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GOVERNING CRISES: ESTABLISHING STABILITY IN FLUIDITY

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Abstract. The global macro-environment is one in which crises are increasingly complex and transcend traditional borders and sectors. The conventional response to crises has been to manage them as extreme shocks to be overcome. In this crisis-management response, crises are seen as isolated events to be resolved. Yet this view of crises is insufficient for handling the intricate contemporary crises we experience today, because it does not fully capture how dynamic and intricately connected crises often are. This view also limits—perhaps even hinders—our understanding of crises, preventing us from predicting them, exhaustively coping with them, and learning from them. More-comprehensive and maybe more-accurate is an understanding of crises as unfolding emergent processes rather than as isolated events, and as processes that a broad set of stakeholders and organizations can coordinate, better manage, and adapt to. The concept of crisis governance provides this more-comprehensive understanding, and is the foundation of the Chair of Crisis Governance (CCG) at the University of Antwerp’s Faculty of Business and Economics, established in 2023. The CCG is a research center created to explore and develop new approaches for dealing with crises by combining this dynamic, evolving, process understanding of crises with the concept of governance, a concept traditionally associated with stability and predictability. Combining these two (arguably) contradictory concepts into one research program will allow the CCG to provide actionable knowledge, theory, and evidence along with new perspectives and solutions for effectively dealing with crises. By reassessing extant frameworks and developing new ones for governance, management, and decision-making, the CCG will help organizations prepare for, respond to, and learn from crises so that organizations can be more resilient, viable, and effective in the crises that, unfortunately, we must expect and be ready for.

Turbulent is a word often used to characterize our contemporary environment—one marked by the rapid and unpredictable changes, uncertainties, and disruptions that organizations and society has to deal with. For decades, researchers in the social sciences have used similar language to describe their contemporary environment. Peter Drucker argued more than half a century ago in 1969 that we were living in “the age of discontinuity,” with societal changes following each other much more rapidly than in previous times. Charles Perrow (1984) echoed this assessment: studying complex systems from a sociological perspective, he concluded that “accidents are very normal” and, consequently, unavoidable. German sociologist Ulrich Beck warned in his 1992 book *Risk Society* that the complexity of new risks was impacting modern society, a challenge he coined the “New Modernity.”

The same message was given by British sociologist Anthony Giddens in his *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990). All of these scholars and the work of many others has profoundly influenced how we deal with disasters, discontinuity, emergencies, risks, and crises.

Our recent experiences with a pandemic, extreme temperatures, forest fires, rising energy prices, inflation, and a changed global geo-political climate all indicate that not only are crises becoming more frequent, they are becoming more complex as well. Moreover, crises are not contained within the borders of a province, region, or country, nor are they independent from one another. In these interdependent and overlapping crises, businesses, governments, and emergency services all need to collaborate with citizens and other stakeholders beyond their geographical and organizational borders—a challenging task even in ordinary circumstances. Effectively coordinating to resolve crises requires more than just collaboration among traditional emergency and disaster relief services; it requires collaboration and cooperation among a broad network of partners. While hope, optimism, and spiritual guidance can provide solace and comfort to help us get through difficult times, more is needed to effectively deal with environmental dynamics that are complex, evolve rapidly, trigger feedback effects, and bring overlapping impacts that increase uncertainty. These uncertainties in unprecedented circumstances can lead to unintended and unplanned consequences. All organizations—no matter what their purpose—need systems that enable them to adapt, adjust, and absorb shocks so that they can continue to perform well and achieve their objectives, even under life-threatening or extreme situations.

Bringing crisis and governance together

Many organizations claim that they know which risks are relevant to them and how to effectively handle these risks. Practitioners acknowledge that accidents are a normal and expected part of life, and that they clearly understand how to respond when something unexpected occurs. “Relevant,” “effective,” “normal,” and “expected,” though, are in the eyes of the beholder: each organization and practitioner has different definitions and understandings. To many public health officials, for example, the COVID-19 pandemic was not unexpected, yet for many in business and government it was a surprise. Similarly, what constitutes an effective response to a crisis varies dramatically as well. Harmonizing these subjective understandings of and responses to risk is neither necessary nor possible; what *is* possible, however, is to reach a shared understanding of what constitutes a crisis and to develop a shared approach for dealing with it.

Crises have traditionally been understood as singular, isolated, shocks in extreme situations that need to be absorbed or mitigated. To complement this understanding and provide an alternative to it, we introduce the crisis governance concept. This concept recognizes that crises are emergent processes, an understanding that can help organizations—both internally and in their interactions with other organizations—deal with these emergent processes. We sketch the first traits of such an understanding and approach here, traits that will be the foundation of a research program on crisis governance to advance our current

approaches to studying, managing, anticipating, and preventing crises and mitigating their aftermath. Crisis governance combines the—superficially contradictory—concepts of crisis and governance. We conceptually clarify each individual concept next, and then argue that their combination—crisis governance—is a concept better suited for dealing with the complexity, uncertainty, and turbulence of our contemporary environment.

