

An Open Letter to Ireland's Government, Members of the Dail and Seanad Concerning Escalating Societal Risk and the Urgent Need for Preparedness Planning.

28th May 2023



"We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are.

- Anaïs Nin, Novelist & Diarist¹.

What we are currently living through is a kind of major tipping point or a great upheaval ... we are living the end of what could have seemed an era of abundance ... the end of the abundance of products of technologies that seemed always available ... the end of the abundance of land and materials including water,"

-Emmanuel Macron, French President, 23 August 2022.²

A networked society behaves like a multicellular organism...random damage is like lopping off a chunk of sheep. Whether or not the sheep survives depends upon which chunk is lost....When we do the analysis, almost any part is critical if you lose enough of it.... Now that we can ask questions of such systems in more sophisticated ways, we are discovering that they can be very vulnerable. That means civilisation is very vulnerable.

-Yaneer Bar-Yam, New England Complex Systems Institute.³

"Risks can crystallize with disorientating speed. In a world of complex and interconnected systems ... [they can] lead to sudden and dramatic breakdowns. ... If we exhaust our capacities to absorb disruption and allow our systems to become brittle enough to break, it is difficult to overstate the damage that might result."

-The Global Risks Report, World Economic Forum, 2018.⁴

"Without electricity, modern life would ground to a halt & the complexity of modern society is such that if you take out one or two little pieces of the jigsaw, the whole thing collapses"

— Lord James Arbuthnot, former Minister for Defence, and Chair, United Kingdom House of Lords, Select Committee on Risk Assessment and Risk Planning 2021/22.

"The simple answer to the question if it is possible to produce food in Sweden during a longer-term societal disturbance is that in general it is impossible to sustain production at animal farms even during a short crisis if the supply of electricity and regular deliveries of fodder and other inputs are cut off, and in general plant production is impossible during longer crisis if there is no supply of fuel, fertiliser/manure, plant protection and seed. The overall picture shows that the agriculture is very vulnerable."

-Dr Camilla Eriksson, Report for the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (the MSB), 2018.⁵

"If the banks are shutting their doors, and the cashpoints aren't working, and people go to Tesco and their cards aren't being accepted, the whole thing will just explode. If you can't buy food or petrol or medicine for your kids, people will just start breaking the windows and helping themselves. And as soon as people see that on TV, that's the end, because everyone will think 'that's OK now, that's just what we all have to do'. It'll be anarchy. That's what could happen tomorrow. I'm serious".

— UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown to his advisor the night before he part-nationalised UK banks, 2008.⁶

¹ Nin, A. Seduction of the Minotaur. (1961).

² <https://www.france24.com/en/france/20220824-macron-warns-french-of-tough-times-ahead-end-to-energy-price-cap>

³ MacKenzie, D. Why the demise of civilisation may be inevitable. (Quoted within) New Scientist 2nd April 2008.

⁴ Global Risks Report 2018. World Economic Forum. www.weforum.org/reports/the-global-risks-report-2018

⁵ Eriksson, C. Livsmedelsproduktion ur ett beredskapsperspektiv. MSB/ Swedish University of Agriculture (2018). <https://rib.msb.se/filer/pdf/28493.pdf>

⁶ Damian McBride (2014) Power Trip: A Decade of Policy, Plots and Spin, Biteback Publishing

Donabate,

Co. Dublin.

www.korowiczhumansystems.com

28th May 2023.

Dear Minister, Deputy, Senator __,

It is as a human systems ecologist with over 15 years of international experience working on large-scale societal risk and preparedness, and as a citizen that I am writing to you. This letter concerns our lack of preparedness to face rapidly escalating global systemic risk, and provides some guidance about how the Irish political system can pivot towards a response.

