



Innovations in disaster management

In December 2021, the Crisis Response Journal hosted a public webinar to explore current endeavours to strengthen disaster resilience links between all sectors and stakeholders, writes **Nadine Sulkowski**

The webinar was held on behalf of the Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education Project, Building Universities in Leading Disaster Resilience (BUiLD), and particular focus was given to showcasing multi-agency and multi-stakeholder collaborations aimed at bridging the gap between academia and practice in crisis and disaster management.

Launched in 2019, the BUiLD project is committed to devising a comprehensive disaster resilience framework for Indonesia's higher education sector (*CRJ* 16:4). The framework is based on universities acting as catalysts for knowledge exchange between public, private and third sector organisations to drive scientifically and practice-informed innovation in disaster research and disaster management education.

Universities have strong networks within the public and private sectors and with local, regional and international communities. This places them in a unique position to

lead research and educational initiatives and to mobilise networks, resources and specialist expertise in the event of emergencies and during recovery. Led by the University of Gloucestershire, UK, the consortium brings together 11 higher education institutions from across Indonesia and Europe, three private consulting firms and a growing group of associated partners, including public sector agencies, disaster aid organisations and funding platforms within Indonesia as well as the Institute of Strategic Risk Management (ISRM).

The aspirations of the BUiLD project could not be timelier. The combined effects of the coronavirus pandemic, geopolitical factors and climate change have caused an unprecedented crisis. Dealing with multiple, longitudinal and complex threats and crises requires increasingly sophisticated and dynamic conceptual crisis and disaster management frameworks, diagnostics and solutions. Alongside this, new coping abilities,

pedagogic and leadership models are needed to prepare individuals, organisations and communities for disruption and uncertainty. As one of the most reputed academic thinkers in the field of crisis management and in a recent webinar convened by the ISRM, *CRJ* Advisory Panel Member Patrick Lagadec warned that 90 per cent of problems are no longer solvable with conventional solutions and that crisis and disaster management approaches must be fundamentally reimagined. Voices like his have sparked a critical debate about, and search for, those best placed to lead 21st century research, education and policymaking in this discipline.

Three issues tend to dominate such conversations. First, there is a general consensus that too much segregation between academics and practitioners hinders meaningful advancements of knowledge, innovations to practice and input into policymaking. Second, conceptualising hypercomplex crises and disasters requires imagination of the unknown as well as the most feared. It is intellectually and emotionally challenging. An inability and reluctance to foresee extreme situations therefore hinder intellectual debates and the furthering of discourse, let alone the fostering of new talent. Finally, unprecedented and dynamic situations raise questions to which even experts do not know the answers. New leadership models that promote cross-sector collaboration and embrace trial and error as necessary pathways to success are needed to overcome entrenched professional thinking, silo mentalities, fears of accepting gaps in knowledge and fears of failure.

Multi-agency dialogue

Overcoming these issues requires a strategic approach based on two fundamental principles. The success of such an endeavour will rest on the facilitation of a structured and ongoing multi-agency dialogue directed at the consolidation of expertise, resources and networks. Moreover, the advancement of scientific inquiry, education and knowledge transfer must be underpinned by the creation of an accepted body of crisis and disaster management knowledge that is thematically dissected and can provide a roadmap for future curriculum development, research, innovation and policymaking. Without either, future initiatives and collaborations in the pursuit of efforts in these areas will remain fragmented. Likewise, opportunities for the exploitation of scalable solutions are at risk of being lost.

Examples of multi-agency collaborations involving universities exist in various forms, at various levels and with varying impact. The *CRJ* webinar hosted in December brought together leading experts who shared European perspectives on how academic institutions can drive innovation in disaster management at a global scale through collaboration based on the two principles above.

The first panellist was Christian Resch (*CRJ* 12:3), Managing Director of Disaster Competence Network Austria (DCNA). As a co-operation platform of universities and research institutions, DCNA aims to promote knowledge transfer through research and education activities with stakeholders, and to provide scientific information to decision-makers in the event of a disaster. Resch talked about science literacy and explained the need for multi-agency collaboration in developing 21st century discourse for both science

communication and scientific communication. Science communication is the process of informing, educating and raising awareness of science-related topics among the general public and non-expert audiences, whereas scientific communication involves communicating new knowledge to scientists and technical experts. To be effective and meaningful across multiple stakeholders, both types of communication require a common language and appropriate information-sharing mechanisms. Common barriers to information sharing were identified, including differences in national approaches, legal frameworks or their absence, the availability and nature of IT infrastructure and suboptimal levels of co-operation between thematic experts.

