

Permanencing ephemerality – upholding an everlasting crisis

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178

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Abstract

Purpose – This article seeks to understand attempts to formalize informality and keep the urgency of crisis in public sector.

Design/methodology/approach – To understand this societal problem, the study used qualitative methods of observations of meetings, text analysis and interviews with members of a central management group, as well as their Coordination group for receiving and integrating newly arrived migrants in a major city of Sweden.

Findings – The analysis shows how public organizations in response to the 2015 refugee situation initially adopted an ephemeral mode of action characterized by urgency, improvisation and short-term coordination. This break from their usual logic of stability and long-term planning enabled rapid mobilization but was not confined to the moment of crisis. Instead, actors within these organizations worked strategically to sustain the sense of urgency beyond the immediate situation. Through these actions, the ephemeral response was transformed into a durable mode of governance. The temporary was not only extended but used as a foundation for building strategic attention and mandate around integration. In doing so, public actors aimed to redefine integration work as both urgent and necessary.

Practical implications – The study provides insights into how public servants can actively shape and sustain political attention for complex social issues, such as integration, beyond the immediate moment of crisis. It highlights the importance of strategic use of mandates, organizational framing and internal mobilization within public administration. The findings caution against overreliance on prolonged crisis narratives as a tool for institutional change. While such strategies may offer short-term momentum, they may obscure other pressing concerns and reduce the legitimacy of future crisis responses. Public organizations need to develop governance strategies that balance responsiveness with long-term planning and enable institutional flexibility without defaulting to a state of permanent exception.

Social implications – This article is societally relevant as it highlights how public servants work to maintain momentum around certain issues. This can be understood as leading to other issues being overshadowed or deprioritized, and that public servants within governmental organizations cannot rely solely on bureaucratic structures and predefined mandates to address and manage pressing and evolving concerns. The ambition to sustain a sense of urgency around societal challenges may be appealing, but it becomes problematic when new and unforeseen crises emerge. There is a risk of creating a “crying wolf” effect where the continued invocation of crisis diminishes its impact and undermines responsiveness to genuinely acute issues. In doing so, the article exposes some of the future dilemmas faced by public organizations operating within a society characterized by polycrisis.

Originality/value – The article contributes to understanding how actors within public organizations strategically draw on past events to sustain a sense of urgency and build mandate for long-term strategic work. Although these organizations are typically associated with stability, they initially responded in an ephemeral, crisis-like manner. Over time, actors worked to prolong this mode of engagement, using the crisis narrative to legitimize continued focus on integration as a pressing and strategic concern.

Keywords Public sector, Crisis management, Integration, Public administration, Ephemeral organizing

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Crisis management is a challenge any organization can face. A crisis is a specific, unexpected and nonroutine event or series of events leading to high levels of uncertainty and threat of or perceived threat (Seeger *et al.*, 1998, p. 233). Multiple global crises can be characterized as interconnected polycrises (Morin and Kerne, 1993) when crises converge and amplify each



other, creating a complex and difficult-to-manage predicament. The crises reinforce the devastating effects of one another and create issues that are larger than the sum of their parts. However, crisis is perceptual and it is perceptions of the persons and groups that define events as crises. [Seeger et al. \(2005\)](#) argue that there are not so many crises but rather ambitions and narratives of crisis.

Informal, ephemeral and other ad hoc forms of organizing have been at the center of crisis research over the past few decades ([Lanzara, 1983](#); [Weick, 1995](#)). Research has focused on informal organizing and sensemaking during crises ([Weick, 1995](#); [Combe and Carrington, 2015](#)). What has been less emphasized is the role of ephemeral forms of organizing embedded in formal organizations and institutions. [Lanzara \(1983, p. 88\)](#) defined ephemeral organizations as being “what people do when nobody tells them what they should do” in the aftermath of a natural catastrophe before official institutions and organizations are in place. Ephemeral organizations are shortsighted and stance from the local context and perspective and evolve from street-level where rationality could be understood to act in efficiency rather than for gradual changes. Although the forms and actions of ephemeral organizations are highly adaptable, the content and purpose are not, since they evolve in line with the immediate local needs. The adaptability of ephemeral organizations makes them suitable for sensemaking and mobilizing since formal organizations often tend to lose their effectiveness during unexpected events. [Lanzara \(1983\)](#) argued that an ephemeral organization is almost not an organization at all, but an example of organizing in its early form. [Lanzara \(1983\)](#) viewed emergent ephemeral groups and government organizations as opposite and argued that once the emergent groups met state bureaucracy, their downfall as emergent groups was initiated and official institutions hold incompatible criteria for the role they should play in relation to each other.

This study explores crisis emergence and management within public administration and seeks to understand when official institutions act ephemerally and attempts to formalize informality to keep the urgency of crisis in the public sector. Building on this foundation, the following research question has been constructed:

How are public administrative structures adapted and reorganized in crisis conditions?