Covid-19 and H5N1 bird flu, increasing concerns about Ireland and the world's energy security, the growing threat of climate change, the reverberations from Russia's war on Ukraine, fragmenting geopolitical realities and pressures on social cohesion, persistent inflation, Artificial Intelligence, and fragile supply-chains are among the most obvious facets of a global risk environment that seems to be getting more uncertain and dangerous. So too is the increasing traction of the idea that we're becoming embedded in a polycrisis, a state of having to deal with multiple intensifying and compounding crises with an impact on society much greater than the sum of its parts.⁷ There are strong grounds for concluding that we may have entered a new era where our economy and the conditions underpinning our collective welfare will be exposed to escalating and potentially unprecedented stresses and disruptions.

But our understanding of risk, the resilience of society, and our capacity to respond to a crisis evolved in, and reflect the conditions of the past. This means there is an accelerating gap between the risks to which society is being exposed to and our capacity to deal with the consequences. Thus, we urgently need to focus on an integrated response relating to anticipation and preparedness. This is distinct from risk mitigation and adaptation. Given the stakes involved this is not just an issue for government, the Dáil and Seanad, but for the whole of society.

The truth is, societies rarely anticipate and prepare for crises that are conflict with their habituated expectations, patterns of behaviour, ways of seeing, and the force of socio-economic inertia. The panjandrums of economic and social consensus will still give learned explanations why it just isn't so, just as happened before the Global Financial Crisis. Good people will want to believe them, or a report will be commissioned all in the hope that the bad things go away or remains forever just over the horizon.

But it is increasingly likely that these are challenges that will face this government, the next, and the one after that. This is on your watch. Good decisions made today towards helping Ireland prepare for what is coming could have an impact beyond anything you could have imagined when you entered political life. The question is, do we have the wisdom, courage, and leadership to act *before* things get really difficult and while we have capacities now that may be unavailable in the future? Given your leadership position, I think, and hope that you do.

⁷ Michael Lawrence, Scott Janzwood, Thomas Homer-Dixon. What is a polycrisis crisis? And how is it different from systemic risk? Technical Paper 2022-4. (Sept 16, 2022). Cascade Institute. www.cadeinstitute.org.

In this letter I hope you will allow me to outline why the risk to society is escalating, how we can approach a response, and some immediate steps the Irish political system needs to take in order to begin this journey.

A Rapidly Transforming Risk Environment

An almost invisible web of conditions sustains the operation of everyday life such as the supply-chains that feed our supermarkets, farms and businesses; the electric grid that enables clean water, sanitation, communications, and economic production; the financial systems that allows investment to proceed and trade to occur, and the societal cooperation that protects our security and capacity to respond to problems. Those are further sustained through their integration with an interdependent global civilisation and its dizzyingly complex circulation of goods, services, commodities, payments, information and people. We contribute to, and depend upon its function and stability.

Even the Global Financial Crisis over a decade ago, the cyberattack on the HSE, the cascading impacts of Covid-19 and the reverberations from Russia's war on Ukraine, however challenging, have not fundamentally disrupted these foundations of our welfare. Compared to the scale of what works in society, our experience of crises and disruptions have been minor, with a recovery to trend expected. Yet the long-term continuity and resilience of society has made us complacent.

What should be increasingly apparent is that our global risk environment is rapidly changing, becoming more uncertain and dangerous. As the *United Nations Office of Disaster Risk Reduction* (UNDRR) noted in 2018⁸: *"with the certainty of near-term non-linear changes, the critical assumption of the relationship between past and future risk must now be revisited"*. Four years later at the launch of the 2022 Global Assessment report they said that humanity's risk perception was distorted by⁹: *"optimism, underestimation, and invincibility"*.

In understanding this we are ill-served by the siloed analysis that focuses on only one or two risk drivers in isolation, climate change, energy security, global indebtedness, or accelerating deployment of high-risk technologies, for example. There is a profound blindness too about the inherent fragility of the societal systems that we depend upon. We face not a climate or energy crisis, but a global systemic predicament that will increasingly test the foundations of societal stability.

