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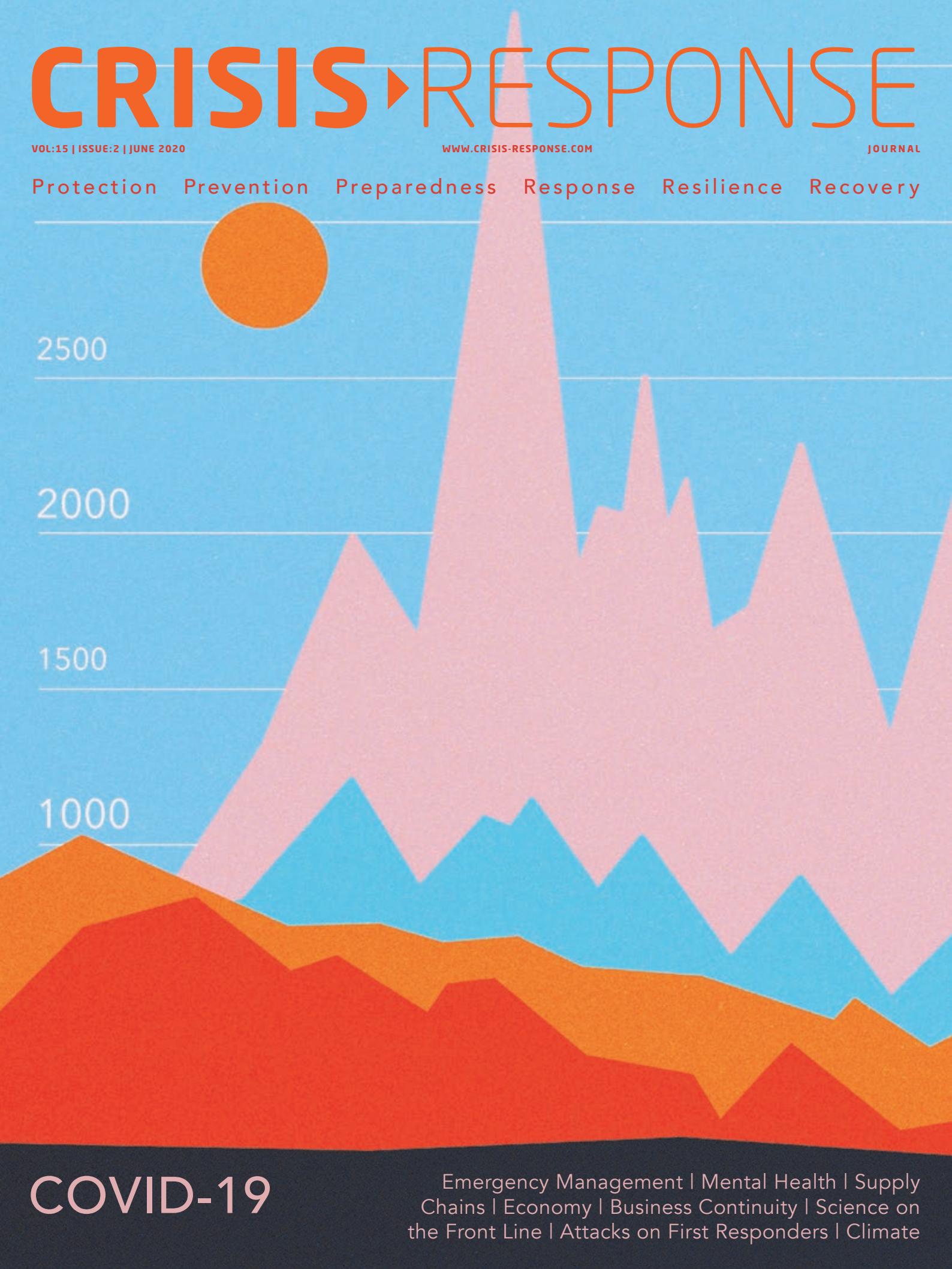

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Editor in Chief
Emily Hough
emily@crisis-response.com

Editorial Assistant
Claire Sanders
claire@crisis-response.com

Projects Development Manager
Derya Kemmis
derya@crisis-response.com

Design & Production
Chris Pettican
chris@layoutdesigner.co.uk

News and Blog research
Lina Kolesnikova
lina@crisis-response.com

Web Support
Neil Moultrie

Subscriptions
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subs@crisis-response.com

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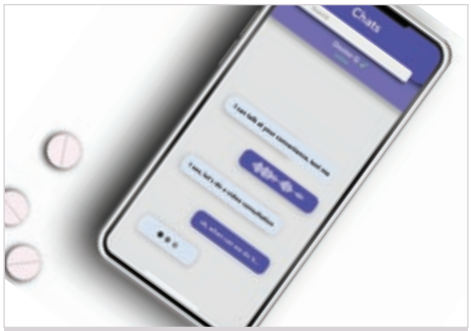

Gracie Broom

comment

Crises have a way of exacerbating underlying vulnerabilities. Once the protective surface has been flayed from society, its pre-existing conditions are exposed and rendered more acute.

