CRISIS ▶RESPONSE

Protection   Prevention   Preparedness   Response   Resilience   Recovery
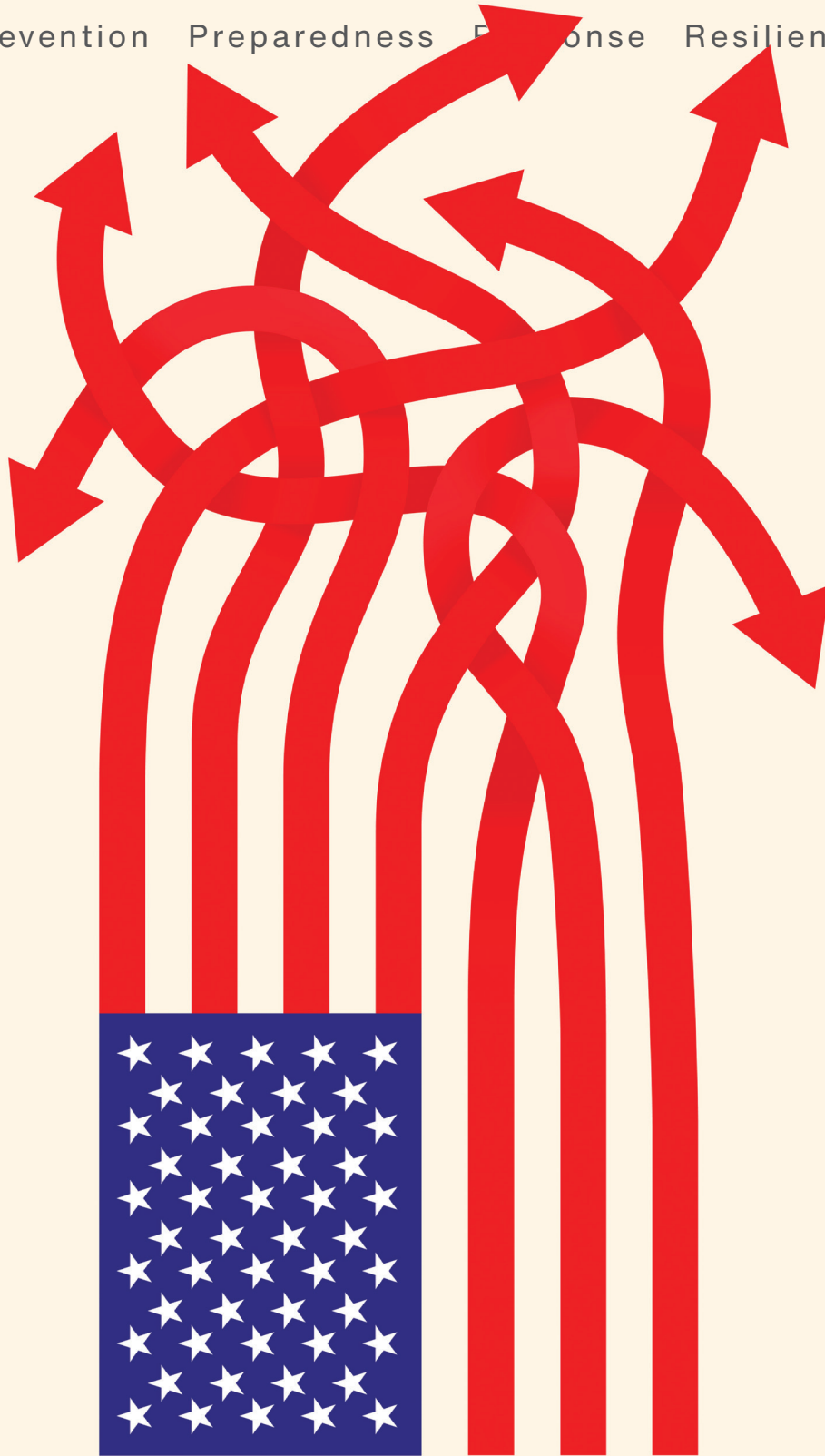
QUO VADIS USA?
PREDICTING CRISES & RESPONSES

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CRISIS›RESPONSE

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Cover story: Focus on the USA
Cover image: Harry Hayson | 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.

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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"

N aively, 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.

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. **C·RJ**

	Piecemeal Change	Systemic Change
Intent	Solving a piecemeal issue	Shifting the conditions holding the *status quo* 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

Table 1 – The key differences between piecemeal and systemic change

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?"

Adobe Stock

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*

Author
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*