Lectio praecursoria

Reimagining crisis management: Preparedness imagination in an era of chronic socio-ecological crises

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About

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On a crisp spring morning, we had gathered in a large conference room at the Helsinki-Vantaa Airport. Officials from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, municipalities, the rescue services, and different research institutions were present. We were handed a paper that explained the situation: there is a suspected case of pneumonic plague at the airport.

A lively discussion ensued. Multiple conversations were taking place at the same time, and I tried my best to keep up with at least some of them.

"How do you inform the airport staff?" I heard someone asking. Soon, airplane disinfection was discussed in detail. Then, an expert reminded us that the case is still not confirmed by laboratory tests. "We have to act before we know!" someone else protested immediately. Then, I heard some people discuss the responsible organisation for the isolation of passengers. But which passengers should be considered to be exposed to the plague? Someone mentioned a threat assessment tool that could be of help.

Despite the very *real* tension that had built up in the room, it was not a real crisis situation. What I just described, was the very first simulation exercise that I attended. The exercise took place in 2018, before the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, as you all know, there is no shortage of real crises in current times. Recently, we have had the pandemic: a health threat that quickly affected the whole society. Then, two years ago, Russia started a full-scale war in Ukraine. It was followed by an energy crisis in Europe and soaring inflation. Global supply chains have been disrupted since the pandemic, and the war has worsened the global food crisis. Geopolitical tensions are high.

At the same time, there is a growing awareness of the different human-induced ecological crises, such as biodiversity loss and climate change. Last year, records were broken for ocean heat, sea level rise, Antarctic Sea ice loss and glacier retreat. There is more human-made mass in the world than biomass. Nanoplastics are found everywhere, even in our blood veins. Species are disappearing at a record rate. And, of course, ecosystem destruction and biodiversity loss are also making pandemics more likely.

It seems that there are multiple systemic crises that often interact and even amplify each other. In this light, it is not surprising that Collins English Dictionary declared permacrisis as the word of the year in 2022. Permacrisis is "an extended period of instability and insecurity."

This is what the Anthropocene looks like. In other words, we have entered an era of chronic socio-ecological crises. We live in an epoch in which human activity is the dominant cause of changes in Earth's land, oceans and atmosphere. Socio-ecological crises are resulting from human activity - or social systems - that exceed planetary boundaries. Planetary boundaries are the environmental limits within which humanity could safely exist. Such boundaries are, for example, the atmospheric CO2 concentration, ocean acidification, freshwater use, and land system change. Socio-ecological crises reveal that there are fundamental flaws in societal structures – in the way we move, eat, and dwell.

There arises the particular challenge of our times – and the topic of my thesis: How to cope with the already-induced crises while also finding a sustainable path regarding the long-term future? Or how to navigate all these short- and long-term crises at the same time? In my thesis, I studied Finnish public authorities' approach to these issues. I explored what their crisis preparedness *is* and what it *ought to be* in such an era of chronic socio-ecological crises.

From the point of view of the authorities, we are in a situation in which historical templates and

strategies for managing socio-ecological challenges are becoming increasingly insufficient. The practices of crisis management have traditionally concentrated on crises that have a clear, sudden beginning and a clear ending, after which a return to 'normalcy' is made. Now, chronic socio-ecological crises can continue to deplete societies' capacities over time, and they further constrain responses to the next crisis. Furthermore, the 'normal' that is supposed to be established after a crisis has often contributed to the crisis in the first place.

Furthermore, what is assumed as 'normal' is changing. The warming climate changes the incidence rate of storms. And when some ecological tipping points are reached, there will be previously unforeseen dynamics. Tipping points are points-of-no-return, like changes in ocean currents. In such a context, learning from past crises is not enough. There is a need to reorganise the way authorities prepare for the future.

The empirical material for this qualitative study was collected among Finnish public authorities and experts. Therefore, the thesis forms a case study of the Finnish comprehensive security model. The model is the official guideline for preparedness activities in different sectors. In Finland, all public authorities – or security actors, as the policy documents would say – are legally required to prepare to perform their tasks in all conditions, including crises. In the Finnish policy documents, the aim of preparedness is said to be 1) to prevent disruptions, 2) to prepare for a response and 3) to plan the recovery process. In essence, preparedness aims to build capacities to manage future crises – or, at best, to prevent crises altogether.

When authorities prepare, they make risk assessments and preparedness plans. They might maintain stocks of essential supplies, like medicines or grain. In addition, authorities organise simulation exercises in which they test their procedures – like the Helsinki-Vantaa airport exercise.

Despite the gloomy character of my research topic, I was actually drawn towards it because of my personal interest in imagination and play. I became interested in how bureaucratic institutions that are based on routine operations seem to invite officers to imagine what could go wrong and what they would do about it.

