

Mission Impossible? Planning and Preparing for Crisis¹

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Crisis management logic suggests that planning and preparing for crisis should be a vital part of institutional and policy toolkits. This paper explores the difficulties in translating this ideal into practice. It focuses on four key difficulties. First, crises and disasters are low probability events but they place large demands on resources and have to compete against front-line service provision. Second, contingency planning requires ordering and coherence of possible threats, yet crisis is not amenable to being packaged in such a predictable way. Third, planning for crisis requires integration and synergy across institutional networks, yet the modern world is characterised by fragmentation across public, private and voluntary sectors. Fourth, robust planning requires active preparation through training and exercises, but such costly activities often produced a level of symbolic readiness which does not reflect operational realities. Finally the paper reflects on whether crisis preparedness is a 'mission impossible', even in the post-9/11 period when contingency planning seems to be an issue of high political salience.

Introduction

A universal maxim in crisis management literature is that crisis preparedness should be high on institutional and policy agendas (Nudell and Antokol, 1988; Seymour and Moore, 2000; Mitroff, 2001; Boin et al. 2005). The logic is that we need to give serious consideration to strong, well-resourced and forward thinking contingency planning if we want to tame and gain control over a crisis when it hits. Such arguments have many cases upon which to draw. Crises can decimate entire regions and cities (Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans, Boxing Day tsunami and South Asia). They can pose major threats to human and animal welfare (avian flu, SARS, BSE). They can have highly destabilising effects on institutions and at times may seriously damage their legitimacy (UK Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, in relation to its handling of foot and mouth disease) They can be instrumental in the removal of key figures from public office (FEMA Director Michael Brown and Hurricane Katrina). Crises can also cause considerable and sometimes irreparable damage to powerful interests (Enron, World-Com). The case for 'preparation' seems to be even stronger when we consider the argument of futurists such as Schwartz (2003), who argue that current trends in technology, population change, medicine, terrorism, ethnic conflicts and others, will produce 'inevitable surprises' which to a large extent we can anticipate.

In this context, the key task for policy makers and crisis managers is to establish institutional procedures and create cultural climates which develop capacities to cope with whatever extraordinary threats come their way. Doing so, however, is no easy task. Boin and 't Hart (2003) have previously identified a number of crisis leadership tensions (particularly in the acute and post-crisis phases), focusing on the way in which crisis leaders are faced with a 'mission impossible' in balancing popular expectations and political realities. Our article takes its cue from Boin and 't Hart (2003) but focuses instead on crisis preparedness policies. In particular, it identifies a number of tensions between the 'ideals' of pre-crisis preparedness, and the realities of trying to prepare for circumstances, which by their very nature are unpredictable. It then reflects briefly on the changing world of contingency planning (particularly post 9/11). We will begin, however, by identifying broad ideals of crisis preparedness.

'Ideal' rules for crisis planning and preparedness

Definitions of crisis abound, and there are debates about whether 'crisis' can be defined in a positivist manner (with a rigid set of criteria) or an interpretative one (where the existence of a crisis depends entirely on individual perceptions). The debate spills over into the commonalities and differences between crises, disasters, emergencies

¹We are grateful to Arjen Boin, Paul 't Hart and anonymous reviewers for their comments on an earlier draft of this article. All interpretation and errors remain our own.

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and catastrophes (Boin, 2004; Perry and Quarantelli, 2005). Such disputes are beyond the scope of this paper. While recognising that certain 'crisis' phenomena may be viewed in different ways by different actors, there is nevertheless strong agreement that crises will tend to be characterised by three sets of conditions. These are: severe and largely unexpected threats, high uncertainty, and the need for urgency in decision making (Rosenthal et al. 2001; Boin et al. 2005).

In the face of potential crises, one might imagine that there is something close to a universal guide as to how organisations and policy-makers should prepare. In reality, there are no universal rules as such. Rather, many analysts and practitioners have developed a broad, movable and often abstract set of principles which then need to be translated into 'good practice'. For example, Perry and Lindell (2003) suggest that pre-crisis planning processes should:

1. be based on accurate knowledge of threats and likely human responses.
2. encourage appropriate action by crisis managers.
3. encourage flexibility in responses.
4. promote inter-organisational coordination.
5. integrate plans for each hazard into a multi-hazard approach.
6. involve the training of relevant personnel.
7. provide for testing through drills and exercises.
8. be adaptable as part of an ongoing process adjustment to new circumstances.
9. be a strong advocate in the face of inevitable resistance to resource commitments for low probability events.
10. recognise the differences between crisis planning (preparedness) and crisis management (implementation and performance).

