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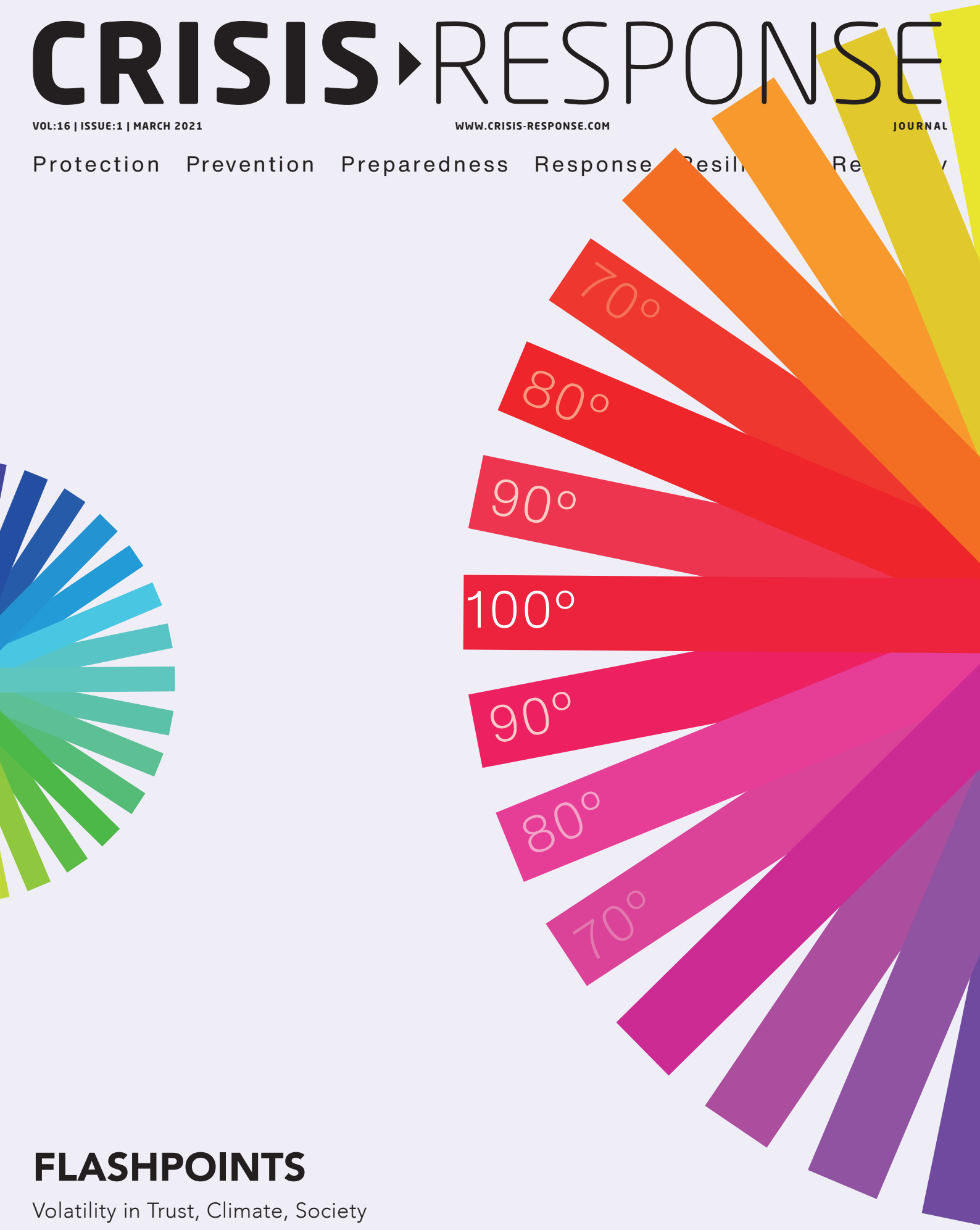