Authors in this edition warn how Covid-19 lays bare inequity, inequality and poverty; the virus is not indiscriminate. And when ingrained injustices reach a peak, righteous anger and frustration inevitably spill over into discord, presenting an opening for those who seek to profit from inflaming societal division.

The Covid-19 crisis – which has taken so many lives and wreaked such misery, fear and pain – raises questions about humanity's ability to work together against common, global threats. With a few notable exceptions, the virus seems to have caught governments on the back foot, illustrated by a failure to understand the full cascading consequences and potential systemic nature of a pandemic.

Perhaps the first mistake of many was an initial inclination to treat this as a 'health' emergency, failing to appreciate how interdependencies allow the virus to rampage across all layers of a society – from individuals and communities, to livelihoods, businesses, economies and supply chains – calling our very values and global models of co-operation into question.

Another glaring omission is evident – where is resilience? Why is the voice of emergency management unheeded by so many at the top levels of governance and the public alike? On p8, Eric Russell attempts to find answers, while on p42 Paolo Garonna explores how science and its global institutions have been devalued and exploited – to the extent of making them viewed as irrelevant in some quarters.

How are we going to cope when larger, more interconnected and destructive crises sweep our way? The answer must not lie in retreating into conflict and hostility. But we cannot come out of this as we were before, and this may be a good thing, as Marcus Coleman notes on p46. We can transform tragedy into opportunity for all. We can examine our global institutions, empowering them to act with authority and universal legitimacy, while maintaining vigilant oversight. We can place our resilience experts where they should be – trusted, experienced voices, whose knowledge is valued and respected at the very highest levels.

The alternative is to retreat into narrow, nationalistic opportunism, privilege and self-interest, sticking tiny plasters on the exposed, weeping wounds of our global society.

Surely we can do better than this?

A better normal: Building equity in crises

Covid-19 continues to affect people unequally, disproportionately afflicting people of colour, those experiencing poverty and people with medical fragility. This unequal impact is nothing new, according to **Marcus Tillman Coleman Jr**, but we can – and must – change this situation

When disaster strikes, it is often marginalised and under-resourced people who are the most affected, and who have the hardest time bouncing back. Covid-19 has illuminated and exacerbated inequities around the world. Recognising this in the US, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) released *Coronavirus Equity Considerations*, which seeks to: "Ensure necessary policies and practices are in place, so that needed information, training, resources, and care are available equitably and reach all people in all communities."

These considerations build on its guidance for building in equity across the disaster continuum – *In the Eye of the Storm: A People's Guide to Transforming Crisis and Advancing Equity*. Similarly, the World Bank published *Poverty and Distributional Impacts of Covid-19: Potential Channels of Impact and Mitigating Policies*.

The public health discussion around Covid-19 makes clear that society is forever changed. There is much talk of a 'new normal', an acknowledgement that we will not and cannot simply return to the way things were. This presents an incredible opportunity. As we linger in extended response and transition to an adaptive recovery, we can, and should, build in equity and ensure a better normal for all people.

What could disaster response and recovery look like in this scenario? It would be marked by an awareness of othering, a 'set of dynamics, processes, and structures that engender marginality and persistent inequality across any of the full range of human differences based on group identities', and belonging, an 'unwavering commitment to not simply tolerating and respecting difference, but to ensuring that all people are welcome and feel that they belong in the society'.

Both terms come from *The Problem of Othering: Toward Inclusiveness and Belonging*, which is a useful framework for decisions, creating structures and planning. Leaders should actively monitor their intentions and ensure decisions minimise othering and maximise belonging.

> There are too many examples of 'professional' crisis leaders rushing to partner to address an inequity, only to create unintended, long-term consequences and wounds that take time to heal

Leaders and organisations should also turn to guidance from partners like non-profits and advocacy organisations, and hard-learned lessons on inequity from disasters past.

This sounds great, but is it practical? As a former lead for disaster operations for the Department of Homeland Security Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships (now called Center for Faith and Opportunity Initiatives), I have witnessed first hand the impact when leaders of organisations choose to find and invest in partners, even in the midst of a crisis. These partners have a wealth of knowledge, a close connection to the communities and subject matters they represent and can help to identify and reduce inequities.

Here are three insights and three traps to avoid that will help any person leading a community through the pandemic and other disasters we have yet to face.