Alexander (2005) goes further and provides a draft standard for emergency planning. He provides eighteen criteria, ranging from the need to ensure that municipal government is the reference point for emergency management (and higher levels of government are the co-ordinators) through to the need for regular revision and testing of plans. Boin and Lagadec (2000) develop the point that preparation is more than simply planning. It is also about anticipation and developing strategies to ensure organisational resilience in the event of a crisis presenting itself. They identify a number of key imperatives:

- Crisis management should be on the agenda of decision-making elites, raising their awareness through workshops, simulations etc.
- Organisations should facilitate resilience through systems for detecting weak and non-conventional signals; be able to process relevant information to and from central

authorities; have the capacity for alertness and mobilisation of crisis units; be capable of relating technical matters to strategic issues in order to handle new types of crises; and promote the capability of actors to deal with decentralised crisis situations.

- Organisations should be engaged in continuous efforts for preparation. These include continuously learning from experience; running tests and simulations to prepare for destabilising surprises; providing appropriate training; promoting learning within and across networks; personally involving organisational leaders in preparation; careful and progressive scheduling of preparatory efforts to avoid 'big bang' exhaustion; and ensuring that crisis management processes are embedded in core organisational processes.

What this argument implies is that 'ideal' preparedness does not reside simply in 'having a plan'. Mitroff (2001) provides support for this view in his portrayal of organisations as like onions – each layer forming part of a greater whole: technology, structure, human actors, culture and top management psychology. In effect, pre-crisis preparedness requires organisational and policy synergies which extend beyond 'rule-books' to the seriousness by which individuals are prepared to think about potential threats and adapt their systems and behaviours in order to prepare for them.

In contrast to the foregoing proposals and recommendations, stands the reality of crisis preparedness which is composed of a multitude of formal and informal practices and policies that vary across organisations and policy sectors. These variations are rooted in factors such as differing organisational goals, culture and resources. In terms of organisations, Table 1 indicates three broad types and their basic characteristics. Those least prepared tend to be dismissive of threats and have little or no contingency planning. Mid-range types give fairly serious consideration to threats and the need for plans, although institutional preparedness tends to be an 'add on' to existing practices and values. By contrast, high preparedness organisations give high priority to threats and the need for contingency planning. In this type, pre-crisis planning is embedded in all aspects of organisational structures, practices, policies and culture.

Not only do organisations vary in their approaches, but the range of policy tools associated with contingency planning varies from 'hard' laws through to 'soft' conventions. Specifically:

- *Laws*: impose binding obligations on organisations to develop contingency plans. For example, the EU places legal requirements on member states to develop contingency

Table 1. *A Typology of Organisational Preparedness for Crisis*

	Low Preparedness	Medium/Mixed Preparedness	High Preparedness
<i>Importance of Contingency Planning on the Organisational Agenda Attitude to Threats</i>	Little or no importance. Not an item for serious consideration. Main focus is 'routine' survival and growth. Dismissive. 'It couldn't happen here' mentality.	Fairly important on occasion, but normally of much less priority than 'routine' organisation goals. Fairly serious consideration. A range of threats should be recognised and planned for.	Very high. Crisis preparedness becomes part of the core goals of the organisation. Very serious consideration. Organisation must give high priority to planning for a range of threats.
<i>Extent of Contingency Plans</i>	None at all, or at best a plan tucked away with little or no awareness by staff or stakeholders.	Fairly detailed and extensive contingency plans as an 'add on' to existing organisational structure and practice.	Very detailed and extensive contingency plans, permeating the structures, practices and culture of the organisation and its interactions with stakeholders.
<i>Extent of Active Readiness through Trials and Simulation</i>	Non-existent.	None or patchy. Plans on paper are considered adequate.	Highly active readiness through regular crisis training and exercises.
<i>Organisational Psyche</i>	Major limits on emotional and cognitive capacities. Constant quest for existence/ego satisfaction. Unable to cope with anxiety. Self inflated or self-defeatest outlook.	Reasonably open (within limits) to emotional and cognitive change. Some ability to balance core drivers with the need to address problems. Some but limited toleration and capacity to cope with anxiety. Reasonably strong self-image, although prone to over-regarding or under-regarding itself.	Openness to emotional and cognitive change. Major concern with addressing problems. Is able to tolerate and cope with anxiety. Positive self-image.

Source: Original table, but drawing on Pauchant and Mitroff (1992: 146)

plans for dealing with threats such as BSE, and foot and mouth disease.

- *Policy guidelines and recommendations*: do not have the force of law but are strongly encouraged by higher political authorities, to the point that public institutions cannot reasonably avoid implementing them. For example, the EU recommends that member states develop contingency plans for avian flu. Emergency Management Australia disseminates detailed principles and practices that should be followed at commonwealth, state/territory and local levels.
- *Codes and Protocols*: are written documents that do not have legal force but are agreements with regard to practices to be followed. They may come from higher political authorities, but can also be developed within and between organisations. The Australian Capital Territory (ACT) has an Emergency Planning Code to ensure that electricity distributors and water utilities have plans for coping with crisis events. After 9/11, all London agencies involved in communicating public information agreed a protocol ensuring joint working in crisis situations.
- *Conventions*: are 'custom and habit' and not codified in documents. All organisations contain elements of convention to varying degrees, in the tacit assumption that staff should be ready and willing to deal with any extraordinary threats to the organisation and its personnel.