FLASHPOINTS

Volatility in Trust, Climate, Society

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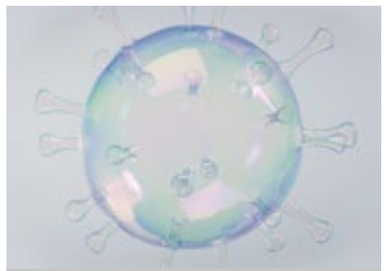

Armor Production | 123rf

Cover story: Rising temperatures
Cover image: Gracie Broom

comment

This edition's cover is a representation of the increasing volatility and temperature of opinions, discourse and beliefs. An 'addiction to outrage' is heating up (p76) and red hot rhetoric is dwarfing calmer, pragmatic and measured reasoning, like a rampant infection burning through communities and the world.

Our feature on society and polarisation unpicks this phenomenon, because to treat the symptoms, we must first understand the causes, recognising how a complex online ecosystem inflames predispositions to the point where they boil over into real world consequences.

But the cover is also a more literal depiction of climbing temperatures and a far less stable world environment. *CRJ* has covered climate issues for many years, homing in on how they affect frontline responders, societies and individuals. More than climate and rising temperatures – the tipping points to calamity are manifold and include biodiversity and ecosystems. Humanity's complex interaction with nature means we treat the world's resources as if they are an infinite commodity, squandering and polluting without considering the repercussions (p54 and p58).

The Covid-19 pandemic is far from over, but the small glimmers of hope have become more concrete. As Mami Mizutori of the UNDRR says on p50, we must seize the opportunity of crisis and: "Use it to understand better what is going on around us. We mustn't see a disaster or crisis purely as a threat... If we prevent better, the recovery process can be a wonderful opportunity, or it can be a catastrophe." Governments, the public, private and third sectors can apply valuable lessons and build back better. Part of this lies in succession planning, diversity, proactive leadership resilience and continuous improvement, as covered by our feature (from p14 onwards).

Because as we keep our feet firmly planted in the present, while remembering and drawing upon what has been learnt from the past, we have to keep both eyes firmly fixed on the horizon to anticipate the future, and make sure that in solving current problems, we do not unintentionally create new risks, or exacerbate latent threats.

Opportunity or catastrophe: Time to choose

Emily Hough talks to Mami Mizutori, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Disaster Risk Reduction at the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, about breaking disaster cycles, future risks and the need to focus on prevention

My first question to Mami Mizutori is what she hopes to achieve during her tenure in the UNDRR. She replies that having been in the job for three years – and with one year left – now is the time when she has been thinking about what has been achieved and what remains to be done: "It is not a cliché; leaving no one behind is very important to me."

Mizutori highlights the "Vicious cycle of disaster, respond, recover and then repeat," emphasising that lives and livelihoods are lost in this perpetual cycle. "What I really want to do with my colleagues is to mainstream prevention and make sure disaster risk reduction (DRR) is in place, that the risk is mitigated before the hazard changes into a disaster and to make sure that no one is left behind in this context," she emphasises, while acknowledging that this is a difficult task.

But perhaps we have reached a turning point. Covid-19 has undeniably been a horrendous global disaster. However, it has led to greater understanding of what a disaster is, and what happens when we fail to work on prevention, she explains.

"Covid-19 is a tragedy, but we need to look at making resilience into an opportunity. Up until now, people have thought of prevention as an added cost, a luxury only available to people who can afford it. That's just not true," Mizutori says. "The more we prevent, the more we invest in prevention, the more we can live safely and comfortably, so we need to change resilience into a commodity."

Understanding risk is not just about attempting to break down disaster complexity and interconnections in a granular way, it is more about understanding the risk that surrounds us, she continues. "Of course, it is complex, it is indeed interconnected, and it isn't going away," Mizutori explains. "But disaster is a combination of a hazard, exposure and vulnerability. When you have a level 5 cyclone in an area with no buildings or people, it is not a disaster; it only becomes a disaster when there is building exposure and the building is fragile, so it is damaged and people are killed. Then it's a disaster."

