

A very brief comment on the GADRI statement on COVID-19 -Lessons from Disaster Research

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"Tell me, my man. Which is the quickest way to go to Dublin?"

"Well, to begin with, Sir, I wouldn't start from here."

Title: *COVID-19 – Lessons from disaster research*

This is good: short, pertinent and to the point.

"... this global pandemic has been widely anticipated and foretold. Experts over many years forecast a pandemic with scale of illness, swiftness of spread, scarcity of critical medical resources and profound impact on society such as we are now experiencing. Current response efforts and decision-making are benefiting from previous pandemic and disaster research. Disaster research provides an essential science foundation for effective decision making before, during and after a crisis strikes."

The planning scenario has been compiled for at least 12 years. What is striking about the progress of the Covid-19 pandemic is the lack of input at many official levels of disaster specialists, risk managers and emergency planners. These fields are dominated by everyone from epidemiologists to economists, who have no specific expertise in managing disasters as disasters.

"...much of this knowledge did not translate into adequate preparedness. This is part of a larger phenomenon that experts have identified as "planning for the last disaster." We often invest in getting ready for the last disaster with a fading sense of urgency as time passes. Stockpiling of resources and redundancy in capacity is seen as wasteful and is eliminated rather than being recognized as preparedness for inevitable extreme weather, geophysical, epidemic or other hazards. Discounting future impacts over current circumstances may be characteristically human, but this myopia based on short-term, political or economic benefits is particularly common among persons and entities making decisions in the public-political arena who, moreover, don't bear the brunt of their decisions. We know from past studies that actions taken in advance to prepare for known risks consistently result in avoided losses many times greater than the cost."

Governments knew this so the real question is why was preparedness so badly neglected? In a world in which austerity has achieved massive transfers of wealth from the poor to the rich, the answer is very clear. Health and welfare services have been reduced and privatised. The ideology that led to these changes militates against emergency preparedness. The confirmation of this can be seen in the economics of Covid-19: economists confirm that they are a disaster for the majority and a huge opportunity for enrichment for the wealthy. Pandemics do provide business opportunities, above all for those who command the mobility of capital. Any failure to acknowledge this should be regarded as naivety. Governments did not "forget" to stockpile, plan and prepare: they took the decision not to do so. There is abundant evidence to confirm this observation: see for example, the UK National Register of Civil Risks. For a decade, pandemics were top of the list among 94 risks the country faces, and yet when the inevitable happened, the UK was patently unprepared.

"...failure to prepare most impacts those who are marginalized and disenfranchised—the poor, the sick, minorities, immigrants, refugees, the uninsured and children. For nations where social safety nets are frayed or non-existent, residents will depend on financial support and rescue packages from their government. Without coping and recovery mechanisms, resort is to reactive ad-hoc emergency spending rather than investments in community resilience that would avoid hardship in the first place."

We now see the inversion (temporarily?) of ideology in expansion of welfare and support for health systems. Undoubtedly too little, too late to save many lives and livelihoods, but a striking reversal nonetheless.

In a world increasingly dominated by defensive "identity politics" solidarity is fast withering on the vine. We are seeing the subversion of emergency response (Hungary) and negligence by demagogic leaders (Brazil, USA). It is increasingly clear that transparency, accountability and democracy are necessary conditions for disaster risk reduction and that point needs to be emphasised.

"...abiding by core principles of risk communication can save lives. Decades of research have established best practices for effective communications in a disaster. These include messages tailored to specific audiences from trusted sources on what to do and how to do it, especially for more vulnerable groups less likely to receive information through traditional channels. Many of these core principles are currently being violated. This must stop, as lives are being lost. We need to have effective risk communication."

Decades of research have not been able to tackle the radical changes of the last ten years. We now have an information battle and an "infodemic". The UN has acknowledged this. False and misleading information are decisively out of control with potentially catastrophic consequences. This leads to the destruction of the mobile telephone equipment that emergency services depend upon, under the assumption that it causes viruses. Opposition to vaccination may be in retreat but its consequences are now even more serious than before in terms of the prevention of epidemics. Conspiracy theories are the elephant in the room. They may be ridiculous, but they can be extremely harmful. It is not merely a question of providing good scientific information. That strategy has failed to curb them. The question now is how to use reliable information to combat them effectively.

"...transparency, situational awareness and recovery planning are essential. Only when we truly understand the risk and most effective responses can we all contribute to the solution. Many fields of science rely on global and open exchange of data. A continuing stream of ambiguous and incomplete messages erodes public confidence and the ability to effectively manage the disaster. While the current priority is rightly focused on preventing the spread of COVID-19, responding to the needs of those infected and addressing the severe economic dislocations, it is also important to begin planning for recovery. As early as possible, a longer-term vision of the impact, recovery planning and endgame are needed so that people and businesses can plan, act and recover."

We are dealing with decades of the ramping up of competitiveness in science and scholarship. The incessant ranking of institutions is one illustration of this. To call very suddenly for cooperation when prestige, funding and jobs depend on being able to beat one's competitors is an absurdity. The funding shortfall caused by the cessation or mutation of activities will be met by competing even more energetically than before. It has already started to happen, for example in the university in which I work.

"...extreme events evoke remarkable acts of altruism but also can bring about a disturbing lack of humanity. It is important to celebrate positive actions, including mutual support for friends and strangers in need. It is just as crucial that we remain watchful for abuse and wrongdoing at all levels of society and take action to confront inappropriate behaviour."

It is therefore time to re-evaluate Alan Barton's concept of the post-disaster 'therapeutic community'. Abuse and wrong-doing occur within the context of national and international situations. The Covid-19 pandemic is a golden opportunity for organised crime. In places like Italy and Colombia it has taken over some of the role of the state in providing employment and enhanced welfare. Inappropriate behaviour starts with political leaders (Trump, Bolsonaro, Orbán) and can be capillary. Factionalism rather than unity is the root problem.

"...as our global community struggles with the pandemic, we must also continue to be prepared for flooding, wildfires, hurricanes, tornadoes and other natural hazards, and not lose sight of the long-term issue of climate change. Moreover, COVID-19 requires that we adapt some established emergency management practices, like planning for emergency evacuation shelters."

Emergency planning needs to move from a simplistic basis to confronting the true complexity of emergencies. Cascading, concurrent, compound, interacting and interconnected risks are the way of the future. The field of emergency planning needs to become much more mature and to work out a way of getting itself taken much more seriously.

"Sound science is essential to good decisions. Disaster research finds that those who embrace evidence-based preparedness in their risk management practices suffer less and rebound quicker."

Evidence-based practice is inherently a good idea, but Covid-19 is a good illustration of just how incomplete, controversial, ambiguous and liable to misinterpretation evidence actually is.

Conclusion: The GADRI umbrella could be a powerful tool to promote good practice, but this needs to take account of (a) the context of the modern world - e.g. factionalism, identity politics, information revolutions, the consequences of 'infodemics', austerity, etc. - and (b) the challenge of providing real solutions based on workable analyses of existing complexity. Although the message can be depoliticised to an extent in order to make it appear impartial, there are now distinct limits to how much this can be done.