

A new approach

Patrick Lagadec interviews Marc Lerchs, head of a government taskforce looking at crisis management and rescue services, who outlines a ten-year project to prepare the Belgian public to be autonomous and more creative when faced with severe disruption

MARC LERCHS HAS JUST BEEN tasked by the Belgian Government to lead a force aimed at redrawing the contours of crisis management and rescue services in Belgium by 2022.

Patrick Lagadec (PL): *If you had to indicate the two main areas being spearheaded, which would these be?*

Marc Lerchs (ML): The first regards the fabric of local resilience. In a major crisis, it has been shown that people who weather an event and recover the best are those who are used to a strong community ethos, in areas of extremely active neighbourhood solidarity, helped by local rescue services that are fully prepared to make the most of emerging initiatives. Following on those key lessons of experience, we are giving ourselves ten years to prepare the Belgian public to be autonomous and creative in responding to severe disruptions. This is revolutionary, because it could be seen to imply that the state is handing over part of its sovereignty back to the public. Citizens are encouraged to support themselves and look after each other during the first few

ambulance stations across the country.

The goal is that the stakeholders really get to know their constituents, so that when a disaster strikes, they will know where to target relief immediately. For instance, we are finalising a plan to cope with long electrical blackout: everything is being planned in terms of streets and neighbourhoods, at a very local level.

But there is much more than the mere organisational and technical design. Post-crisis dynamics in complex, networked societies can no longer be managed as a top-down exercise. Crisis response organisations must be prepared to adopt a new culture of rescue, far from traditional simple command and control models.

Collective success

Sharing visions and efforts is a key to collective success. This implies that people in charge must promote the use of collective intelligence, and be prepared to shape the future with open minds.

The second line of defence involves how politicians manage crises and are prepared to lead in extremely turbulent times. Over

The Belgian Government hopes that by the end of this project, part of the population will be self-supporting in the first 72 hours after a major disaster

hours or days of a major disaster so that state resources can be focused on other priorities.

The ethos behind this notion of autonomy, which is evolving within the conceptual sphere of empowerment, means that there must be in-depth and constant proximity between citizens and their firefighters, police and medical teams, to name just a few. In order to achieve this, rescue services must be located in the very heart of society; there should be more – but smaller – stations and units positioned in a fine grid system throughout communities. This will mean a denser network, or much finer grid, of police, firefighters and

the past 20 years, we have come to live in a world where inventions and technology have developed so quickly that the inventors have forgotten to develop the lifestyle that fits in with these technological advances. Upcoming issues will be complex and interconnected, local and global. The inevitable result is many massive surprises! Navigating through crises and storms has become the norm – calm waters are the exception.

It is crucial that senior leaders meet regularly to reflect together, to share strategic visions, knowledge and feedback from experience. Even more: they must share and elaborate on

Marc Lerchs



Marc Lerchs is a security counsellor with the Belgian Ministry of Homeland Security

their doubts, questions and insights. Such meetings between leaders are essential to create confidence and to ensure that prevention and response are managed successfully. Here again, sharing is vital: no single person has the key to preventing or managing complex crises. Clearly this is revolutionary for our mindsets: the point is not just to have the best responses for each set of problems. For leaders, it is absolutely vital to start thinking outside the box. And more, to be prepared to be surprised. We could take this even further and say they must be prepared to accept that there is no box anymore.

Obviously, this global shift supposes a departure from basic situations in many countries, and capabilities would need to be upgraded seriously. How else do you expect to deal with a severe crisis, when everyone turns up in crisis centres without really knowing their role, where procedures are frozen, where pre-determined rescue plans are unable to adapt to what is actually happening, and with a leadership that is either non-existent or dramatically limited?

In Belgium, our policy-makers have addressed this challenge decisively, and some hallmarks appear. The initial step is to overcome fear: do not be scared or frozen, make the switch from denial and despair. Next, it is vital to define the core values you want to refer to and these must be carved in stone.

After this, you have to build your team with trusted, loyal people, who have common sense and who hail from diverse – and not necessarily institutional – backgrounds. There should not be too many experts and technocrats, there should be a good balance between male and female participants in order to enlarge perspectives and, of course, all good teams need an artist.

This team gives the head of government a space filled with intelligence and loyalty, allowing him or her to reflect and deliberate, to examine their intuition without the fear of mistakes. But, obviously, this type of 'rapid reflection force' would not prevent a leader from thinking and judging, from following their own intuition and making decisions.

PL: *If you had a message to deliver to the international authorities in charge of managing crises, what would you say?*

ML: Your best weapons against future crises are your own intelligence and the imagination of your rapid reflection team.

PL: *And what about possible surprises we might encounter in the near future?*

ML: We must be more creative in our capacity to anticipate. Most of the things that we anticipate in our contingency plans are at risk of failure in the event of a major disaster. We

From the unknown

Spearheaded by CRJ Editorial Advisory Board Member Dr Patrick Lagadec, this series is devoted to exploring the challenging issues characterised by 21st Century crises.

move to a telephone alert system? The phone system could crash in a large earthquake. We rely on mobile networks? They will break down. We post crisis information on the Internet? That could crash too. We send a courier? Roads may be destroyed. We plan to house refugees or survivors in a gym after a terrorist attack? Windows might be broken by the initial explosion and toxic gas could enter the building.

What use are Social Media in Emergency Management (#SMEM), the media, our communication systems, petrol pumps, cash dispensers, fridges or nuclear power plant cooling systems in an extended blackout?

With our goal of empowering people and encouraging self-reliance, we are hopeful that a part of the population will be self-supporting in the first 72 hours of a major disaster. It is not too hard to keep water, food, money, fuel, candles, a radio, a tent, sleeping bags, a first aid kit and a few sandbags at home... Nor is it difficult to arrange a rendezvous if an alert happens during the day when the family is dispersed.

Another example is telecommunications, the backbone to any response. We are currently talking to amateur radio enthusiasts. Should there be a blackout in an administrative region, we are planning to send one amateur radio operator to the police, one to the fire department and a third to the emergency medical response headquarters. Then we would put a highly-visible and easily identifiable radio car at each motorway exit, so people know they can go there to ask for assistance to be dispatched. These radio amateurs have solar and wind powered generators, and independent antenna relays, so they can be part of the solution.

And this is but one example among thousands of others. We have cyclists, pedestrians and horse riders, which could be used as couriers – before we get the good old messenger pigeons out of their cages...

Let's be ready to be surprised; let's develop collective intelligence, shared innovation, and faith in our the ability to face emerging challenges creatively.

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