Leaders are encouraged to:

- Rethink the relationship between traditional emergency management capabilities and the capabilities of the healthcare sector when meeting the needs of the medically fragile and socially vulnerable. Consider Healthcare Ready, a not-for-profit organisation that works at the intersection of emergency management, healthcare and the public and private sectors. It helps patients and families access care for their existing chronic conditions and connects civic society organisations with medical suppliers at a scale neither could achieve through public-private partnerships. Executive Director, Dr Nicolette Louissaint, is mindful that: "Given the large-scale disruptions we are facing, it is critical that we carefully consider now how best to rebuild the world that is being rapidly disrupted and partially dismantled by this virus, rather than wait until we're on the other side of this crisis, when we could be faced with other disasters such as active hurricane or tornado seasons."

Healthcare Ready's approach to partners across emergency management and healthcare sectors means it is rethinking how to improve access to care for medically fragile and socially vulnerable populations now and in the future.

Nadiia Forkosh | 123rf

- Work alongside and support faith-based and community organisations active in disasters to provide for the near and long-term needs of people who experience the 'one-two' punch of disasters. For example, flooding is a persistent threat that can occur alongside other crises, and the ensuing displacement presents increased risks in a pandemic context. Leaders should be in consistent communication, co-ordination, collaboration and co-operation with organisations like the National Voluntary Organisations Active in Disaster, InterAction, and the UN Environmental Programme (UNEP), via the Faith in the Frontline with Covid-19 effort. These provide tools and capacity building opportunities aligned with the equity considerations outlined by the NAACP.
- Challenge yourself as a leader to incorporate equity and practices that affirm belonging in your recovery structure. This will help your organisation to avoid the traps that make it difficult to leverage the goodwill, social capital and capabilities built into the response to Covid-19 in the next phases of an adaptive recovery, or in the preparation and pre-response activities required for future disasters. FEMA has an online course on Religious Literacy and Cultural Competency in Disasters and review the *Engaging Faith-based and Community Organisations* publication, in addition to the work from the Othering and Belonging Institute. You can also look at the publications from the NAACP and the World Bank that are referenced above and listed in the sources at the end of this article.

Ensnared and undermined

Many traps can ensnare people leading in a crisis and cause them to undermine their own efforts. When it comes to building pivots that can mitigate the impacts of inequality, there are five actions that Jannah Scott, PhD and I observed to be especially detrimental and difficult to recover from without significant investment.

The most common and one of the most tempting traps lies in working outside of the formal structures and decision-making processes – such as the incident command structure, incident management system, or unified command. When crisis strikes, it can seem prudent to throw aside the processes and structures that slow us down. In fact, these are the very elements required to help everyone in a crisis, succeed. There are too many examples of 'professional' crisis leaders rushing to address an inequity, only to create unintended, long-term consequences and wounds that take time to heal.

Follow the example of W Craig Fugate, former Administrator for the FEMA under President Barack Obama, who invested time and talent in rebuilding relationships with organisations which, historically, distrusted government. Fugate instructed his team to learn how the formal structures of organisations like the NAACP, AARP, (formerly the American Association of Retired Persons), and the National Disability Rights Network could be leveraged to achieve better disaster outcomes and fit into his whole community approach to emergency management, an effort that ended with signed memoranda of agreement.

Another trap lies in seeking long term results from short term investments. It would be both unwise and unwelcome for a leader of an organisation seeking a partnership with the private sector to ask a CEO to participate in disaster response and recovery efforts without regard for his or her core mission, operating and staff costs and primary scope.

Yet this is precisely what many leaders do when approaching civic society and faith-based institutions. While these organisations can offer substantial tangible and intangible benefits for a fraction of the cost of a large procurement, they also offer social ingenuity and an entrepreneurial spirit that can be cultivated and directed to sustain disaster recovery efforts. Partnerships (financial and non-financial) should expand beyond donations and charity to find and invest in ways to mitigate inequality.

Third, do not build capabilities without building social currency. NAACP's *Coronavirus Equity Considerations* provides recommendations to build the social currency necessary to engage them and their network as partners in mitigating inequities. The UNEP is building social currency by helping promote information sharing and lessons learned from faith and civic society organisations around the world.

The principles of meta-leadership state that: "A foundation of trusting relationships," in unison with a wide range of other organisations, is vital to navigating any crisis. The language, actions, gestures, affirmations, and activities between press statements continue to define every organisation and institution's ability to build and maintain social currency in good faith. Focusing on building capabilities and social currency within partnerships in today's crisis will allow us to respond more effectively tomorrow.

Incorporating these insights and avoiding these traps will help us transform our new normal into a better one for all people and communities. Let's avoid these traps and incorporate these insights in order to build a more equitable world together. CRJ

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Further reading

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- *www.nvoad.org*
- *www.interaction.org*
- *www.aarp.org*
- *www.ndrn.org*
- *www.naacp.org*
- *www.unenvironment.org*
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- *https://belonging.berkeley.edu*
- *www.fema.gov/faith*

Author

MARCUS TILLMAN COLEMAN JR *is Senior Associate at HWC and a member of Harvard University National Preparedness Leader Initiative and Howard University Alum. Marcus focuses the role of stakeholder engagement in strengthening resilience*

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