The world is facing accumulating and intensifying stressors and sources of shock including from the myriad impacts of climate change; potentially extremely serious energy constraints and disruptions that include, but far transcend the on-going reverberations from the Russian war on Ukraine; multi-dimensional drivers of food insecurity; the implications of escalating global indebtedness and a fragile credit system as it faces a more volatile, uncertain and growth constrained world; the increasing likelihood of new and potentially more serious pandemics; water and materials constraints; the feedback on society from crashing biodiversity and disrupted ecological services; new technologies such as Artificial Intelligence that could act as an accelerant to multiple other risk drivers even in the short-to-medium term; while increasing social-media amplified polarisation, and fracturing and war between nations is making collective action more difficult, and threatens our security and state stability. Each of these are growing and urgent drivers of risk, together they amplify each-others impact across a hyper-connected world.

⁸ Global Assessment Report, United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (2018). https://gar.undrr.org/sites/default/files/chapter/2019-06/chapter_2.pdf

⁹ Humanity's broken risk perception is reversing global progress "in a spiral of self-destruction". UNDRR GAR22 launch. (22 April 2022). <https://www.preventionweb.net/news/humanitys-broken-risk-perception-reversing-global-progress-spiral-self-destruction-finds-new>

But this is only part of our predicament. The expression and interaction of these drivers of risk through interdependent and highly synchronised globalised supply-chains, critical infrastructures, financial systems and societal cooperation are potentially highly fragile transmitters, amplifiers, and generators of further disruption and uncertainty. While intensifying stresses and repeated shocks can progressively undermine resilience and increase vulnerability of society just as the impact of the flu depends upon whether one is healthy, or already suffering from other ailments.

If you've been party to the governments contingency planning for blackouts¹⁰ and diesel supply interruptions¹¹ over the last year you will have got a sense of this fragility and how the absence of 'just one thing' can cause severe cascading impacts to society. The quotations at the beginning of this letter give an insight into how others have judged aspects of societal vulnerability.

The emerging risk environment we are entering might be summarised as:¹² *the on-going implications of a growing array of intensifying stressors and sources of shock interacting through increasingly fragile societal systems*. We will never be able to analyse all the potential interactions over time, it's intrinsically deeply uncertain and is likely to become more so. But they have a common outcome- they impact the stability and persistence of the societal systems upon which we depend.

From this vulnerability-focused perspective we need to shift some of our attention towards three broad outcomes that the concerns of this letter articulate. There may be more optimistic outcomes but these are the most high-consequence societal impacts for which we're least prepared.

- Ireland (along with the world) enters a prolonged period of stagflation/ depression overlaid with rising likelihood of repeated and interacting social, economic, financial, and environmental shocks homegrown, and transmitted through our interdependencies with the rest of the world. This does not mean that European economies will get into trouble next year, they may even bounce back, but that the historical trend may be breaking and downside risk is becoming more likely.
- Serious systemic disruption to critical infrastructures over wide areas/ periods (1 week-1 month) but recoverable. These could be driven by blackouts or fuel shortages, severe weather, cyber or physical attacks on critical infrastructure, or some confluence of conditions that drive cascading disruption to critical lifeline services.
- Catastrophic and irreversible global systemic destabilisation.

All of these outcomes can be prepared for, independent of any particular drivers of risk.

We cannot predict with any certainty what will happen and when, and the global economy has been resilient here-to-fore. But we are already making a prediction by habituation when we plan to go to the supermarket next week, assume a business or infrastructure can operate next year, make political commitments for the next election, or expect to roll out the deployment of renewable and resilient infrastructure over the next decade. All implicitly assume a continuity in large-scale global integration and systemic stability. Almost all of our chips are on this horse, as it expresses the inertia of societal organisation and adaptation shaped by past conditions

¹⁰ Energy blackouts loom on regulators radar. Irish Times (20 Aug 2022)

<https://www.irishtimes.com/business/2022/08/20/energy-blackouts-loom-on-regulators-radar/>.

¹¹ Fuel shortages may threaten states capacity to maintain societal function and civil order. Irish Times (24 Aug 2022).

