European Food Safety Authority

Advice of the Scientific Committee in relation to EFSA's activities in a crisis

(advice based on a draft prepared by the Task Force on "Crisis Management" of the EFSA Scientific Committee)

Background

Section 3 of Regulation N° 178/2002 addresses the role of EFSA in a crisis. It specifies that the Commission should develop and agree with the Members States and EFSA a crisis plan and that such a plan would be triggered when emergency measures are not sufficient (article 56-1) to contain the problem. EFSA shall participate in a crisis unit and if necessary provide scientific and technical assistance. The Commission is currently developing a crisis management plan which will cover the joint arrangements between EFSA, the Commission and the Member States.

Not only will the Authority need to be prepared to **react** in a crisis as identified in the Regulation it will also need to have in place systems which identify developing potential crisis situations and be able to be proactive in this respect. The Authority should define its ad hoc arrangements and procedures for providing scientific information and communication in order to cope with its responsibility.

Terms of Reference

The Scientific Committee is requested by EFSA to give an opinion on the set-up EFSA could build to efficiently act in a crisis unit triggered by the European Commission. That set-up should complement the one which will be implemented for the handling of emerging risks.

Introduction

A crisis is defined as a time when it becomes difficult to appraise, treat and control an emerging event that may have a large impact on the community (Figure 1). It is a specific process which often starts when a triggering event reveals a series of disfunctionings that had not been anticipated or even thought possible. It appears often in complex integrated networks where domino effects and large scale effects of local events are possible. Major crisis reflect the ways societies structure themselves and allocate their resources; in this sense most crisis have political implications. Crisis, as disasters, are not random occurences but reflect the

interaction of human beings with a given environment. There are no purely "natural" disasters/crises; there are natural hazards, which impact upon human vulnerabilities and that are mostly determined by human causes.
Crisis is a time when the way of handling risk through a classical procedure is no more valid (Godard et al, 2002) because in particular it involves to handle not only the biophysical aspects of the question but also its social effects in the communities, including the scientific communities. Solving the crisis requires to accept to look in regions where existing models are no more valid, but where uncertainty, non-predictability, instability, irregularity and disorder can prevail. It needs a lot of effort to find back a new order for acting right, often not by using well known validated responses and for example by mobilising viewpoints of experts and not merely scientific publications. It often needs to clear what are the actual values at stake that will be used as references before going further.
Despite the short time schedule, experts should not work under too much time pressure but they should have time for sharing their knowledge and more important their ignorance and uncertainties. However, to be useful and legitimate they should have time to build up a new knowledge for helping the manager in a real time action.

A crisis is a process that usually includes a long incubation period with short and brutal and destructuring consequences (Roux-Dufort, 2000) that can be compared to the one described for the scapegoat syndrome (Girard, 1972). Four phases of a "crisis cycle" can be defined where EFSA can be involved:

1. Usually **weak signals of the crisis** can be perceived before the occurrence of its core. The Centre for Science in the Public Interest (2003) stated that it is "Only by tracking food/feed quickly, both forward and back through the food chain custody, will the authority be able to prevent large number of illness and deaths". Those signals can be non conventional and unusual and they can arise from unusual sources. The ability to "hear" them is an essential initial phase for an efficient crisis assessment. It is important to notice that often the problem is not only to get the information but to believe in what they mean. It is only in believing that a catastrophe can happen that we can be prepared to prevent it (Dupuy, 2002). That means that EFSA should be able to analyse the data arising from different networks and in the particular from the "*rapid alert system for food and feed*" but also from as many networks and contacts as possible from the whole world (e.g. OIE, WHO,…). In Europe sound system of record keeping, and more importantly of their analysis, in the food/feed chain must exist, strongly involving in particular the Member States. There must be a development goal that goes far beyond the food/health sector and involves the whole texture of society. In terms of *prevention* and *mitigation*, many hazards and vulnerabilities are reduced by preventive care, e.g. food safety. EFSA must contribute to *preparedness* by contingency plans and referral systems, to be activated in case of a crisis.

2. It may be necessary to assess the **scientific nature of the crisis** and to analyse the question under the current knowledge. For that purpose it will probably be necessary to quickly collect new information by mobilising experts from a large range of different scientific disciplines. They often will be asked to go beyond the normal scope of the risk analysis trying to give their personal opinions and "feelings" long before a more structured risk assessment can operate.

