

MEGA-CRISES

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Understanding the Prospects, Nature, Characteristics
and the Effects of Cataclysmic Events

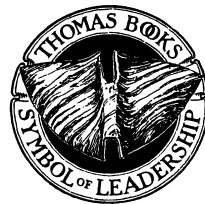
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MEGA-CRISES

Part I

**THE CONCEPT OF MEGA-CRISIS
AND MEGA-CRISIS MANAGEMENT**

Chapter 1

THE NEW CHALLENGES OF MEGA-CRISES

IRA HELSLOOT, ARJEN BOIN, BRIAN JACOBS, AND LOUISE COMFORT

THE RISE OF MEGA-CRISES

We live in turbulent times with continents and nations facing ever-heightening risks. Natural disasters, intense and protracted conflicts, terrorism, corporate crises, cyberthreats to infrastructures and mega-events. We are witnessing the rise of mega-crises.

Mega-crises are not just “more of the same”; they present a new class of adversity with many “unknowns.” They defy boundaries, limits, neat demarcations, patterned connections and linear consequences. The impact of mega-crises opens up new futures, some more palatable than others. To avoid the worst possible futures, an effective and timely response is required.

The related problems of governance take on new dimensions. Mega-crises challenge traditional assumptions and working methods of public authorities, corporate leaders and the public at large. Mega-crises have a wide, often direct global impact, being difficult to contain in the short and long run, and generating diverging ideas about appropriate solutions. Mega-crises imply not only quantum but also quality jumps in coping with the defining features of crisis: severe threat, uncertainty, urgency (Rosenthal, Charles & ‘t Hart, 1989). Mega-crises present “mega-threats,” create deep uncertainty, and evoke an extreme sense of urgency. A list of recent events reminds us of just how demanding these challenges are.

A Few Examples

Since the start of the twenty-first century, we have seen a series of *mega-disasters*. Asian countries have collectively suffered the misery and heavy tolls inflicted by the Boxing Day Tsunami (2004) and the earthquakes in Kashmir (2005) and Sichuan (2008). Hurricanes Katrina (2005), Gustav and Ike (2008) have confronted the United States with huge problems in the management of increasingly large-scale natural disasters. Africa is suffering from desertification. Many countries are increasingly worried about the consequences of structural climate change and the rise of the sea level that may occur in this century. They may face drastic choices in overcoming new threats to urbanized and industrialized lowland areas. The traditional dichotomy between natural and man-made disasters has become obsolete in many parts of the world, as natural systems interact increasingly with demographic and socioeconomic contingencies.

Since the last decade of the twentieth century, *public health mega-crises* have been on the increase (Garrett, 1995; Ouah, 2007). After the AIDS epidemic and the BSE scare, many countries have experienced the anxieties of other entirely new viral epidemics threats. In 2003–2004 the SARS outbreak in China and Canada demonstrated just how far and how fast epidemics can travel. Since then, pandemics, including the Avian flu and the H1N1 flu, have challenged governments and have provoked public anxiety.