<https://www.irishtimes.com/business/economy/2022/08/24/fuel-shortages-may-threaten-states-capacity-to-maintain-societal-function-and-civil-order/>

¹² Korowicz, D., Calantzopoulos, M. *Beyond Resilience: Global Systemic Risk, Systemic Failure, and Societal Responsiveness*. The Geneva Global Initiative (2018).

But consider the early reports of a new virus at the very beginning of 2020. Unfamiliar, far-away, infecting few. The inclination to forestall a reaction is strong, one doesn't want to appear hysterical, so we wait for more evidence or until enough of our peers respond so that we won't be the only Chicken Licken facing humiliation if it all turns out just fine. Anyway, most of us have enough on our plates being adaptive to and pre-occupied with the rhythms and dramas of our own daily lives and obligations. But this is to underestimate the power of exponential processes, where the danger is outrunning what is visible, and by dallying, future risk is amplified.

Yet the process of converging stressors and sources of shock through increasingly vulnerable societal systems can also become an accelerating process. It too presents the same challenges of comprehension, of stepping out of our familiar rut, of not wanting to appear over-sensitive or be accused of catastrophising. It too presents the problem of what we observe in any moment is not conveying what is becoming possible. Further, the process of building resilience and preparedness to handle whatever comes our way takes time and effort, while the likelihood of crisis and disruption is continuing to escalate.

We can hope for and work towards kinder futures, but we must also prepare for things going seriously wrong, *now*. Even if we disagree on the likelihood or scale of our emerging risk environment, putting some of our chips down on basic resilience and preparedness is a win for everybody. It's why we buy house insurance, not because fire is inevitable, but because the cost is so high if it does occur. We're now in a situation where the fire risk is escalating, our house infrastructure is potentially a tinderbox, and our insurance payments are years out of date.

Approaching a Response

The following briefly addresses some points of consideration.

1) Orientation

We have entered a risk environment that will increasingly challenge our expectations, worldviews, economic and risk models, sunk costs, our societies adaption to risk, and established contingency planning. We need institutional and social infrastructures more adaptive to this changing situation so we can prepare for tomorrow's risk environment by acting today.

2) Public Reaction

There is an understandable anxiety that the public might blow back on politics for broaching uncomfortable truths. However, increasing economic, social and environmental concerns may do that anyway. Being out ahead demonstrates courage, competence and compassion, and is fundamentally an act of hope.

Citizens in a democracy, facing potentially unprecedented socio-economic stress and severe disruption have a right to be informed contributors to discussions involving such profound challenges. The predicament before us is urgent and long-term, so we may not be able to avoid that which may be inevitable.

The message is not "we're going down", it's that we're living in an increasingly dangerous and uncertain world and we need to be better prepared - just look at Finland, Sweden, and Singapore who are already facing up to such challenges. Notice too that these are regarded as high trust societies.

It should also be noted that we (KHS and RASDA) have already been running the Electric Infrastructure Security Council's¹³ *Earth Ex* blackout simulation, and the severe flooding simulation with groups of people around Ireland. We've found that people really appreciate that they are involved in something so meaningful, that they are being treated as adults with agency and problems to solve, and that they can participate in a preparedness journey in communion with their neighbours.

3) *The Reflexivity Trap*

There are important and legitimate limits to what government can publicly stand over for fear of inducing or accelerating a crisis. At the same time, if everything is done in secret it severely limits the scope and capacity to establish society-wide preparedness (the reflexivity trap). The sooner institutions are announced and set up the better- don't wait until we're in the midst of a crisis when such reflexivity risks will be much greater.

4) The Speed of Policy Processes vs. Escalating Risk

Our political processes were adaptive to past conditions, they are highly maladaptive in an escalating risk environment where substantive decisions may need to be made quickly while maintaining popular legitimacy.

5) Whole of Society Approach.