In effect, the 'real world' displays varying practices (from 'hard' to 'soft' policy tools) and levels of planning/ preparedness which stand in contrast to the broad ideals of crisis management. Reasons for this disparity are not absolute, but the following discussion attempts to go some way towards an explanation. It identifies and fleshes out a fundamental tension between (a) the 'ideals' of crisis preparedness and (b) the unpredictability of crisis and the realities of organisational and political life. In doing so, it identifies some key pressure points for those engaged in trying to argue for and develop robust contingency planning. These tensions are summarised in Box 1.

Box 1: Tensions Between the 'Ideals' of Crisis Preparedness and the Realities of Crisis

- High Potential Impact of Crisis vs. Low Priority of Emergency Management
- Need for Planning and Order vs. Uncertainty and Disorder of Crisis
- Need for an Integrated Approach vs. Realities of Institutional Fragmentation
- Need for Active Planning and Readiness vs. Symbolic Readiness

High potential impact of crisis vs. low priority of crisis management

One might imagine that the high potential impact of crisis is sufficient to rally political leaders, policy makers and crisis managers into devoting considerable resources to the cause of crisis preparedness. The difficulty is that such optimism has to work against forces and circumstances of inertia. Several particularly important factors can be identified.

First, crises are low probability events. Therefore, contingency planning amounts to a demand for resources to cope with an event or events that may never happen. Indeed, it would be erroneous to assume that all organisations even make such demands on their paymasters and senior executives. In the face of low probability events, organisations may suffer from a range of maladaptive behaviours stemming from bureaucratic politics, poor intelligence gathering and processing, cultural 'blind spots' or even an 'it couldn't happen here' mentality (Turner and Pidgeon 1997). The latter can be a product of 'groupthink' (Janis, 1982) where there is a shared sense of invulnerability in terms of potential threats. Many organisations adopting such attitudes have struggled enormously when faced with a crisis. In the example of 9/11, protocols were in place between the Federal Aviation Authority (FAA) and North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) in the event of a hijack. Unfortunately, the arrangements were 'unsuited in every respect for what was about to happen' (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 2004: 18). Preparedness for a low probability hijack did not extend to preparedness for an even lower probability form of hijack. They wrongly assumed that a hijacked aircraft would be easily identifiable, that sufficient time would be available through chains of command, and that the hijacking would be 'conventional' rather than 'suicidal'. It is of course easy with hindsight to attribute blame to the FAA and NORAD. Perhaps the problem is simply one of a failure of imagination. Nevertheless, thinking the unthinkable (and preparing for the worst case) becomes more difficult when resources are tight. As Clarke (2005: 23) suggests: 'prospective worst cases are less likely to encompass the inconceivable, especially when experts and high-level decision makers are doing the prospecting. Indeed, these cases are often constructed as "reasonable" possibilities. The problem is that worst cases are never reasonable'.

Second, one of the main driving forces behind public policies is that they are a product of what political scientists have variously described as minimum winning coalitions, policy monopolies, advocacy coalitions and policy communities. However, even in the post 9/11 period (as we

will argue), contingency planning by public institutions does not have as strong a coalition behind it as we might think, to install crisis preparedness (not just symbolically but also operationally) at the top of institutional agendas. Certainly, contingency planning may bring longer-term and less tangible benefits of security for powerful political and economic interests such as banks, insurance companies, manufacturers, retailers, farmers and so on. For interests such as these, however, public sector contingency planning is akin to a low profile 'public good' which is desirable but secondary to the primary benefits from subsidies, trading rights and so on. Indeed other public goods such as the army and defence are more politically and economically salient than contingency planning. A huge industry of arms manufacturers and defence contractors obtains direct financial benefit from states performing their traditional role as defender of the nation.

Certainly, and as we have indicated, contingency planning is not devoid of powerful interests in the post 9/11 period. Indeed, the insurance industry is increasingly expecting public and private institutions to develop business continuity/contingency plans. However, public sector preparedness is still financially costly, and driven more by states' need to protect against threats, than by a momentum generated by a coalition of powerful politico-economic interests. For crisis managers and political leaders, there are very few votes and little praise when crises are handled well – only criticism in the event of failure. Therefore, it is difficult to forge and maintain a powerful coalition in favour of substantial time and resource inputs into contingency planning, when the payoff tends to be limited to the avoidance of flak.