In some ways, she explains, Covid-19 is a textbook disaster. One risk leads to another – a tiny new virus replicates, then quickly crosses borders. "First, it was a public health disaster, then it became a socioeconomic disaster, with more than two million dead, five hundred million jobs affected and 100 million people forced back into extreme poverty. Children have lost education, we can't travel, we can't see our loved ones.

"Everybody is affected in one way or another – this is the systemic nature of risk and now everyone understands that."

According to Mizutori: "Bad risk governance is the biggest risk driver, as Covid-19 has demonstrated. Some countries have done better than others in terms of risk governance because they have a history of dealing with disease outbreaks such as SARS and MERS. They also had a plan and a strategy, as called for in the *Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction*."

She notes when formulating these strategies, it is vital that different stakeholders are involved, both at national and local level. "It is not solely the task of the government to form the strategy. Government has to be at the centre, because it has the convening power, but it has to bring in all the different actors." This includes the private sector, civil society and the media. "Most importantly, we believe it needs to bring in vulnerable people. We have to reflect their voices – women, children, indigenous people, refugees, the displaced, older persons, those living with a disability – they know what they need and what risks they are exposed to, so must be involved at local and central level to talk about how to make a DRR strategy and how to implement it together. That's how we move things forward for disaster risk governance."

I comment that sometimes plans may be in place, but they haven't been looked at for a while, or are adhered to slavishly even though they are not suitable for a particular eventuality. Mizutori responds: "We carried out a review of the national strategies during Covid last year and we found that most national strategies for DRR are based on a single hazard approach; they did not recognise the multi-hazard nature of our contemporary risk landscape and only looked at traditional risks.

Changing the paradigm

"This has to change. You can't have a plan that only faces what you have traditionally encountered in the past. At the Sendai World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in 2015, we said we must change the paradigm from managing disasters to managing risk, but most countries are still managing disaster. Or plans are made, but no funding is attached to them."

When existing national strategies for DRR were examined last year, most did not include biological hazards, despite the *Sendai Framework* incorporating such hazards, as well as disease outbreaks, into the global agreement. "The most important point is that disaster management and health management authorities need to work together, not in silos. If you are putting the sole responsibility for responding to Covid-19 on a health authority, it really can't look at all the repercussions and cascading impacts. Health authorities need to be embedded and work with the disaster management authority, which is usually situated under the highest level of political leadership," she emphasises. This provides a better overview and understanding of the impacts upon different sectors.

This ties in with an important and challenging aspect of contemporary times – urbanisation. "More than half the world's population lives in urban areas and this will be more than 60 per cent by 2050. However, the way that the world is becoming urbanised is not organised," according to Mizutori. "People are building whatever housing they can afford, wherever they can, often in highly vulnerable areas." In that process, the degradation of the environment continues apace, as well as the dangerous proximity of humans, livestock and natural wildlife – an incubator of dangerous pathogens, raising the spectre of future outbreaks of novel diseases.

"There are many aspects that drive this informal urbanisation and this is one of the biggest risk drivers," she explains. "Which is why the resilience of cities and communities is so important." The ten-year Making Cities Resilient Campaign ended last year, and a new campaign – MCR2030 – has taken the baton, examining how different risks connect in urban areas and, when they come together, how they can lead to so many

Left: *Bangladesh Cyclone Preparedness Programme Volunteers in Cox's Bazar*
Centre: *Wreckage on the shoreline of Tacloban, Philippines, after Typhoon Haiyan in 2013*
Right: *Coastal protection barriers in Bangladesh*

Images provided by UNDRR

different disasters and accelerate destruction of protective ecosystems and lead to biodiversity loss.

Poverty is one of the biggest vulnerabilities, illustrated by the so-called competition to vaccinate against Covid-19. "Because of the risk connectivity across the whole planet, we are only as strong as the weakest link," says Mizutori. "So we have to make sure that those in vulnerable countries have access to both the vaccine and the recovery dividend. This is much more than a moral obligation; it will come back on us if we don't. It is not enough to secure the vaccine for all your citizens and close your borders – that won't work."