It has long been recognised that in times of deep shocks and/or prolonged stress, government capacities can be overwhelmed. Hence citizens, communities, civil society organisations, the private and public sector need to play their part. *Whole of Society* preparedness draws upon the skills, local and contextual knowledge and experience of everyone. It's behind Sweden and Finland's highly regarded contingency planning¹⁴. It was also highlighted in the UK House of Lords report: *Preparing for Extreme Risks: Building a Resilient Society*¹⁵, and the recently published *UK National Resilience Framework*.¹⁶

In a time of increasing uncertainty and socio-economic stress, the risk of intensifying social polarisation and fragmentation is likely to rise, along with increasing pressures on general welfare and mental health. Whole of Society preparedness and resilience building can give us focus and agency in a time of uncertainty, and build communities of shared endeavour that support social cohesion.

First Steps in a Political Response

These are high-level actions that acknowledge an increasingly serious predicament, and puts together the support and institutional infrastructure to enhance risk assessment and response capacity. There are lots of specific policies that could be introduced, which I hope you'll give me the opportunity to discuss with you at a later date.

¹³ www.eiscouncil.org.

¹⁴ Whole-of-Society Preparedness: Finland's Approach <https://nationalpreparednesscommission.uk/2021/10/whole-of-society-preparedness-finlands-approach/>

¹⁵ Preparing for Extreme Risks: Building a Resilient Society. UK House of Lords select committee on risk assessment and planning (Dec 2022). <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld5802/ldselect/ldrisk/110/110.pdf>

¹⁶ UK Government Resilience Framework HM Government (Dec 2022) https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1131163/UKG_Resilience_Framework_FINAL_v2.pdf

- Form an on-going *Joint Committee of the Oireachtas on Emerging Systemic Risk, and Preparedness*. This would broaden and deepen the knowledge base of the political and policy system, explore the wider ethical, social, and political challenges, learn how other governments and civil society organisations are addressing our transforming risk environment, and explore policy responses.
- Establish a *Citizen's Assembly on Risk and Resilience*, to address the challenges this brings to Ireland, its people and nature, and how we can respond.
- Every political party should have its own informed and coherent *Risk and Preparedness Policy*.

Political parties need to consider what their response will be if their manifestos commitments cannot be implemented, societies expectations cannot be met, and the states adaptive capacity begins to be undermined.

Even the wisest and most virtuous government (make of that what you will) will not be able to control or solve the consequences of emerging risk because the socio-economic processes upon which we depend are so complex and globally entwined they exist beyond our ability to perceive, never mind our capacity to exert control over them.

- There is an immediate need for a *Minister for Resilience and Contingency Planning* (also a recommendation from the UK's Resilience Review mentioned earlier).
- The setting up of a *National Contingency Agency* to engage in foresight, preparedness and contingency planning, and coordinate State and Whole-of-Society responses. The Swedish Contingency Agency, the MSB, provides one model for such an organisation.
- *The Office of the Taoiseach* sets up an on-going, and properly funded *advisory process on emerging risk*. This should be focused on anticipating and preparing for more immediate evolving threats. This needs legitimacy, and a wide sphere of inputs and exchange.
- There are major issues relating to our future governance, legal systems, and the constitution arising from potential destabilisation and systemic failure. The government may be forced to respond rapidly and at scale in highly charged and contested contexts. It is in all our interests that we set the ground rules and find some consensus. The Oireachtas commit Citizen's assembly, and party policy should all address this.

We cannot predict with certainty what will happen. But it is increasingly unwise to assume that there must always be a 'normal' that we can get back to, because things can also get much worse. Facing up to such challenges head-on is an act of hope. It expresses a faith in each other and that there is a shared future worth having. But as of today, we're shockingly complacent and wasting time. As Dr Michael Ryan of the WHO said in the early pandemic period, when everything still felt a bit distant: *the greatest error is not to move*.

It's now well past time.

Thank you for taking time to read this. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions. If you find it helpful, I can introduce you to a range of people and organisations working on integrated risk, societal resilience and preparedness, and discuss specific policy proposals for Ireland.

Is mise,

David Korowicz