In essence, preparedness is a future-oriented task. Although scenario-based simulation exercises are the clearest example of it, the rest of preparedness efforts are also based on some ways of imagining or making sense of possible futures. I decided to approach preparedness activities by investigating something called preparedness imagination. The concept was proposed by Heino et al. who studied Finnish security policy documents. Preparedness imagination refers to authorities' ability to explore ideas about threats and crises, especially those that are not apparent in an operational environment. The focus is not on individuals' minds but on social practices.

With the concept of preparedness imagination, my aim was to contribute to the multidisciplinary field of crisis research. More specifically, my research contributes to literature on sense-making and detection of emerging crises. Sense-making is one of the critical crisis management tasks, like communication to the public or coordination of response efforts. Sense-making refers to the collecting and processing of information that helps authorities to detect an emerging crisis and to understand the significance of what is going on. By studying preparedness imagination, I shed light on the conditions that shape how authorities make sense of future crises.

First, my goal was to know if the current preparedness imagination is up-to-date – considering the current epoch. I wanted to know what factors prevent authorities from recognising socio-ecological crises. Second, my goal was to suggest ways to broaden the scope of preparedness imagination to better address chronic socio-ecological crises.

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The empirical material of the study made it possible to analyse Finnish authorities' preparedness imagination in multiple domains and at different administrative levels: First, I analysed the national security and preparedness policy documents. Second, I studied a national expert institute and ministry regarding their preparedness for one specific socio-ecological crisis, a pandemic. Third, I analysed a large corpus of expert interviews on Finnish preparedness. The experts represented various sectors, including environmental experts, but also more conventional security actors. Lastly, I took part in designing a new kind of simulation exercise for municipal policymakers and experts. The exercise, the so-called Policy Operations Room, is an on-going design experiment – and I will return to it later.

In practice, I studied authorities' preparedness imagination in these different contexts by observing the epistemic work that they do regarding three aspects: 1) how they construct their operational environment, 2) who they consider to be the appropriate security actors, and 3) what they consider as adequate preparedness.

As a result, my thesis revealed a set of tensions that compromise the current preparedness imagination of Finnish authorities. These tensions impact how authorities make sense of socio-ecological crises: There is an unavoidable tension between imagined crises and 'real' crises, as crises never turn out as expected. This speaks to a well-known dilemma between the need to *anticipate* and, on the other hand, to maintain *flexibility*. There is a tension between short-term and long-term time horizons in preparedness activities. Also, a tension between so-called hard and soft security actors is found, as well as tensions between the operational and strategic levels of preparedness, and between climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts. In the realm of simulation exercises, a further tension exists between exercises that seek to routinise response and exercises that allow participants to explore uncertainty.

Because of the tensions, many of the long-term, cross-sectoral, and cascading aspects of socio-ecological threats are not being considered properly. What results from this is something I call an *illusion of control*. Uncertainty is tamed, and there is a false sense of security. Authorities' focus is often on preparing for direct and local socio-ecological crises, like storms and floods. Indirect, structural and long-term impacts of environmental change are neglected. By pointing out this illusion of control, I wanted to highlight the limitations of traditional crisis detection and sense-making. They tend to focus on well-known risks and fail to account for the interconnections between different threats. Since global environmental changes are accelerating and the predictability of the future is decreasing, preparing for the future could be done with a more imaginative and inclusive approach to crisis management. The point is not to better predict the future but to rather learn how to better improvise in the face of increasing uncertainty and complexity.

In the thesis, therefore, I posit several policy recommendations for broadening the scope of authorities' preparedness imagination. For example, efforts could be taken to further develop generic planning – non-threat-specific planning that allows for flexibility in new situations. Yet, historical analogies and assumptions that form the basis of such planning, need to be carefully evaluated. It is also necessary to develop the current collaboration practices. Scenarios that guide preparedness efforts should be devised and explored in a multidisciplinary and cross-sectoral manner. It is critical to better analyse the systemic aspects of crises. In order to do this, using truly comprehensive policy advice and broad-based expertise would be necessary. Regarding the Finnish comprehensive security model: Knowledge of environmental change is still not properly integrated into the model, or into security work in general.

Also, crisis management's time frame needs to be extended. Specifically, chronic crises deserve

special attention in today's world. During COVID-19, it became clear that some planned responses only work for a particular phase of a crisis. Preparedness should include analysis of how urgent decisions affect the long-term capacity of critical systems to deal with future crises. Also, I present a specific type of simulation exercise for policymakers and experts. The so-called Policy Operations Room is an exercise that works as a time-machine that forces the participants to experience the long-term consequences of their urgent decisions. These kinds of exercises could help authorities in exploring uncertainty and in practising improvisation.

Let's finish by briefly returning to the exercise I described in the beginning. The airport exercise ended up being quite a typical one: It was an exercise in which authorities built routine responses. They tested their established protocols designed for such occasions. I cannot help but wonder how the COVID-19 pandemic would have been received at the airport if this exercise had been different. What would have happened if there had been an ecologist or an anthropologist as part of the team who designed it? What if the participants had been asked to imagine a situation where ten airplanes of exposed people – instead of one person – entered the airport? What if someone had asked if the existing protocol is truly flexible enough?

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