Third, a related point is that in a world of tight public expenditure constraints and extensive state intervention in areas such as health, education, transport and defence, contingency planning is low on the list of political priorities. This is not to imply a 'gold standard' for the funding of contingency planning. It is simply to suggest that in the competition for resources between low likelihood scenarios and front-line delivery of public services, the battle is an uneven one. One study of local government emergency planning in the UK revealed evidence of substantial 'underfunding'. In a survey of Emergency Planning Officers, 70% of respondents spent less than £100,000 per annum on planning for emergencies, and only 27% had a financial contingency to deal with emergencies (Pratchett, 2004). For many public organisations, making demands for additional resources in the name of increased crisis preparedness is politically 'taboo'.

Fourth, an organisation subject to crisis experiences may find its resources diverted to tackling the 'last crisis', rather than planning for battles to

come. Such reliance on 'historical analogies' (Brändström et al. 2004) may prove less conducive to awareness of new threats and new contexts which lie just around the corner. In the UK, for example, the Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food was so preoccupied throughout the 1980s and 1990s with the threat from BSE that its contingency plans for foot and mouth disease (FMD) were underdeveloped; including no risk assessment, no rehearsals at the central level and an outdated crisis operations manual (McConnell and Stark, 2002). More recently, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, there have been many allegations that the US had ramped up its plans to deal with external threats (terrorist attacks), at the expense of planning to deal with natural disasters.

The outcome of this tension between the destructive potential of crises and the low priority afforded to crisis management, is that organisations such as the US Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the UK's Emergency Planning Society and Emergency Management Australia, often struggle to find a sympathetic political ear. They are acutely aware of the need to place contingency planning high on agendas, but they confront political power, institutional inertia, budgetary constraints and more powerful priorities. Paradoxically, their best hope is for a crisis to destabilise existing institutions and practices, hence producing 'open windows' (Keeler, 1993; Kingdon, 2003) for pushing forward their views. The shock of 9/11 has galvanised many countries into reforming their crisis planning operations. Often, however, such reforms are not as pervasive as we might think. For example, the Director-General of the Swedish Emergency Management Agency has argued that reforms have been held back by a financial system which is too tied to civil defence in a war situation, with emergency management remaining outside the core activities of public bodies (Eksborg, 2004). Such a tension between the forces of reformism and conservatism are consistent with post-crises periods where policy change is often diluted or thwarted by the power of inherited interests, values and commitments (Boin et al. 2005).

Need for planning and order vs. uncertainty and disorder of crisis

Planning is typically about synergy. It is about creating a blueprint which draws together a range of resources in order to further community/political/corporate/bureaucratic goals. Best practice in crisis management promotes similar ideals (see, for example, Waugh, 2000; Tierney et al. 2001). It suggests that only through prior planning can we hope to deal successfully with a crisis if it arises. Such optimism is to be lauded, but needs to be tempered by political and organisa-

tional realities. Crisis is neither amenable to being packaged into neat scenarios, nor are institutional pre-crisis plans so easily constructed. Let us expand on these points.

Crises come in a variety of guises such as chemical explosions, tsunamis, terrorist attacks and heatwaves. Each organisation can potentially be subject to a multitude of threats, but it is difficult to produce a single plan that covers all the potential challenges emerging from crisis situations. Should the evacuation of residents from a flooded area be treated by police authorities in exactly the same way as residents evacuated from an area where there is a concentrated outbreak of avian flu? When municipal authorities plan for the clearing up process after a passenger plane hits a city centre, should they plan to use exactly the same methods in the event of the aircraft being a cargo plane which is carrying radioactive material? The answers to both questions are clearly 'no'. Specific threats often require specific measures to contain/quell them. However, the range of crisis possibilities and outcomes is so vast that 'crisis' will always have the tendency to conflict with the instincts of those who seek advanced coherence and an ordering of possibilities.

In this context, we can get a sense of how public institutions have been able to plan for a multitude of uncertainties. In essence, they have veered heavily towards an integrated approach through the development of 'all hazards planning' (USA, Australia), 'integrated emergency management' (UK), and 'total defence' (Sweden). The general philosophy of these approaches is that whichever type of disaster we can anticipate, a degree of shared planning and coordination should be the basis for emergency preparedness. Two different variations are in evidence:

- One generic plan, containing some recognition of measures needed for different types of threats/disasters.
- Separate plans for different types of threats/disasters, but with some coherence given through integrated management arrangements.

In many respects, such approaches have distinct benefits. Operationally, they can be cost effective and efficient. They bring together natural areas of overlap and give them coherence through common goals, plans, strategies, protocols and approaches. London, for example, has a Strategic Emergency Plan (London Resilience, 2005) which integrates six plans:

- London Command and Control Protocol
- Media/Public Information Protocol
- Mass Fatality Plan
- Large Scale Evacuation

- Site Clearance
- Disaster Fund

Symbolically, integrated plans may also be 'good politics' because they create the impression of cohesion and control. Conversely, they may attempt to create synergies and predictabilities which exist only on paper and do not reflect the real threats and dilemmas which vary across hazards such as chemical spills, bushfires, floods and terrorist attacks. The generic model can also mask political priorities. Some communities viewed the all hazards approach under the Reagan administration as essentially a vehicle for planning in the event of a nuclear war (Waugh, 2000). The all hazards approach also cannot be stretched to every potential crisis situation. When a new threat arrives on the horizon, there are often operational reasons but particularly symbolic ones for public authorities 'having a plan'. In recent years, this has happened particularly with foot and mouth disease, SARS and avian flu. In political terms, failure to develop a separate plan for a new, high profile and newsworthy threat, leaves political leaders and their officials open to accusations of complacency.

