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to an intracrisis response**

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# Strategic planning in interesting times: From an intercrisis to an intracrisis response

**Impact**

Strategic planning has been shown to positively affect organisational performance in the public sector. As an intensive, long-term oriented, and deliberative process, strategic planning is often viewed as an essential practice, yet mostly in relatively stable or non-crisis contexts (even when undertaken as a platform for ex-ante crisis preparedness). However, emerging crisis types (such as creeping crises) come with a novel melange of features that disrupt conventional norms of public administration, crisis governance and policymaking. Drawing on the theories of creeping crises, strategic planning, and empirical observations, this article discusses how such crises are recently creating windows of opportunity for intracrisis strategic planning. This driven by these crises’ inherent nature which causes disruptions for key elements of pre-existing strategies such as capabilities, goals, and policymaking paradigms. This also emphasizes that within such crisis conditions, practitioners should dedicate sufficient time to undertake intracrisis strategic planning, rather than exclusively engage in an adhoc and stopgap crisis responses.

**Abstract**

This new development article discusses how emerging types of crises provide opportunities for - and necessitate the undertaking of- strategic planning as a form of intracrisis response. This supplements existing literature and approaches to strategic planning that conventionally emphasize its value in relatively more stable conditions or mostly as a platform for pre-crisis preparedness.

**Key words:** Strategic Planning, Crisis, Creeping Crisis, Intracrisis Strategic Planning

## 1. Introduction

Strategic planning is often associated with improved organizational outcomes in the public sector. For example, it can contribute to improving citizens' and public managers' perceptions of organizational performance (Vandersmissen, George, & Voets, 2022), decision-making quality (Baker, 1992), and goal achievement (George, Walker, & Monster, 2019). Here, strategic planning can be understood as a deliberate (and deliberative) process that focuses on strategy formulation. This entails a set of interlaced activities including mandate, mission, values, and environment analyses leading to the development of concrete and implementable strategies to address certain problems or issues (see Bryson & George, 2020; Cepiku, Giordano, & Savignon, 2017). Given its association with positive outcomes, strategic planning has become one of the most widely employed tools in public organizations. However, within the public sector realm, strategic planning is predominantly studied, and often viewed in stable non-crisis contexts, or in anticipation of crises, i.e., for crisis preparedness (Brown et al., 2018; Rajala & Jalonen, 2022). This is despite the value it provides for coping with change (see Bryson, 2018; Pasha & Poister, 2017).

This article highlights how recent developments and emerging events are creating "interesting times" and generating new types of crises for public administration to address (see Massey, 2023). It argues that some of those emerging crisis types avail the space for strategic planning to take place and provide value, not only as for intercrisis (between crises) preparedness, but also for intracrisis (during crisis) responses. In doing so, this points scholarly attention to an under-researched context for strategic planning research where significant theoretical development can be undertaken. It also points practitioners' attention to the potential for strategic planning as an effective tool for crisis policymaking within certain crisis conditions.

To make this argument, I first briefly review the nexus of strategic planning and crises, underlining the predominant view in literature. Then, using theoretical arguments supported by empirical observations, I highlight how one of the most prominent emerging crisis types (i.e., creeping crises) provide opportunities and a compelling need for strategic planning to be exercised within crisis periods.

2. Strategic planning and crises

Strategic planning and crises are scarcely studied together and are often viewed as separate (see Vargo & Seville, 2011). Yet, some research on the nexus of strategic planning and crises exists. This goes in two main directions. The first one focuses on the relationship between strategic planning and crisis impact through fostering crisis preparedness. In other words, identifying when and how robust strategic planning before or between crises (i.e., intercrisis strategic planning) can lead to better crisis management. For example, how pre-crisis strategic planning helps avoid stopgap tactical action in response to crisis urgency (e.g., Johnson, 2007; Manning, 2020), or pre-crisis strategizing for scalable post-crisis responses (e.g., Johnson, 2007). The second (more recent direction) focuses on how turbulence in external environments induces certain strategic planning heuristics over relatively long durations leading to varying strategic planning preferences. For example, how budgetary cuts and conflicts foster inclinations towards logical incrementalism, negotiated strategizing, and performance orientation among others (e.g., Hartfiel, 2010; Pasha & Poister, 2017). Within this body of research, crises are predominantly viewed as turbulences in institutional contexts such as deteriorating economic conditions (e.g., recessions and funding cuts), or service quality problems that slowly accumulate over relatively long durations of years or decades (e.g., Hartfiel, 2010; Jimenez, 2012; Campbell, 2016).