And what of recovery? We need to seize the flaws that a disaster exposes and turn it into opportunity according to Mizutori. "We have built back better, but that means we have to build back transforming the way people will live and sometimes that is a painful process," she explains. "You might need to look at the configuration of population and new demands, whether previous sectors that were the money generators in the region are still the best ones and you might have to make tough choices. But that is seldom done. The easiest way governments put money into recovery is to rebuild, sometimes in regions that may not need that same infrastructure.

"Even if you do rebuild what is needed, you have to construct in a more resilient way; it is not good enough to rebuild the same road, the same bridge, the same school. You need a better plan, one that not only looks into growing infrastructure, but seeks to put that extra dollar into building resilience."

This also holds true for Covid-19 recovery. "Investing in resilience sounds almost obvious. It goes back to Mark Carney's (former Governor of the Bank of England) famous speech in 2015 about *The tragedy of the horizon*, where we are constantly seeking short term financial returns, making sure shareholders are happy.

"But don't you think that we are coming to a kind of a turning point?" she asks. Companies are looking into resilience and sustainable solutions as a business opportunity, and shareholders consider economic, social and governance (ESG) factors to be an important benchmark: "I feel we are coming to a place where what is valued is changing." Mizutori notes that the private sector is more innovative than public sector bureaucracy and there are also positive legislative moves in some countries to ensure that companies make disclosures about climate risk when financing projects. "Once such disclosure isn't just about climate risk, but also about disaster risk, then – and only then – will truly resilient projects be invested in and we will be walking the talk."

Even if all the countries that have committed to net zero emissions of greenhouse gases stick to their promises, we are going to face a climate emergency for many generations, Mizutori says. "We must look at this as an opportunity to use every dollar going into a recovery plan to adhere to this commitment that governments have made, that's the green part. The resilient part is when you also look at urbanisation risks, which arise from degradation of the environment – everything needs to be taken into consideration."

This is where nature-based solutions come in, but these must be on a larger scale than we are currently seeing. "The concept is gaining traction because of the win-win situation that nature-based solutions can provide us," she enthuses. "They work for DRR, for climate adaptation and mitigation, for stopping the loss of biodiversity and environmental degradation. And nature-based solutions can contribute to reducing all three components of risk: hazard, exposure and vulnerability." Importantly, nature-based solutions help to reduce vulnerability and bring people together: "They involve whole villages and communities getting together, making their crops stronger, fortifying their land, and reducing their vulnerability, especially those in poverty."

Mami Mizutori: "The more we invest in prevention, the more we can lie safely and comfortably"
UNDRR

Finally, we turn to multilateralism and DRR (p12). Mizutori comments: "We talk a lot of the crisis of multilateralism, and we hope that with some changes of governments, this will be less acute. The year 2015 was a golden year for global agreements – we had the *Sendai Framework* and *Sustainable Development Goals*, we saw the *Paris Agreement*, the *New Urban Agenda*, the *Addis Ababa Action Agenda*...

"We have, unfortunately, been derailed somewhat, but we must put these commitments together, so they operate in concert: DRR, climate, adaptation and mitigation and the urban agenda. Multilateralism is the key to this."

Recent events provide an opportunity: "We have to seize it, use it to understand better what is going on around us. We mustn't see a disaster or crisis purely as a threat, but also as a moment when we can change the way we confront risk and embrace better prevention," she says. "If we prevent better, the recovery process can be a wonderful opportunity, or it can be a catastrophe. If we cannot recover in a greener, more equitable and positive way, then the trillions and trillions of dollars, euros, pounds that have been spent in the process will be lost.

"And we would be doing exactly the opposite of what the *Sendai Framework* tells us to do, which is not to create new risk." CRJ

Author

EMILY HOUGH *is Editor in Chief of the* Crisis Response Journal

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