Attempts to engage in pre-crisis planning are additionally complex. Planning in general requires a maximalist approach, involving a considerable amount of detail in the allocation of roles, responsibilities, resources and the specification of targets. However, decision making under crisis circumstances typically lacks the type of evidence-base that would normally be available for routine decision-making. Indeed, a paradox exists whereby the more elaborate a contingency plan is, the less likely it will be of use in a crisis because it necessarily must focus on a narrow range of threats, doing so in such detail that no-one can read and/or remember (Hart, 1997). Therefore, significant aspects of crisis responses need to be improvised, based on immediate circumstances and time constraints. It is not possible, for example, to give detailed guidance in advance in terms of:

- the timing of the use of force when hostage negotiations have broken down.
- the level of aid allocated to a region devastated by a hurricane.
- what to tell the media at a press conference when there is conflicting evidence of contamination in domestic water supplies.
- what one agency should do in a disaster situation if another agency has not adhered to an agreed protocol for cooperation.

Crisis, therefore, pulls planning in a minimalist direction, because it requires considerable room for individual autonomy in responding to extraordinary and unpredictable circumstances as they

arise. The consequence is that contingency planning often straddles the tension between maximalist and minimalist approaches. The most common pathway is a contingency plan which identifies lines of authority, roles and responsibilities and means of coordination, leaving key individuals with considerable autonomy to carry out their roles and respond as they feel appropriate. Care must be taken, however, to ensure that crisis decision makers are given the devolved authority to act in direct response to events, without fear of future sanctions by their employer.

Not only does crisis produce circumstances which work against creating synergy and order for planning purposes, but institutions themselves may exhibit tendencies which are less than conducive to engaging in such planning. Organisations engage in 'sensemaking' (Weick, 2001), whereby people interpret events and scenarios in the context of existing choices and commitments. This in turn constrains the meaning they impose on situations. The implication for contingency planning is that projections, plans and proposals for the future, are filtered through pre-existing experiences. Hence, the tendency is towards a form of institutional conservatism which frames scenarios and how they should be prepared for, within the existing organisational 'box'. Therefore, a powerful tendency is to try and create – through contingency planning – a sense of order, control and assuredness, despite the fact that crises can create unimagined uncertainty and disorder. In Amsterdam in 1992, for example, Schiphol airport was prepared for a plane crash, and the city itself was prepared for various public order crises. Neither was prepared for what was to come – the Bijlmer air disaster in which a plane crashed into a residential area with a large immigrant population and a multitude of social problems (Boin and Lagadec, 2000).

Some contingency plans arguably are little more than 'fantasy documents' (Clarke, 1999). Whether by deliberate intent, the insular thinking of experts, an over-reliance on traditional bureaucratic responses (Schneider, 1995) or the sheer complexities of trying to coordinate across a range of networks (Hillyard, 2000), such plans are not likely to provide blueprints for coordination and action in times of crisis because they are out of touch with some of the political realities of crisis (death, destruction, confusion, unpredictability, self-interest and irresponsibility). As a result, contingency plans are more symbolic – a form of reassurance both internal and external to the organisation. They reassure us, for example, that the mail will still be delivered after a nuclear attack; that regulators and oil companies can clean up after massive oil spillages. For many organisations and policy makers, it is easier to produce 'fantasy' documents than to engage in

forthright admissions of real dangers and the uncertainties they create (Clarke, 1999).

Need for an integrated approach vs. realities of institutional fragmentation

A general tendency among crisis management theorists and practitioners is to recommend co-ordinated pre-planning for crisis. The result is that relations within and between institutions are united through common goals, strategies, plans, and allocation of responsibilities throughout shared networks. Such an approach can allow for a diversity of views in terms of the preparation of plans, but diverse interests then give way to a 'common good' plan.