Rut Erdelyi, the European Director of the Resilience Advisors Network (RAN), a *CRJ* Key Network Partner, and the Co-ordinator of the Horizon 2020 DRS01 Cluster, was the second panellist. RAN is

a group of over 100 international practitioners who form expert project teams. Advisors come from a broad range of related backgrounds and projects are typically designed to strengthen community, locality

Multi-agency and multi-stakeholder collaborations bridge the gap between academia and practice in crisis and disaster management

or infrastructure resilience from disasters and emergencies and may focus on the development of guidance materials, training, disaster drills or scientific research projects.

Erdelyi echoed the introductory argument for developing academic institutions as catalysts for bringing together science and resilience and called for linking research clusters to leverage the social capital of academia. She acknowledged political dimensions of DRR and the growing importance of Eastern and developing nations in influencing this dialogue, suggesting that the notion of capacity-building collaborations, typically led by Western nations, must be reimagined. Through her work with the Crisis Management Innovation Network Europe (CMINE) for Horizon 2020, Erdelyi connects RAN to a variety of other networks including academia (*CRJ* 16:4). Developed as part of an EU funded project, CMINE acts as an open, co-operative and inclusive knowledge exchange network for individuals, crisis management organisations, researchers, industry and policymakers across Europe and globally. CMINE provides a platform for focused discourse and co-operation, while trying to reduce repetition and fragmentation.

The third panellist was Joerg Szarzynski, Co-Head of Global Mountain Safeguard Research (Glomos) Programme and *CRJ* Advisory Panel Member. As a collaborative programme and a scientific alliance between the United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Security (UNU-EHS) and Italy-based Eurac Research, Glomos acts as an interface between the international mountain research community and the UN system. Szarzynski spoke about the UNU, which was founded in 1973 and is headquartered in Japan; its mission is to engage in collaborative research and education to support efforts to resolve the global problems of human



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survival, development and welfare that are the concern of the UN. UNU works with leading universities and research institutes in UN member states and functions as a bridge between the international academic community and the UN system. The institution contributes to capacity building and acts a gateway to systemic risk information.

Patrick Lagadec warns that 90 per cent of problems are no longer solvable with conventional solutions

UNU's network of institutes include, for example, the Institute for the Advanced Study of Sustainability in Tokyo, the International Institute for Global Health in Kuala Lumpur and the Institute for Water, Environment and Health in Hamilton, Canada. Key questions

raised by Szarzynski revolved around the best mechanisms for developing disaster resilience competencies and interconnected solutions for interconnected risk factors.

The final panellist, Louise Davidson (*CRJ* 15:3, 16:3 and *CRJ* blogs online), presented insights into her current doctoral research as an example of developing

intellectual capital and promoting knowledge transfer across multiple agencies. Her research is looking to better understand the way in which emergency responders from the police, fire and rescue and ambulance services work together. The aim is to enhance the common understanding of why challenges in emergency response persist and what intervention can be implemented to reduce the re-occurrence of those challenges in the future. Davidson is a researcher and doctoral student in Psychology at the University of Sussex and the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA), an executive agency sponsored by the Department of Health and Social Care. The agency is responsible for protecting communities from the effects of infectious diseases, chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear incidents and other health threats, and it provides intellectual, scientific and operational leadership at national and local level, as well as on the global stage. The co-project manager for BUiLD, Michael Fuller, who leads on the development of institutional disaster preparedness and response capability, is currently Chief of Staff at UKHSA.

Powerful networks

The webinar was moderated by Dr David Rubens, Executive Director of the ISRM, Member of *CRJ*'s Advisory Panel and also a member of the Advisory Board for BUiLD. The ISRM was established to create a global networking and knowledge exchange platform where practitioners, academics and policymakers can come together to share information, help progress and promote the underlying understanding and capabilities associated with strategic risk and crisis management, as well as to develop their own personal and professional networks. Through its training platform, the ISRM is able to embed new insights and frameworks emerging from practice into discipline-specific training and academic programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate level. Debating approaches towards bridging the gap between academia and practice is a frequent agenda item at international webinars facilitated by the ISRM.

In summary, the webinar brought together representatives of powerful national, regional and global networks whose initiatives are based on similar principles and a shared vision. Discussions led to three principal outcomes. First, they highlighted the need for knowledge sharing to inform an intellectual discourse that can advance the crisis and disaster management discipline to the level of capability needed to manage unprecedented threats and crises. Second, they have given direction for organising future multi-agency and multi-stakeholder collaborations in a way that is meaningful, built on synergistic working and aimed at exploiting the scalability of solutions. Finally, it has created a stepping stone towards the further consolidation of global expertise and collaboration efforts in crisis and disaster management. *CRJ*

- To listen to the *CRJ* webinar, visit crisis-response.com/listen
- For information about the BUiLD project, visit disasterresilience.eu
- BUiLD is funded by the Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education Programme: 610447-EPP-1-2019-1-UK-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP

Author



NADINE SULKOWSKI *F ISRM* is leading the Erasmus+ BUiLD Project and is a Senior Lecturer in the Gloucestershire Business School, UK

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