness drive migration. No matter where you live, you will feel the consequences of rapid urbanisation.

Next, we turn to ageing demographics. As populations are growing denser in the global south, they are ageing in the global north. Concurrent declining fertility and mortality rates, along with migration, are the primary causes. According to the UN, the number of people over age 65 will double by 2050, representing as much as 25 per cent of the population in North America and Europe. Most elders will be women and many of them will live alone.

Elderly householders may exhibit increased fragility resulting from physical, emotional, economic and psychosocial factors. They are more susceptible to the effects of extreme heat and cold. The elderly may have more difficulty evacuating their homes and have more complex needs when they arrive at shelters.

The demographic shifts portend a decrease in the working-age population relative to the whole, exacerbating

the quest for talent, particularly in physically demanding fields. It will also put pressure on pension resources, with implications for other budgetary considerations such as public safety, public health and related areas. Simultaneously, the requirements to serve elders properly may increase costs.

When considering climate change, there's nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. Whereas climate change was somewhat on the fringe in 2008, it is now in the headlines daily. There is ample evidence that dry areas are becoming drier while wetter areas are wetter. Ice caps are melting and sea levels are rising. The result is a dramatic increase in disasters precipitated by a natural event – floods, droughts, wildfires, heatwaves and more. According to the UN, the number of climate-related disasters was up 83 per cent in the period from 2000 to 2019 as compared with the previous 20-year period.

What has become clear over time is that researchers were overly conservative in their estimates of the changing climate. Where they have been wrong, it has been in underestimating the speed and scope of the transformation of the environment. It is reminiscent of Ernest Hemingway describing going bankrupt: "Slowly, and then suddenly." Sadly, policymakers are still moving slowly.

Climate change will speed urbanisation as some traditional agricultural land becomes unproductive. It will also exacerbate the challenges of living in dense

Yuko Kondo | Ikon Images





concentrations without air conditioning, modern drainage and sanitation, and other infrastructure that helps insulate humans from environmental stressors. It will increase the vulnerabilities of the elderly. It will strain the capacity of our social and built systems, at times beyond the breaking point.

Lastly, we turn to interconnections.

The Dalai Lama once said: “Our ancient experience confirms at every point that everything is linked together, everything is inseparable.” The intense connectivity across the planet was made plain by Covid-19. Few people had heard of Wuhan, China before 2020. Today, everyone has been affected by the novel coronavirus that emerged from there. The consequences were not simply medical. Supply chains became stretched and tangled. Economies teetered. Educators and students struggled. Healthcare systems neared collapse.

As comforting as it would be to think of Covid-19 as a once-in-a-lifetime event, it likely is not. Disasters on one side of the planet will be felt on the other side. It is the butterfly

“Everything is linked together, everything is inseparable”

effect on steroids because travel, trade and technology make infinite, instant connectivity possible. Recall the havoc caused by a single ship, *MV Ever Given*, which wedged itself in the Suez Canal in March 2021. As much as 12 per cent of annual global trade passes through the canal annually. *Lloyd's List* estimated that the *Ever Given* incident resulted in \$400 million per hour in delayed goods costs.

Fragmented (and fractious) responses from individual regions or nations to events will not suffice, because every country depends on others for essential goods and services. For example, the conflict in Ukraine is projected to have a dramatic impact on food security in Africa and beyond (see *CRJ* 17:1). Greater co-ordination, co-operation, and collaboration are therefore needed on a global scale.

The confluence of the four trends outlined above is a classic slow-moving crisis. Individual severe incidents are not elusive black swans. They are a herd of grey rhinos stomping to be noticed, alerting all who are paying attention to the calamity ahead. It is incumbent on those in emergency management – and the broader crisis community – to lead, lest the impossible tasks of constant response and recovery fall to us. Here are practical steps to take:

■ **Lead beyond – solve their problem first, then yours:** Getting proper consideration paid to preparedness is a classic challenge. That is in part because officials ask people to solve a problem they do not see. Instead, contribute to solving the problems they do see, even if they are slightly out of your lane. In doing so, you will build the relationships you need to garner the attention and resources required to address the risks you have identified. Learning about the challenges of daily elder transport, for example, could help inform how you approach evacuations and provide the opportunity to raise the issue of evacuations with the larger community;

■ **Lead up to elected officials assertively:** Politicians think in electoral cycles. The action needed to address emerging risks is more urgent and requires consideration of longer time horizons. Emergency managers and

their peers in public safety need to be a unified voice, reminding officials that choices have consequences. Rarely do elected officials gain office on their disaster credentials. However, they can quickly lose their positions when they fail to handle a disaster well. Preparedness and public safety budgets are investments in future security, not costs to be minimised for short-term gain;

■ **Lead across agencies and sectors persistently:** Individual agencies cannot solve complex problems because these challenges are multifaceted, often involving and affecting diverse stakeholders. A volatile future is best met by moving these problems upstream to prevent them before they happen. Greater connectivity between health, housing, immigration, education and other policy centres provides the best chance of linking and leveraging initiatives to greatest overall effect. Do not forget businesses and non-profit organisations. Bring a broad range of actors together for exercises to discover how each can contribute to best-possible outcomes; and

■ **Lead inclusively, taking a ‘social determinants’ approach to preparedness:** Public health professionals have long looked at a wide range of factors that determine population health: Economic stability; education; housing; food; healthcare access; social connection; and more. The keys to a healthy population can often be found in the interplay between these elements. A similar approach to preparedness can also be fruitful. Invite into discussion those who serve your community, but who may not ordinarily be part of your circle. Look beyond the usual admonitions and guidance. Listen intently to discover the true barriers to preparedness.

A shift to a broader leadership role has a precedent. Fire services, for example, have evolved from pure response entities to dedicating significant effort to prevent fires while preserving the capability to fight them. This meant involvement in the development of building codes and product safety standards, as well as educating political leaders and the public. The result in lives saved and property damage averted is almost incalculable. Now, with multiple major persistent threats emerging, the need for a similar transformation across public safety, humanitarian and corporate safety functions is clear.

### Influence beyond command

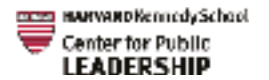
Leading in this capacity requires deploying influence beyond the authority of command. It will require investment to develop leaders beyond the technical abilities required of their rank. It calls for changing mindsets as much as altering practice.

Communities rightfully take great pride in the bravery and dedication of their first responders. However, no community can expect them to be constant responders. The greatest respect that can be paid to those willing to risk their lives for public health and safety is for a whole-of-community commitment to the preparedness, mitigation and adaptation needed in these turbulent times. CRJ

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