Such calls for integration in pre-crisis planning are not so easy to realise in practice. Political systems are vertically and horizontally fragmented. Whether vertical fragmentation is constitutionally entrenched (in federal systems such as the US, Australia and Canada), or created through laws and convention (in unitary systems such as the UK and New Zealand), a common feature of all modern liberal democracies is the spread of political decision making authority over national, sub-national and local levels. Most such authorities are directly elected, but there is an increasing trend towards non-elected governance in the form of agencies, quangos, non-departmental boards and so on. Horizontal fragmentation, by contrast, refers to the dispersal of policy and administrative functions across the same levels of governance – for example between local councils, and between health authorities. This vertical/horizontal/political/administrative fragmentation is replicated in contingency planning. Crisis management needs to draw on multiple expertise across a range of networks (Hillyard, 2000). For example, the London Regional Resilience Forum, is comprised of representatives from over thirty different elected and unelected organisations, ranging from the Department for Local Government and the Regions and City of London Police, through to the London Underground and the London Coroners Group.

Such dispersal of power and authority can pose a number of difficulties for the integration of crisis preparedness. First, layers or levels of government or governance often are subject to different political control. Therefore, there is the potential for conflict between different political agendas and priorities. Second, layers or levels of non-elected governance have their own individual bureaucratic specialisms and interests in health, defence, policing, education and so on. This is a breeding ground for bureaucratic politics, where a major priority of each organisation is the defence of its own interests. For example, in the 1985 Heysel stadium tragedy, the Belgian

national and local police forces had a long tradition of rivalry. Rather than a coordinated plan through one adopting a lead role, they 'solved' their contingency planning through taking control of diagonal halves of the stadium (Rosenthal et al. 1991). More recently, the 9/11 report was critical of the Fire Department of New York and the New York Police Department, both of which considered themselves operationally autonomous – inhibiting their preparations for coordination in a major incident (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 2004). Bureaucratic politics has always been a feature of the interaction of public organisations, but the propensity is heightened by contemporary public sector encouraging of defensiveness through the creation of systems which are driven by the imperatives of meeting performance plans, budgetary targets and so on (Hood and Jackson, 1992).

Third, public authorities often need to co-ordinate with non-governmental organisations (NGOs). This is an exceptionally common practice in pre-crisis plans, because there is a widespread acceptance that engaging with the expertise and local knowledge of volunteers can be an efficient and cost-effective method of contingency planning. For example, social services, medical units and police services can be supported by voluntary groups. Volunteers can perform roles such as staffing family centres, befriending victims, providing first aid, and giving information and advice. However, potential difficulties include:

- volunteers not being involved in the planning process and not feeling ownership of the plan.
- conflicts between the outlooks of part-time 'amateurs' and full time professional specialists.
- volunteers overstepping their assigned responsibilities.
- volunteers lacking resources and not receiving appropriate training.

Fourth, in the modern public sector, there is an increasing tendency towards public-private partnerships and this trend is being reflected in contingency planning. However, the difficulty of public-private synergy in contingency planning is essentially one of bringing together organisations with fundamentally different values, cultures and goals. One set is concerned fundamentally with private interests and profit maximisation, while the other is concerned with public interests and the provision of public value.

Fifth and finally, local communities are often brought into the contingency planning process. As Coles and Buckle (2004) indicate, the advantages and reasons for doing so are:

- from a human rights perspective, people have a right to be involved in processes which may profoundly affect them;
- planning is more effective if it includes all stakeholders;
- government has limited resources and needs the knowledge, skills and capacities of local people;
- if a disaster occurs, local people will want to get involved anyway.

In practice, such rationales are less easily achieved. Various studies have shown that most communities have little or no interest in disaster preparedness, and there is intra-community variation involving factors such as race, income and gender (Tierney et al. 2001).

The broad picture emerging, therefore, is that planning for crisis requires an integrated approach from institutions with different political priorities, mandates, legal status, cultures, resources, planning cycles, information capacities and communication systems. In trying to square this circle, pre-crisis planning in many western societies has shifted towards 'joined up government' or 'whole of government' approaches'. The broad intent is to bring intra- and inter-organisational cohesion (within and between government agencies and departments) in the pursuit of common goals (Ling, 2002). There has been a 'trickle down' impact on contingency planning. In Australia, for example, a review of disaster preparedness for the Council of Australian Governments in 2002 found a lack of national co-ordination, as well as weaknesses in cross-agency working. As a result, its main recommendations involved creating new national machinery for the coordination and collaboration of commonwealth, state/territory and local levels, as well as encouraging 'joined up' or 'whole of government' approaches to all aspects of emergency management (Cornall, 2005). Joined-up approaches may be symbolically attractive (after all, who would favour disjointed policies?) and there is a strong operational logic for an integrated approach. However, there is some disparity between joined up ideals and how they are translated into organisational practice. These include difficulties in eradicating cultural and professional barriers, as well as confusions over accountability (Ling, 2002). In terms of crisis preparedness, we should be open to the possibility that joined up crisis preparations do not necessarily lead to joined up responses.

Overall, the foregoing issues highlight the tension between the integrated logic of contingency planning, and the disaggregated nature of public, private, voluntary and community bodies. The requirements of contingency planning, even with all hazards and joined up approaches, can-

not hope to compete seriously with or eradicate the multitude of institutional patterns and social behaviours which sustain modern societies. The reality is that typically it has to be accommodated within existing institutional relations, rather than fundamentally changing them.