While this body of research provides us with robust understandings of how strategic planning contributes to crisis preparedness, very little is known about if (and how) strategic planning takes place as a form of intra-crisis response, particularly during large-scale systemic crises. Over past decades and given the then prevalent conceptualization of dominant crisis types, it is understandable that the practice of strategic planning would be largely unexpected (and thus scarcely explored). This is perhaps due to the fact that crises were mostly viewed as sudden, and discreet shock (or focusing) events such as natural disasters and major accidents (e.g., Johnson, 2007; Smith, 2012). While on the other hand, strategic planning is mostly (and rightfully) viewed as a deliberate, stakeholder intensive, time-consuming, and future-oriented practice with rather long-term rewards (e.g., Walker et al., 2010; Bryson, Edwards, & Van Slyke, 2018), that often fares better in more stable conditions (see Mintzberg, 1993; Rajala & Jalonen, 2022). As such, given their intense, rather localized, and urgent nature, such contexts naturally

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3 did not avail the time, space, or need for strategic planning during crises as public organisations  
4 scrambled to engage in urgent responses to crisis episodes, and implement (or slightly adjust)  
5 existing crisis strategies. Nevertheless, these crisis episodes (catastrophes or disasters) provided  
6 ample opportunities for ex-post reflections and lesson drawing, thus leading to more informed  
7 strategic planning and preparedness (e.g., Birkland, 2006; Smith, 2012).  
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13 However, the nature of crises has evolved over the years presenting “interesting times”  
14 for contemporary public administration. We are witnessing an increase in interconnected,  
15 systemic, and lingering crises. For example, most recently from the COVID-19 pandemic to  
16 migration flows, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the consequent energy and economic  
17 crises, among several others (Massey, 2023). Many of such crises present a novel melange of  
18 features, even recently becoming a strand of their own, known as creeping crises (Boin,  
19 Ekengren, & Rhinard, 2020). Creeping crises are inducing changes in how public administration,  
20 management and policy are being understood and mandating new approaches for how it is  
21 researched and practiced (e.g., El-Taliawi & Hartley, 2021; Zaki & George, 2021; Zaki, Pattyn, &  
22 Wayenberg, 2022). So, how does this affect practices of strategic planning?  
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### 32 **3. Strategic planning as an intracrisis response**

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34 This new development article focuses on the opportunities creeping crises create for  
35 strategic planning as an intracrisis response. These opportunities are driven by three main  
36 characteristics inherent to creeping crises: *time frames, novelty and evolutions, scale, and*  
37 *multidimensionality*.  
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42 In terms of time frames, creeping crises are lingering and relatively long term-as opposed  
43 to shock events or fast burning crises such as natural disasters (they can last for months on end,  
44 or even years such as in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic). Thus, temporally, they allow and  
45 necessitate engagement in deliberate learning, situational synthesis, and environmental  
46 scanning. Consequently, there is room for adjustments, the establishment of new long-term crisis  
47 policymaking paradigms, and accordingly paradigmatic shifts (see Ladi & Tsarouhas, 2020; Zaki &  
48 Wayenberg, 2023). As far as novelty and *evolutions* are concerned, creeping crises are often  
49 underpinned by novel problems described as “unprecedented”, either due to technical novelty  
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or scale. Hence, there are usually no pre-set strategies for addressing them (For example, strategies designed to handle localised epidemics failed to cope with the scale of the COVID-19 crisis). They also morph, presenting themselves as different problems over time, particularly given their varying intensity cycles (see Boin, Ekengren, & Rhinard, 2020). For example, the COVID-19 pandemic has started as a public health problem, which later manifested as one of individual rights, access to education, healthcare, and freedom of movement, among others (see Zaki, Pattyn & Wayenberg, 2022). Similarly, the Russian invasion of Ukraine. A crisis that has simmered in the background before breaking out as a security and defence crisis, then manifesting as one of energy security, and later as one of long-term sustainability transitions underpinned by the potential of fossil fuels backsliding. This takes us to the third driving characteristic, that is *scale and multidimensionality*. Creeping crises are also transboundary, both sectorally and geographically. Such crises often hit across affects interconnected regions, with systemic spill over effects that are often disproportionate. As such, they can overwhelm crisis response capacities. Another example can be seen in the COVID-19 crisis were some regions (given their demographic geographic, capacities, or even behavioural characteristics) have been affected more or less than others (e.g., Zaki et al., 2022).

Now, put together, how does this create a window for intracrisis strategic planning? Strategy can be understood as the process of moving from current positions to aspired ones via leveraging capabilities, where strategic planning formulates the processes by which this transition is analysed, understood, and achieved (see Bryson & George, 2020). Harkening back to this concept, several logics emphasize the need for intracrisis strategic planning processes within creeping crises. Mainly as these crises can inflict significant and long-term changes to the main components of existing strategies, namely, *aspirations* (i.e., policy goals and paradigms by which they are sought) , and the *capabilities* (i.e., means) available to achieve them.