3. Managers may require **scientific assessment of different possible options for action** and to maintain the attention long enough to be sure that the system is back to a stable position. A system after a crisis can in fact be more subject to have a relaps or a new crisis.There is no golden bullet, no quick –fix solution against crisis. Crisis reduction/management is essentially a developmental process of investment in people and institutions, at local, national and international levels.

4. Eventually it is necessary **to learn from the crisis**. That part is often underestimated but is in fact essential. EFSA should be able to analyse any crisis arising anywhere in the world, and not only in Europe, so be able to better react in the future. Several organisations in the past (e.g. Lok and Owell, 2000) have been taken that opportunity to learn from other countries.

Conclusion

It is difficult to know what and when will be the next crisis. The only thing important is to believe that it will come. It makes then necessary to prepare the procedure so to be able to handle it and if possible to avoid it turns to be a real crisis.

Thinking about emergencies and preparing for crisis need to answer to the questions:

- Are we fully informed about the environment where we are operating?
- Are our plans realistic?
- Are our procedures adequate?
- Are our structures and systems strong enough to withstand a crisis?

In order to strenghten national, regional and international capacities, five operational objectives are identified:

a) to promote legislation enabling actions to take place;
b) to promote strategies, plans and procedures for coordinated action;
c) to strenghten human and institutional resources;
d) to promote programmes for public information, awareness and participation;
e) to promote collection, analysis and dissemination of information.

There is no quick-fix technology for crisis reduction/avoidance, which is essentially a process of investment in people and institutions. Financial and political investments are essential for a programme to have enough continuity to induce positive changes. It should overcome the difficulty of maintaining such costly programs when the aim is to avoid crises and then if successful to make non-events.

Taking into account those different aspects, the Scientific Committee is in the opinion that a **Permanent Crisis Unit** will be an essential tool for EFSA to deal with the whole crisis cycle for helping better the Commission to manage crises. Building up an ad-hoc group when the crisis is emerging will probably not be enough as it will probably be too late to really have the scientific and psychological resources to give the right solution to the crisis.

That structure should:

1. analyse the **weak signals** from wherever they come.
2. prepare an **emergency plan**. That plan should in particular include the key persons to be contacted and a list of experts with different backgrounds. It should better concentrate on procedures than on facts and aim at preparing scenarios of actions. It could also develop tool for quick responding quantitative risk assessment. An updated list of contacts with the key people will be necessary and robust procedures to mobilise them as quickly as possible, including all the facilities to work efficiently. In time of crisis, analyses of independent assessments coming from different origins will probably be necessary in particular in urgent cases. A first action could be to conduct a "crisis audit" to "identify potential vulnerabilities and possible crisis scenarios" (e.g. Anonymous, 1999).
3. have the mandate to organise **training exercise** with all the key persons which could be involved in a crisis. That point is crucial, as it should allow simulating an unusual event, not well defined, with no clear scientific background. That should create a context for all the key persons to operate in a concerted way to develop a culture of crisis.
4. be in charge of learning from **past internal or external crises** so to prepare future crises.
5. be involved in **communication** during and after the crisis. That involvement should be defined under the framework of the general crisis organisation in order to not interfere with other bodies. It should be based on transparency and aimed at gaining confidence from the stakeholders and the public in general taking into account the specificity of a crisis (Lubaszewski, 1999).
6. interact efficiently with **Member States bodies and international partners** in order to integrate disaster reduction and crisis management in development plans; and to have the capacity to manage effectively emergencies and crisis, with a maximum of self-reliance. Capacity, in this context, summarizes four major elements: a) *information* on the problem to be tackled; b) *authority* to act; c) *plans, resources and procedures* for their application; d) *partnerships.*

7. have a **trained and ready to act staff**. This permanent unit should probably include experts on crisis assessment and management (Roux-Dufort, 2000). It should have the facilities for conducting and recording the procedure and in particular a crisis room with all the relevant facilities.

The Scientific Committee is in the opinion that its involvement, or the involvement of its chair, in the EFSA Permanent Crisis Unit is necessary. It will be a useful measure to include the scientific committee and panels on a permanent basis will be probably involved in case of crisis. It will also help to mobilize as quickly as possible all the experts of the panels and to find other persons with complementary scientific expertises.