Need for active planning and readiness vs. symbolic readiness

Good practice does not stop with a plan on paper. It also involves a variety of interactive means by which those who will potentially be involved in a crisis situation, are given appropriate training and testing. The broad philosophy running through these activities is that:

- people are a vital resource in crisis preparation;
- their outlook and understanding of crisis can be reshaped;
- crisis preparedness can be improved as a result, leading to more effective management and decision-making in the event of a crisis.

A number of activities are at the disposal of public authorities in the quest to ensure adequate training in preparation for crisis (see 'Flin, 1996; Hart, 1997; Perry, 2004 for an overview). These include tabletop exercises, simulations ('hot seat' exercises), on-site function exercises, and full-scale exercises. Such activities are the very essence of crisis preparedness. Learning occurs in a 'safe' environment and hence mistakes can be rectified and lessons can be learnt (in theory) as part of personal and organisational education in preparation for the 'real thing'. However, like all aspects of crisis preparedness, there is a tension between the need for planning and the realities of crisis management. This is not to suggest that we should reject the need for active planning through training and exercises. Such activities are vital. However, we should be aware that use of a range of exercises is neither inevitable nor necessarily equated with highly robust preparedness for crisis. Three main reasons can be identified.

First, pre-crisis activities and exercises can be expensive, and the nearer the simulation of reality, the greater the expense. In the UK in 2004, Exercise Triton 04 simulated a large flood scenario, involving more than 60 organisations, almost 1,000 participants and at a cost of £1.5m (Younge, 2005). In the US in 2005, TOPOFF 3, a major terrorism exercise sponsored by the Department of Homeland Security, involved 10,000 individuals, 275 organisations and cost \$16m. Such high costs constrain pre-crisis preparedness and ensure that use of exercises (especially full scale exercises) is not inevitable. For example, a report by the UK's National Audit Office (HC 36,

2002-3) on National Health Service preparedness found that:

- One-third of health authorities had not tested plans for chemical, biological and mass causality incidents;
- Four-fifths had not tested plans for radiological or nuclear incidents.

The usefulness of simulated and full-scale exercises is almost universally lauded. The other side of the coin, however, is that such exercises cannot be conducted in every public institution for every possible scenario.

Second, even when exercises are conducted, adjustments in policies, practices and behaviours are by no means inevitable. In essence, such fine tuning can be constrained by the sorts of forces mentioned earlier which are protective of the status quo. These include organisational 'sense-making' whereby recommendations for change become interpreted in ways that sit comfortably with the organisation but less comfortably with the needs of a collective planning exercise. It may also include lack of funding for lesson-drawing. Another possibility is a shared sense within an organisation that it is well prepared anyway, and further fine tuning isn't really necessary. In the aforementioned NHS example, one quarter of health authorities who had tested their incident plans still considered themselves to be not well prepared for radiological/nuclear incidents (HC 36, 2002-3). A high profile example of the failure of lesson-drawing lies with the Hurricane Pam exercise for New Orleans in 2004. Levees continued to be considered suitable, even although they could only withstand a Category Three hurricane (Katrina would prove to be Category Four), and follow up planning activities such as how to provide shelter for thousands of displaced individuals, suffered because of lack of funds.

Third and finally, crises do not respect organisational training and planning. By their very nature, crises are chaotic, unpredictable, threatening, and do not provide crisis managers with the time or the information they would ideally like before making decisions. Indeed, the nature of modern crises are becoming increasingly inconceivable in a world of globalisation, hyperterrorism, mutating viruses and so on (Lagadec and Carli, 2005). To conceive of 'ideal' preparedness is a paradox. How can we prepare for something if we do not know what we are preparing for? We certainly should not reject pre-crisis training and exercises, but as students of crisis management we should be aware of their limitations. For public institutions, giving the impression of crisis readiness is vital if they are to avoid charges of complacency. However, the symbolism of high level 'readiness' that comes with pre-crisis exercises, shouldn't necessarily be

equated with the same level of operational preparedness.

The changing world of pre-crisis planning

For many years, contingency planning was traditionally a marginal activity in terms of profile and practice within public sector organisations. Certainly, crisis preparedness did occur in many front-line sector-specific organisations in order to plan for rail crashes, air disasters and so on. However, for many decades in the post-war period, the context of contingency planning was that national threats were considered to be from 'external' aggressors, rather than 'internal' failures in critical infrastructures. As a consequence, contingency planning was dominated by a Cold War mentality and the view that preparations for conventional and nuclear war could 'double up' as preparations for chemical spills, urban riots and such like (Rockett, 1994; Stephens and Grant, 2001).

