Is the world ready for global natural disasters?

By Victor Moreriane, APR   3 Apr 2020

It is highly critical for organisations to be crisis ready for local, national and sectoral crisis scenarios. But most importantly, organisations should be crisis ready for global events or catastrophes that may just be outside their span of control. Covid-19 is a point of reference. These are mainly high-risk disasters taking place in the natural environment, in particular climate change and disease outbreaks.

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These could be complex events in which the impact and risk on your organisation are extremely high while the source of the problem is external. In some cases, the source of the problem may not be known, solutions to the problem may be dependent on external forces, and day-to-day developments of the crisis may be influenced by external factors and stakeholders such as scientists, politicians, economists etc.

In such a scenario the organisation has no control of the external environment but has an obligation to act swiftly to protect is internal and immediate environment as well to protect employees and assets. Even if the organisation could be powerless a reactive approach could have devastating consequences.

What if the crisis progression changes after every 24 hours as in the case of Covid-19, rendering everyone incapable of properly comprehending the scale and impact of the disaster?

Lessons from Covid-19 - Be crisis ready!

Victor Moreriane, APR 27 Mar 2020

What if lives are lost at an alarming rate and the rules of engagement keep on changing as the situation evolves?
It is for that reason that leaders in organisations should start thinking deeply about risk mitigation plans for the natural environment. Natural disasters include drought conditions, storms and flooding, air pollution, disease outbreaks, medical emergencies, major injuries and loss of life.

The natural environment has over a few years been elevated to a strategic level by many organisations as well as major

corporations, scientists as well as activists.

The Global Risks Report 2019 reflections

The Global Risks Report 2019, 14th Edition (World Economic Forum) provided some interesting reflections.

The report, which assesses the risks facing the world, over a ten-year horizon, identified extreme weather and climate-change policy failures as the gravest threats. Failure of climate change mitigation and adaptation is also identified as a high risk.
However, Covid-19 has created awareness to the fact that we should not only concentrate on crisis scenarios with national or local implications - but should also consider global risk scenarios.

My second area of focus is disease outbreaks as we are seeing with Covid-19 pandemic. The annual report on global preparedness for health emergencies, compiled by the Global Preparedness Monitoring Board (GPMB) – titled "A World at Risk" paint a grim picture. Published in September 2019, the report urges political action to prepare for and mitigate the effects of global health emergencies in the wake of the Ebola epidemic in 2014-2016. The report warns that disease outbreaks has been on the rise for the past several decades and "a global health emergency looms large".

The report warns us that the world is not ready to mitigate such risks and urges global leader to invest in health emergency preparedness to improve health outcomes, build community trust and reduce poverty…

The report notes that "disease thrives in disorder" and failure to be crisis ready could be catastrophic. "The world is not prepared for a fast-moving, virulent respiratory pathogen pandemic."

Between 2011 and 2018, World Health Organisation (WHO) tracked 1,483 epidemic events in 172 countries. Epidemic-prone diseases such as influenza, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (Sars), Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (Mers), Ebola, Zika, Yellow Fever and others. These are harbingers of a new era of high-impact, potentially fast-spreading outbreaks that are more frequently detected and increasingly difficult to manage.

We were warned

Ironically, GPMB report had already warned about the real threat of a "rapidly moving, highly lethal pandemic of a respiratory pathogen" and warns that such an outbreak has a potential to kill 50 to 80 million people and wipe out nearly 5% of the world's economy. Such a pandemic, the report warns, could cause panic, destabilise national security and seriously impact the global economy and trade.

The poor are likely to suffer the most given that "lack of access to basic health services, clean water and sanitation. This will aggravate the spread of any infectious pathogen."

The report urges the world to proactively establish the systems and engagement needed to detect and control potential

disease outbreaks.

It is encouraging to note that the report escalates the act of being crisis ready as a "global public good" and further asserts that such acts should be inclusive and involve all key stakeholders including communities.

The world has changed, so should all organisations. With over 16,000 loss of lives around the world due to Covid-19, it is time for world leaders, business and public sector leaders to act swiftly.

ABOUT VICTOR MORERIANE, APR

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