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Protection Prevention Preparedness Response Resilience Recovery



QUO VADIS USA?

PREDICTING CRISES & RESPONSES

Afghanistan | Pyroterrorism | Managing
Burnout | Cybersecurity | Change &
Leadership | Psychosocial Societal Health

contents

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News

4

Technology

Drones in emergency response

58

PIX4D describes a use case that proves how useful drones can be during a crisis

Bridging the gap

38

Adam Berry reports on how military processes for crisis management can be applied to a civilian environment, with technology's help

Afghanistan Analysis

Crises within crises

12

As the complexity of Afghanistan's issues increases, two fundamental elements are missing, says Luavit Zahid: trust and clarity

Escape from Kabul

16

Andrew Brown describes helping those most at risk to flee their homeland

What next?

20

Barbara Kelemen looks at investment and donor issues

Security & Analysis

Cyber-jihad in 2021

22

Olivier Cauberghs and Lisa De Smedt explore the digital transformation of the three biggest players on the cyber-jihad battlefield

The propaganda machine

26

Ørjan Karlsson describes how the propaganda machine is being professionalised

Sitting ducks: SMEs & cyberattacks

28

Legal requirements, insurance, public relations and human resources are vital in cyber incident response, argues Larry Lafferty

EMP attacks

30

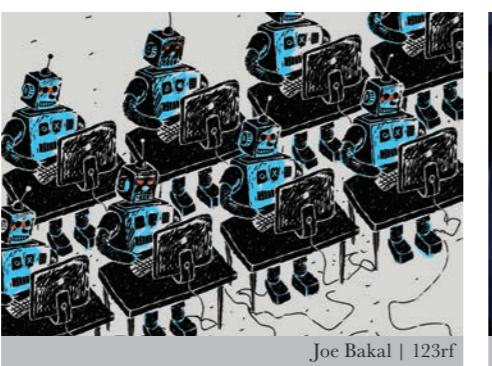
Lina Kolesnikova assesses the risks of electromagnetic pulse attacks

Pyro-terrorism in forests

34

Tony Moore says that the pyro-terrorism threat should not be ignored

Propaganda p26



Joe Bakal | 123rf

Artificial intelligence p42



Lightwise | 123rf

Cover story: Focus on the USA

Cover image: Harry Hayson | Ikon Images

The Swiss Army knife of leadership

58

Andy Blackwell & Nina Smith share their experiences of mentoring, recounting how it can contribute to the development of security and resilience leaders

Staff endurance: A strategic resource

62

Magdalena Lind details how to maintain the functional fitness of healthcare personnel

Leaders in flames

66

Burnout is not only about the front lines, says Eric McNulty. Here's how to be ready to lead when it matters most

Leadership & Change

Systemic change in complex times

68

Gill Kernick vowed to do whatever it took to make sure that we learned from the events that took place in the UK's Grenfell Tower

Living in an age of flux

70

Emily Hough interviews April Rinne, who says that our relationship with risk must take into account how we consider and react to change

How the mind works in a crisis

74

Engagement with communities in the right way can create long-lasting, positive changes in mindsets, argues Stefan Flothmann

Focus on the USA

Predicting future crises

78

Guest Editor Jennifer Hesterman introduces three experts from law enforcement, fire and rescue and emergency response, in order to take the pulse of crisis and emergency management in the USA

A first response health check

80

Matthew Smallwood examines three emerging scenarios that will affect how emergency services will be able to serve their communities

Mentoring p58



Adam Howling | Ikon Images

What's next for policing?

82

Lack of staffing, funding, the will to engage and citizen trust are some of the issues facing US police departments, according to Philip Galindo

Climate change & cascading disasters

84

Robert Witham says that the solutions to a catastrophic failure of critical infrastructure or the cascading effects of a weather emergency lie within communities themselves

Interconnections

Universities building disaster resilience

86

Nadine Sulkowski explains how governments and supranational institutions can play a critical role in fostering policies concerning the cohesion and prosperity of society and environmental sustainability

Keystone cities: Irreplaceable hubs

88

Constance Marzell-Kyme argues that understanding the complex interconnectedness of cities can be of immense value in crisis planning and response

Questions to ask a donor in a crisis

92

When a billionaire offers to help in the recovery from a crisis, what should your reaction be? Rob Shimmin investigates

Plus

Shaping future responses

95

Why do we seem reluctant to learn lessons and, more importantly, apply them, particularly when responding to a crisis? Jeannie Barr explores

Events

Frontline

98

Claire Sanders speaks to Lorraine Wapling about her mission to further disability inclusion in organisations around the world

USA feature p78



John Holcroft | Ikon Images

comment

At the EENA 112

conference in Latvia this November, Patrick Lagadec took a satirical approach in his keynote presentation.



The CRJ Advisory Panel Member discussed the Covid-19 pandemic from the perspective of the virus itself, drawing parallels with other crises. He analysed the virus's strategy in which its 'special forces unit' repeatedly expressed gleeful amazement at how humanity is facilitating Covid-19's deadly mission at every step.