National reflections on the death throes of the Cold War and the subsequent new world order, did not need to reflect too deeply on where 'new' threats would emerge. From the mid-1980s onwards, spates of high profile disasters have ingrained themselves in the consciousness of political leaders and administrators. They provide a warning, especially in a modern world of rapid communications, that critical failures can resonate across nations (literally and or/symbolically) and remind us of our vulnerability: Chernobyl, Lockerbie, Exxon Valdez, Kings Cross, Zeebrugge Ferry, Piper Alpha, Valujet, Columbine, Space Shuttle Challenger, Space Shuttle Columbia and WACO to name but a few. Indeed, the nature of threats has now taken on more of a transnational character (Rosenthal et al. 2001). Many crises in one country can rapidly spill over to others in a 'World Risk Society' (Beck, 1999) of interconnections through air travel, electronic communications and transportation of goods. Such 'modern' threats include SARS, avian flu, BSE, foot and mouth and cross-national terrorism.

If the end of the Cold War shifted the policy agenda towards a world which made preparations for domestic-induced 'internal' crises a more salient issue, the agenda shifted again in the wake of 11 September 2001. Throughout the Western world, the terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center (followed in subsequent years by a steady flow of attacks in Madrid, London, Bali and elsewhere) are a harsh reminder to public institutions that the 'unthinkable' can happen and needs to be anticipated and prepared for. The destruction of New Orleans in 2005 by Hurricane Katrina added a further twist,

reminding us that the world's biggest super-power can be shattered by non-terrorist forces.

As a consequence of all these factors, contingency planning has become a much more relevant issue for public authorities. Some reforms have been accelerated while others have been built from scratch. Broadly speaking, we have seen four main types of pre-crisis planning reforms in recent years. A common theme is a classic response to crisis – a centralisation of powers within government ('t Hart et al. 1993) and a shift towards 'harder' policy tools, rather than leaving contingency planning to 'soft' discretion and convention.

First, public authorities have created new, peak bodies to focus on civil contingencies. Previously disparate contingency functions and powers have been amalgamated and/or subject to varying degrees of centralisation in new agencies or units. Examples include the US Department of Homeland Security and the UK's Civil Contingencies Secretariat.

Second, and related, many countries have reviewed their contingency arrangements and strengthened preparations through additional resources and detailed central requirements/guidance. Examples could be found in the work of the Swedish Emergency Management Agency, Emergency Management Australia, and the Directorate-General for Public Order and Safety (Netherlands).

Third, new legislation has placed legal requirements on some institutions for contingency planning. In the UK, for example, the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 places a requirement on Category 1 responders (such as emergency services and local authorities) to put in place crisis plans and arrangements for business continuity.

Fourth and finally, contingency planning has been built into many requirements for good governance and policy improvement, and is subject to audit. In the UK, for example, Best Value legislation requires that local authorities put in place arrangements for the continuous improvement of all local authority functions (including emergency planning). In effect, there have been some moves towards mainstreaming rather than marginalising crisis preparedness.

Conclusion

Boin and 't Hart (2003) identify conflicting tendencies running through the practice of crisis management i.e. between conservatism (leaning heavily towards the status quo and resistant to 'knee jerk' policy change) and reformism (a more progressive approach which favours change and learning from crisis experience). If we apply these stances to the theme of this paper, we can say that a conservative tendency in crisis prepared-

ness would involve playing down threats, adopting a 'can cope' outlook, and being resistant to investing scarce resources in drawing up plans and rehearsing for events which may never happen. This is compatible with the low level of preparedness-type organisational characteristics identified in Table 1. By contrast, a more reformist approach would recognise the real threats that crises can pose, recognise the real possibility that the organisation may be unable to cope, and show willingness to engage in all the sorts of preparations and planning that conservatives are more likely to resist. This is compatible with the characteristics of high level of preparedness-type organisations.

For crisis managers in 'high preparedness' organisations, their task is easier because they do not have to battle strongly against an organisational culture that 'buries its head in the sand'. This point aside, most crisis planners in public institutions have a very difficult task trying to convince political and bureaucratic elites to invest resources in planning and training for low probability events – and with no guarantees that the plans will 'work'. However, advancing the case for crisis preparedness is easiest when 'windows of opportunity' (Kingdon, 2003) are opened up by crisis itself. Success is far from guaranteed (Boin et al. 2005), but nevertheless there is no better time to engage in 'crisis' policy entrepreneurship than when organisational practices legitimacy are destabilised by a crisis itself.

To return to the title of this article, we would suggest that in a practical sense, high levels of crisis preparedness are not 'mission impossible', but they are certainly very difficult to achieve. Planners and crisis managers will always struggle against the fact that pre-planning will tend to be low on agendas, while crises themselves are not amenable to advance predictability. This struggle is compounded because pre-planning requires the advance cooperation of fragmented and often conflicting interests, while 'paper' preparedness exercises are often simpler and cheaper than active readiness through trial and simulations.

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