It will be perhaps necessary to have different approaches depending on the nature of the crisis, e.g. when dealing with **bio-terrorism** and establishing counter-terrorism methodology (www.fda.gov).

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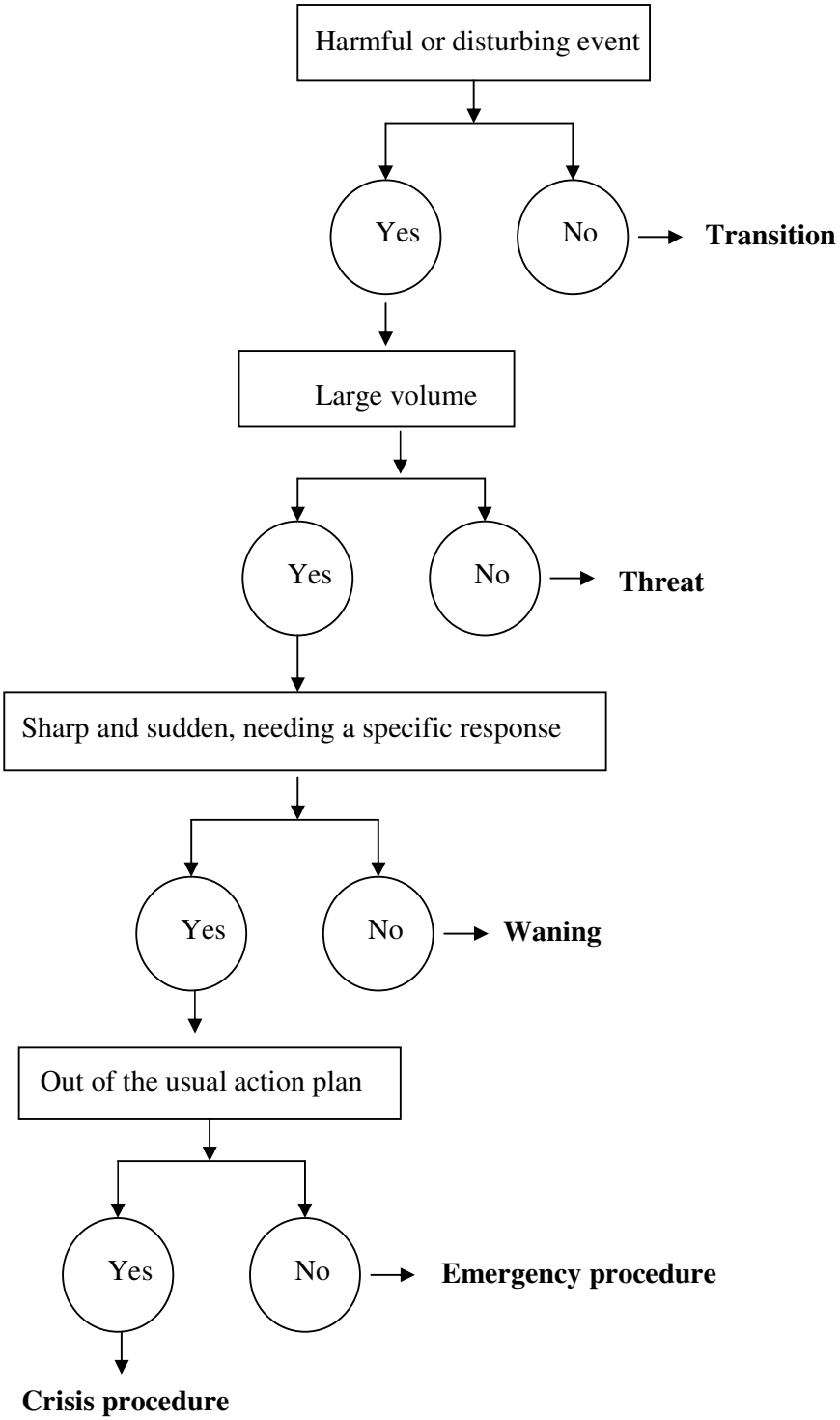

Figure 1: Chart flow of the crisis identification (Reilly, 1993 in Roux-Dufort, 2000)