Why do we so often make it easy for disasters to take hold and cause such tragic tolls? One reason, posits Gill Kernick on p68, is that: "Many of our top-down, bureaucratic and mechanistic ways of thinking, grounded in mythical cause and effect narratives... are becoming redundant."

Feedback in the session I moderated at the European Forum for Disaster Risk Reduction has also stuck with me. One participant noted: "We need to know our citizens better." Another highlighted the continued weakness in approaching disaster at a cross-sectoral level.

This is the very *raison d'être* of the CRJ – to encourage knowledge sharing and action between disciplines; the articles on p38 and 62 exemplify good practice in applying transfer of expertise.

And on p74, Stefan Flothmann discusses how to change the mindsets of disaster-afflicted communities to ensure better recovery and resilience. The psychosocial phases he discusses are equally evident in nations, businesses, emergency responders and individuals; in other words, across most of humanity. Today, many seem to be gripped by the 'disillusionment' phase, ground down by the painful, drawn-out pandemic crisis.

This theme continues in Jennifer Hesterman's guest-edited focus on the USA (p78), an unflinching snapshot of issues in fire and rescue services, police and emergency management. A recurring concern – among other issues – is the public loss of trust.

We must rectify this. Solutions are there, but political posturing, geopolitical jostling, opportunism, protectionism and empire building are endemic. If we don't change, we are all simply facilitators: collaborators with, and enablers of our common enemy – disaster.

Systemic change in complex times

In June 2017, **Gill Kernick** watched her former home in Grenfell Tower burn. As flames exploded out of charred windows, she turned to BBC reporter Matthew Price and said: "I will do whatever it takes to make sure we learn, to – in some way – make those lost lives count"



Two young fish are swimming along, when an older fish swims past and asks them: "How's the water?" The young fish continue swimming, then one looks at the other and says: "What's water?"

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Noively, I imagined that my desire to learn would be shared and relentlessly driven across the government, housing and building sectors; that the worst residential fire in London since WW2, which killed 72 people in the UK's richest borough, would lead to swift, dramatic and lasting change. I was wrong.

Instead, I entered a labyrinth of despair that ranged from discovering the multiple failures to respond to the known dangers of external façade fires, to realising that Grenfell was emblematic of decades of poor construction practices. Thousands of families across the country were living in unsafe buildings and neither the government, housing sector, nor industry were going to provide the leadership needed to resource rapid remediation and ensure people could feel safe in their homes.

I had to confront the fact that despite spin and rhetoric to the contrary, history predicted that Grenfell, like previous tragedies, would not lead to meaningful change.

We would conduct an inquiry, identify key lessons – and fail to learn them. Piecemeal changes would be made, but the underlying issues such as failures to heed warnings, listen to those at the sharp edge or deal with imbalances in power, would not shift.

These systemic issues are not limited to Grenfell, but to our inability to learn from disasters more broadly. To fulfil my promise, I had to ask a different question: Why does our failure to learn make sense? Until we understand this, we will never prevent human suffering whether through a pandemic, a flood or a fire. After years of research, my conclusion is that two interconnected issues lie at the heart of the matter: our failure to understand the nature of complexity and an over-reliance on piecemeal versus systemic change.

Frameworks such as volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environments, wicked (seemingly unsolvable) problems and complex adaptive systems are all indicative of a growing understanding of how to operate effectively in an increasingly complex world.

Many of our traditional, top-down, bureaucratic and mechanistic ways of thinking, grounded in mythical cause-and-effect narratives such as: "We'll roll out this regulation and it will change behaviour," are becoming redundant.

Our response to disasters largely stems from this paradigm. In the UK, pandemic response focused on top-down regulations, but failed to consider the impact of ministers and advisors violating lockdown rules on wider trust and hence, behaviour. We must improve our ability to operate effectively with increasing complexity. Complex problem solving, collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, emotional intelligence and cognitive flexibility will become more important.

	Piecemeal Change	Systemic Change
Intent	Solving a piecemeal issue	Shifting the conditions holding the <i>status quo</i> in place
Question	What's wrong with the system?	What is the system perfectly designed for?
Assumption	Controllable, predictable world	Complex, emergent world
Access to change	Fix what is wrong	Make the water visible: grapple with the messy kaleidoscope
Approach to change	Technical solutions (If I do 'x', 'y' will happen)	Disrupting the status quo, experimenting (If I do 'y', what will happen?)
Leadership style	Bureaucratic, command and control, rules based	Organic, emergent, values and principles based
Requires	Traditional expertise	All stakeholders' tacit expertise

In complex systems, change is emergent and can't be directed or controlled in a linear, predictable fashion. Outcomes are unpredictable and we cannot understand cause retrospectively. Interactions are nonlinear and minor changes can produce major consequences. Also, elements in a system adapt and co-evolve, based on their interactions with one another and with the environment.