Crisis

In Greek, *krisis* means separation, turning, or decision point. Its etymological descendent, the English word *crisis*, is much-less neutral, typically associated with difficulty, danger, threat, and uncertainty. In addition to these more-negative associations, a crisis is also seen as fluid, evolving, and dynamic—in other words, as temporal: A crisis comes, but eventually it will be overcome and fade away (Boin et al., 2005).

A crisis is also often conceived of as an event that puts at risk the safety and security (of a system) because it affects one or more vital functions and makes it impossible to maintain stability using everyday (i.e., non-crisis) resources, values and norms, structures, and processes (Pearson & Clair, 1998). Since a crisis is disruptive, and the stakes of its outcomes for those involved are high, its effects are often less than temporal. Crises frequently lead to structural or lasting change, either as a result of steps taken to mitigate the crisis itself or because of adaptations and reforms made in response to it (Ansell et al., 2021). Understanding the risks, the exceptional demands, and the systemic changes brought about by a crisis is crucial for effectively managing crises, which explains why crisis management has been defined as an organization's "ability to effectively absorb, develop situation-specific responses to, and ultimately engage in transformative activities to capitalize on disruptive surprises that potentially threaten organization survival" (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011, p. 244). Crisis management has also been defined as the collective effects of activities designed to minimize the impact of a crisis (Boin et al., 2013).

Although the focus in crisis management is on responses aimed at resolving a crisis, seen as an event or an isolated situation ("situation-specific"), from another view a crisis is an unfolding emergent *process* (Turner, 1976). The process view of crisis is more-dynamic and its understanding more-nuanced: in this view, a crisis is a series of events, each with its own distinct characteristics and challenges. As Figure 1 shows, a crisis evolves over time, and includes its own "genealogy of crises that may be potentially tracked long before the acute phase, which is the ultimate moment of a continuous cumulative process of organizational failures" (Roux-Dufort, 2016, p. 27). Unlike a crisis-as-isolated-event that requires immediate attention to resolve it (and then forget about it), a crisis-as-process is one that needs continuous attention, from preparing for it to watching for early-warning signals to investing in long-term recovery and adapting to changed outcomes (Brugghemans et al., 2021). In this longer-term view, crises are seen as periods of disturbance in which those affected exert collective pressure, in which daily routines are interrupted, and in which core values and structures of a social system are put at risk in unpredictable and sometimes unimaginable ways (Rosenthal, Charles, & 't Hart, 1989).

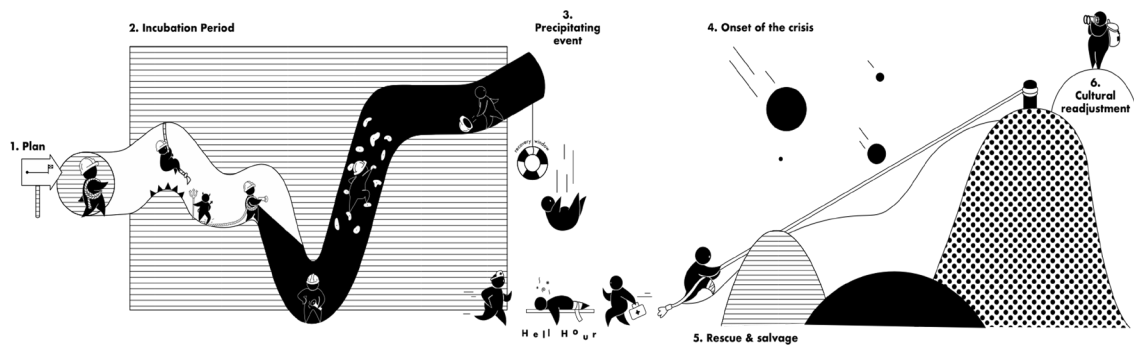


Figure 1. How do crises unfold?
(Based on Turner, 1976 – Illustration: Kaatje Marynissen (2019))

Understandably, studies focused on investigating the causes of crises and analyzing the effectiveness of crisis management (Boin et al., 2018) lead to the predominant findings we have in the literature. These findings explain the factors that led to a crisis, how those causes are related, and whether the crisis was effectively handled. Without fully accounting for the processes involved, however, such conclusions can be inadequate and can fail to reveal temporal ordering or explain how crises unfold within and between organizations. Consequently, conclusions based on a narrow understanding of crises can provide faulty guidance on how to effectively manage crises as they incubate or develop over time (Turner, 1976). As Figure 1 illustrates, organizations always deviate from the initial (risk management) plan because such plans are based on linear processes that, after all, must be executed by non-linear thinking people. As a result, we exceed safety margins - leading to a precipitating event that, if not addressed quickly or adequately, leads to the “hell hour” and subsequently the onset of the crisis, forcing the organization to focus on rescue and salvage. Once the crisis is contained, Turner (1976) recommends a thorough cultural readjustment to evaluate, adjust, and implement weaknesses, as well as strengths, of the organization.