First, as above-pointed, creeping crises often induce debates around -and changes in- major policy paradigms and goals (i.e., aspirations in strategic management terms). Looping to our two main empirical examples, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine provides some preliminary insights. For example, changes in policy goals during the COVID-19 pandemic from reducing infections and maintaining a functional healthcare system during the

first waves, to “living with the pandemic” as a new approach during the consequent waves. This is underlined by shifts in value perceptions that vary with the earlier-pointed manifestations of the crisis (i.e., from a primary focus on individual human life and healthcare systems, to freedoms, liberties, and social welfare, see Zaki, Pattyn & Wayenberg, 2022). The same applies to discussions surrounding the resumption of coal mining to cover energy shortages, or the supply of defensive weaponry to military conflict areas. Second, due to their scale and multidimensionality, creeping crises can induce long-lasting drastic changes to systemic capabilities, for example through obliterating existing capacities. Longstanding healthcare capacity overruns during the COVID-19 pandemic, and energy supply capacities resulting from the Russian invasion of Ukraine provide vivid examples of this. Another example can be seen in influxes of migrants from surrounding conflict areas leading to capacity overruns in migrant processing and integration facilities. Under these conditions, initial capabilities, and conditions upon which existing strategies were predicated undergo significant changes, rendering existing goals largely unachievable. Furthermore, the logics by which government moves from current positions to their aspired ones also change. Creeping crises bring forward more societal contestation and divisiveness, particularly given their “fuzziness” and ambiguity where multiple value perceptions are contested in an amplified public space (see Boin, Ekengren, & Rhinard, 2020; Johnson & Haarstad, 2022). This also calls for different approaches to strategizing, sensibly an increasing affinity to external stakeholder engagement underlying situational synthesis (see Pasha & Poister, 2017).

Put together, creeping crises can induce changes to the foundational components of existing strategies and strategic planning processes over extended durations: *initial conditions, systemic capabilities, aspirations, and policy goals* as well as the *values and paradigms underlying transitions between aspirations and capabilities*. This avails the conditions and need for “strategicness” of crisis response through policymaking. This element of strategicness is described by Bryson, Edwards, & Van Slyke (2018) as one that entails: cognizance of changing context, a defined set of objectives that require stabilization, flexibility to adapt to crisis evolutions, and coping with uncertainty in a fluid crisis situation. All elements necessary for a creeping crisis response.

While in earlier decades, strategic planning was scarcely viewed within these crisis contexts as central processes for intracrisis response, recent research shows a growing interest in doing so. Table 1 highlights how emerging research explores aspects of intracrisis strategic planning during the recent COVID-19 crisis. It is worth noting however, that the hitherto traceable semblances of intracrisis strategic planning naturally fall on the spectrum between rational comprehensive planning and strategic planning, in other words between the root and the branch methods (see Bryson, Edwards, & Van Slyke, 2018).

Strategic planning as ...	Examples
Tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ The experimental use of adjusted scenario planning techniques for crisis response and recovery (e.g., Brooks &amp; Curnin, 2020).</li><li>▪ Developing offensive and defensive resilience with possible worlds scenario planning (e.g., Rajala &amp; Jalonen, 2022).</li></ul>
Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ The establishment and initiation of strategic planning processes through community engagement (e.g., Wahlin &amp; Blomkamp, 2022).</li><li>▪ Intracrisis strategizing through the construction and engagement of local publics (e.g., Sancino et al., 2021).</li></ul>

Table 1: Empirical indications of intracrisis strategic planning from the COVID-19 pandemic

With that said, both theoretical argumentation and empirical observations highlight the potential value of intracrisis strategic planning in creeping crisis contexts. In the concluding section of this article, I propose some avenues for future research on intracrisis strategic planning.

4. New frontiers for future research and practice

This new development article discussed how emerging creeping crises avails the space and potential to engage in intracrisis strategic planning. This opens new frontiers for strategic planning research and practice where several excursions can be undertaken. First, relatively recent research already shows that turbulences in institutional contexts can invoke certain strategic planning heuristics (e.g., Hartfiel, 2010; Pasha & Poister, 2017). Future research can explore how creeping crises contexts invoke certain heuristics that shape intracrisis strategic planning processes. This is especially while considering that learning mechanisms underlying situational synthesis can vary, between contingent and inferential, depending on constructed crisis perceptions and experiences (see Kamkhaji & Radaelli, 2017; Zaki, Pattyn, & Wayenberg,



2022). Second, another potentially valuable venue for both future research and practice could also be to explore the determinants of successful intracrisis strategic planning during creeping crises. In other words, when does intracrisis strategic planning succeed or fail, and why? This can consider different institutional and political settings, while especially leveraging comparative research designs and configurational methods. A third avenue can entail exploring the adjustments and adaptations practitioners introduced to existing strategic planning tools to cope with crisis nature and complexity. This can build on emerging work by Brooks & Curnin, (2020), Rajala & Jalonen (2022), among others. Last but not least, and on a more practitioner-oriented front, future empirical research can focus on taking stock of strategic planning activities undertaken by practitioners during the past years of creeping crises. This can avail valuable lessons for the global community of practitioners, as well as scholars on the strategy and crises nexus.

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