This failure to understand and operate effectively in an increasingly complex world is connected to overly focusing on piecemeal versus systemic change, the second factor at the heart of our inability to learn from – and therefore prevent – disasters.

Most responses to disasters are piecemeal: changing parts of the system but not the system itself. Piecemeal change will happen post-Grenfell, and it is critical that it does. But I am not confident that we will see systemic change. Systemic change requires shifting the conditions that are holding the problem in place. Such problems are, according to Draimin and Spitz: "Entrenched and perpetuated by the *status quo* of power, institutional culture, social expectations, myth and narrative."

Let's consider building materials, which contributed to the fire. A piecemeal approach would attempt to control the specific materials used on high-rise buildings – important and critical changes, but not sufficient.

A systemic approach to the issue of building materials would require grappling with messy issues, such as: Political lobbying by product manufacturers; the independence of testing and certification bodies; trade-offs made under the guise of sustainability; and the limitations of siloed governance and regulations. We'd need to assume these issues beyond the narrow scope of Grenfell and consider what other dangerous products might be in use, both in buildings and in other industries.

This would reveal challenges that are far more complex than banning certain building materials or tightening construction product testing and classification. It would require a rethinking of which behaviours we consider acceptable and which we do not.

Piecemeal change is relatively easy: you identify what went wrong and then put plans in place to correct it. Solutions tend to be technical in nature and rely on traditional expertise. For systemic

change, though, we need a different approach.

David Forster Wallace's fish parable provides a good analogy. Two young fish are swimming along, when an older fish swims past and asks them: "How's the water?" The two young fish continue swimming, then one looks at the other and says: "What's water?"

The first step in systemic change is to reveal the conditions holding the problems in place – to make the water visible, illuminating the systemic forces at play and grappling with this messy kaleidoscope. Rather than asking what is wrong with the system (which gives you piecemeal answers), this is best done by considering that the system is functioning perfectly and then observing and discovering what it is perfectly designed to produce.

At the heart of the matter, failure to learn from and therefore prevent disasters, lies in failure to embrace the interconnected worlds of complexity and systemic change. Embracing these worlds demands a radically different style of leadership, one grounded in principles and values and that engenders organic and emergent thinking and solutions: A system where a resident's lived expertise is valued as greatly as the technical advice of a fire engineer; where experimentation, innovation and disruption are the norm; where not knowing, humility and curiosity are valued over control, bureaucracy, and authority; where kindness is seen as more disruptive than aggression, and compassion more effective than taking positions; and where hope lives in fellow seed-planters, seeking a world we cannot yet see, where the human suffering of disasters is honoured through meaningful and lasting change. **CR**

Table 1 – The key differences between piecemeal and systemic change

Reference

- Draimin T & Spitz K (2014): Building Ecosystems for Systems Change: How do we collaborate to create ecosystems that support innovation for systems change? *Social Innovation Generation & Oxfam*

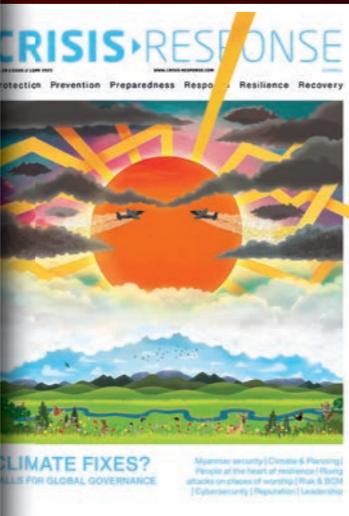
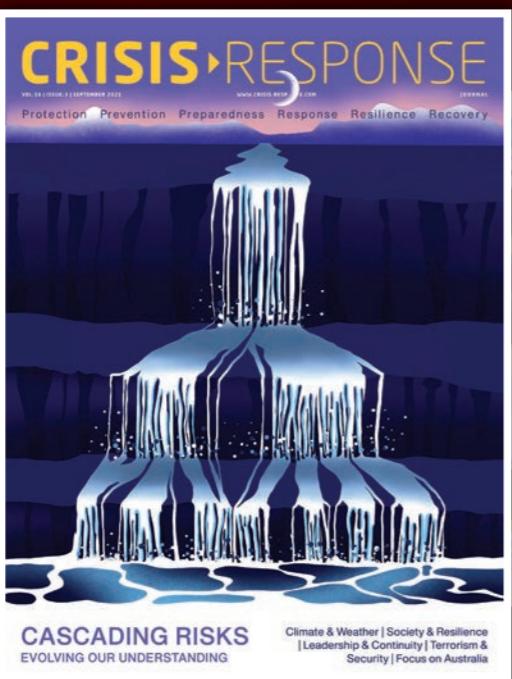
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 **GILL KERNICK** is a consultant in safety, culture and leadership. Between 2011 and 2014, she lived on the 21st floor of Grenfell Tower. Her book *Catastrophe and Systemic Change: Learning from the Grenfell Tower Fire and Other Disasters*, was published in May 2021

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