We argue that to effectively deal with a crisis, we need to understand how and why it unfolds over time. An approach that accounts for the actions of organizations and individuals, the categories of events that lead to a crisis, and how these actions and categories progress over time (cf. Van de Ven, 1992) promises significant value. Shifting our approach in such a way can help us better understand how crises occur and how they can be prevented and mitigated in the future.

Governance

Governance as conceived in the management and organization literatures is not limited to the government and the state (Stoker, 1998; Milward & Provan, 2000); it also extends to include the governance structures organizations choose to adopt (Albers et al., 2016; Provan & Kenis, 2008). Included in the concept of governance are decisions about which structures of authority and collaboration should be formed to enable or constrain decisions and actions, as needed (Ostrom, 1990; Williamson, 1996; see also Thihanyi et al., 2014). In

this view, governance is intentionally created and designed, stable and reliable, and, when properly organized, leads to predictability and accountability.

Often conflated, management and governance are subtly but importantly different. Management is concerned with day-to-day operations and executing organizational tasks, such as setting goals, planning, organizing resources, directing activities, and controlling processes to efficiently and effectively achieve objectives (Robbins & Coulter, 2020). Governance, on the other hand, is concerned with the overall structure, policies, and processes that guide decision-making and behavior within an organization or a system. Governance thus establishes the framework that legitimates management and allows for its operations, processes, and tasks to take place. As an underlying concept, governance not only influences which relationships stakeholders enter into and how they approach those relationships, it also shapes the rules, norms, structures, and processes that guide collaboration, coordination, and control. Collaboration refers to helping others implement tasks and activities, while coordination is jointly determining common goals so that people or groups are organized in such a way that they can collaborate properly and well (Castañer & Oliveira, 2020; Okhuysen & Bechky, 2009). Control is brought about by using mechanisms to guide conduct and ensure that a system's components lead to both predictability and a desired state or outcome (Leifer & Mills, 1996). Governance therefore helps an organization carry out the purpose for which it was created and is maintained.

The need for crisis governance

Crisis governance brings together crisis—characterized by uncertainty, dynamics, and temporality—and governance—characterized by reliability, stability, and inter-temporality. Extending beyond governance and its conventional mechanisms, crisis governance addresses the unique challenges of crises—situations that are complex, turbulent, highly uncertain, rapidly changing, and that significantly threaten organizational stability and viability. Establishing crisis governance necessitates developing structures and processes so that organizations can respond to unforeseen crises swiftly and effectively. It is precisely because crises are emergent, complex, and hard to grasp, and because they have a wide scope and sometimes wider repercussions, that the stable, predictable, inter-temporal construct of crisis governance is needed. Crisis governance helps organizations reach out to a wide range of stakeholders, from board members and executives to shareholders and regulatory bodies, which gives organizations greater resources and perspectives for enacting and handling multiple sets of preventive, managerial, and reactive measures that alternate, evolve, and potentially intersect. This is a broader view on dealing with crises than merely mitigating and recovering from the impact of a crisis.

Synergistically combining the uncertainty, dynamics, and threats of crisis with the stability, predictability, and reliability of governance is challenging. Some might even argue that the effects of such a synergy is only possible in theory. Organizational literature abounds with theories promoting the benefits to organizations of concepts that are incompatible, sometimes even contradictory: cooperation and competition (Kostis et al., 2024),

exploration and exploitation (Lavie et al., 2010), efficiency and responsiveness (Devinney et al., 2000), efficiency and inclusiveness (Henry et al., 2022), to name a few. What all these theories suffer from, however, are the practical problems of achieving the ambidexterity (the “two-handedness”) necessary to simultaneously juggle contradictory demands or principles (Turner et al., 2013). For crisis governance to improve our ability to cope with crises entails embracing the stability-dynamics continuum.

For crisis governance to yield the benefits we believe it can requires understanding how organizations can develop, govern, and adapt to unexpected, unfolding, and complex situations in fluctuating environments without losing focus. The need to “develop, govern, and adapt” demands a governance framework, which will allow organizations to effectively manage, make responsible decisions, and achieve organizational goals while at the same time preparing for, anticipating, intervening during, and learning from crises.

Advancing understanding of governing crises

The CCG will help crisis governance succeed by furthering a novel understanding of crises. This will be done by answering fundamental questions about crises and their origins, including exploring the object (What is governed?), its agents (Who governs, and who is governed?), and its situation as embedded in a context (What crisis, and how did it unfold?). Viewing a crisis as a sequence of events (a process) rather than as an event will trigger the adoption of a mode of governance that organizations can use to swiftly and effectively prevent or respond to it, ensuring as well that the organizational responses will be both consistent and adaptively responsive to the nature and the development of the crisis sequence as it unfolds. In other words, the work of the CCG will help organizations to cognitively transition their approach and response to a crisis, helping them adapt their activities, behaviors, and understanding of and response to events over time and evaluate and process these cognitive transitions to measure their effectiveness. The process view of a crisis recognizes that each sequence has its corresponding governance object, agents, and situation, all of which are embedded in a larger environment and which cascade upward to the central overarching questions from which all other questions are derived: What governance arrangement can “dynamically aggregate” the actions of an organization’s agents such that they are directed—over time—to achieving organizational goals? And how can this arrangement help organizations better deal with a crisis?

Seeing a crisis as a process within a fitting governance arrangement, and recognizing the corresponding questions that need to be answered and problems that need to be solved, will help us move beyond an organization-level examination of what causes crises and what determines whether crisis management efforts will be effective (Boin et al., 2016) to understanding crisis management from a governance perspective that affects both intraorganizational operations as well as interorganizational ones (Laegreid & Rykkja, 2023). Once viewed as an organization-specific function, crisis management can evolve into crisis governance—a dynamic, multifaceted process involving multiple individuals and organizations. This new understanding of governance as encompassing a wider network of

agents challenges conventional understandings of action, and therefore calls for governance mechanisms that are more adaptive and holistic.

Because of the boundaries of current theories of crisis management and governance (Laegreid & Rykkja, 2023) and because of our specific positioning in the field of management and organization studies, we can bring about this adaptive and holistic approach by following four elements of guidance:

- (1) Bringing together various fields of study, particularly crisis, management, and organization studies to foster interdisciplinary dialogue and collaboration. Linking these fields will cross-fertilize all of them: crisis studies will benefit from and be able to leverage knowledge, theorizing, and novel contexts from the management and organization fields, while management and organization studies will gain new perspectives by examining crises as contexts that challenge conventional organizational paradigms.
- (2) Establishing flexible and collaborative organizational networks will help us better navigate, address, and solve complex or wicked problem contexts. We will develop adaptive and resilient approaches that emphasize the important role that organizational networks play in organizing in crisis contexts.
- (3) Integrating governance and strategy approaches into the study of crisis management and organization will help us understand how governance structures and strategic decision-making influence crisis outcomes. Governance here refers to the mechanisms and processes through which decisions are made and implemented, and strategy here refers to formulating and executing plans to achieve organizational goals.
- (4) Actively reaching out to and engaging with practice—including public organizations, critical infrastructure providers, private organizations, and firms—will lead to new ideas and shared understandings. This engagement will significantly advance scholarly research efforts and lead to greater practical and societal impact. Collaborating among sectors will make it easier to transfer applied research and knowledge and will narrow the theory-practice gap. Organizations will benefit as well, because they will be better able to anticipate, prepare for, intervene during, and learn from crises.

Conclusion

Dealing with crises requires flexibility, agility, and judgment. It also occasionally requires reinterpreting, modifying, or revising rules, roles, and procedures as events unfold. Our concept of crisis governance promises to allow for this. As a comprehensive approach for managing and responding to crises, it effectively balances the inherent uncertainty, dynamism, and temporality of crises while also providing stability, predictability, and

reliability (i.e., governance) for organizations. To implement crisis governance and navigate the complexities of modern crises requires developing, implementing, and adapting governance within and between organizations. Because crises are interconnected and extend beyond traditional borders and sectors, they demand that a wide group of stakeholders—including emergency services, governments, businesses, and citizens—collaboratively adapt and respond.

Crisis governance thus provides a framework to support management and decision-making and helps organizations and stakeholders anticipate, prepare for, and intervene during crises, and adapt and change to the new reality that follows. Not only will crisis governance help organizations achieve their goals, it will also help many organizations meet the conflicting demands they face when managing unpredictable crises and their uncertain outcomes. Because crises are dynamic, evolving processes rather than isolated events, they require continuous attention and adaptation. The Chair of Crisis Governance is designed to provide research insights into how crisis governance can predict and explain crisis outcomes—helping organizations anticipate, cope with, and learn from these crises and offering them tools to increase their resilience, viability, and effectiveness.

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