Background

Ephemeral organizing and crisis

[Weick \(1995\)](#) viewed ephemeral organization as the primordial start of organizing as it is being enacted. [Weeks \(2007\)](#) claimed that ephemeral organizations emerging during crisis would benefit from using already existing organizational structures to possibly improve efficiency and sensemaking and be removed when formal organizations are in place. [Boin and Bynander \(2015\)](#) connected ephemeral organizations with the needs of coordination in crisis and their possibility for emergent response networks. They underscored that spontaneous coordination and collaboration can emerge particularly from a bottom-up perspective and within framing of a rationality to act in efficiency could lead to instant institutionalization ([Boin and Bynander, 2015](#)).

Crisis necessitates and enables action ([Drennan et al., 2015](#)). That is because leaders are expected to act quickly and effectively to respond to the uncertainty that crises create ([Boin et al., 2016](#)). Crises can therefore be interpreted as enablers of change ([Kingdon, 1995](#)). By creating meaning and context around events, crises can serve as springboards for action ([Taylor and Every, 2000](#)). Crises are often followed by rapid reform proposals ([Boin et al., 2016](#)). [Mackintosh \(2015\)](#) noted that crises often give rise to ambitious efforts to reform policy and public institutions. [Hoffman \(1999\)](#) argued that new political arenas and groups can emerge around shared topics and issues considered important. This implies that conditions, norms and structures may change depending on how events in the surrounding environment are perceived as significant ([Hoffman, 1999](#)). Prominent events in society, such as an increased influx of refugees, can thus trigger movement and serve as a starting point for change.

Boin *et al.* (2016) identified three reasons why crises create opportunities for structural and fundamental reforms. First, crises loosen structural constraints that govern public institutions. Second, crises challenge fundamental values that guide and shape policy formulation and practices. Third, crises soften established political positions and stances on the affected area (Boin *et al.*, 2016). For a crisis to come to an end, two conditions must be met. At the operational level, response networks must conclude their work. At the strategic level, the issue must no longer dominate public debate, either politically or in policy formulation (Boin *et al.*, 2016).

Crisis initiates change

Miller (2001) argued that crises can persist by transforming into institutional crises. In an institutional crisis, the integrity of politics is questioned while room for action and legitimacy are challenged (Boin and Hart, 2000; Boin *et al.*, 2016). This occurs when a crisis begins to symbolize or become linked to previously unknown or neglected risks and vulnerabilities (Miller, 2001).

A review of previous literature showed that informal, temporary and other ad hoc forms of organization have been the focus of a significant portion of crisis-related research in recent decades (Lanzara, 1983; Weick and Sutcliffe, 2015; Pramanik, 2015). Research on crisis management has centered on aspects such as informal organizing and sensemaking (Weick, 2005; Beck and Plowman, 2014), governance and crisis management (Meyer and Simsa, 2018; Ansell and Arjen, 2019), decision-making in crises (Uitdewilligen and Waller, 2018; Kornberger *et al.*, 2019) and work under extreme conditions (Hällgren *et al.*, 2018). A common feature of these studies is that crises are viewed as temporary episodes.

Organizing in the post-crisis phase

Studies exploring the aftermath of crises follow a similar episodic approach. Once the crisis has ended, a new episode begins, focusing on aspects such as accountability and investigations (Brändström, 2015; Hwang, 2016), learning (Schiffino *et al.*, 2017), and policy change (Boin *et al.*, 2016). What has been less studied in research on crises in public administration is what happens when a crisis is resolved and in the transition from the acute phase of a crisis to the post-crisis phase, when immediate effects of the crisis have passed and actors must consider what to do next.

Theoretical framework: sensemaking before, during and post crisis

One way to theoretically analyze how individuals and organizations act in and after crises is to draw on Weick's (1995) framework of sensemaking, when faced with complex situations members in organizations can understand and make sense of events by giving them meaning (Weick, 1995). Weick (1995) discussed how frames in vocabularies involve abstract cues and the relationships between different meanings, connecting cues within frames to create sense. Sensemaking creates and imbues actions, such as organizational decisions, with meaning. It is a process in which individuals use events and circumstances to rationalize organizational behavior. Thus, sensemaking contributes to the creation of organizations' own narratives (Weick, 2005).

Sensemaking when adapting to crisis conditions

Snow *et al.* (1986) have shown that frames and sensemaking processes can create meaning around an event by organizing experiences and guiding action (Snow *et al.*, 1986). Taylor and Van Every (2000) suggested that the sensemaking processes related to a past event or situation can serve as a springboard for future action. Wolfe (2016) highlighted that public narratives can be used to mobilize collective actions, as large and transformative events constitute recommendations for action. Grodal and O'Mahony (2017) argued that mobilization for major

societal challenges creates shared goals that can encompass and bridge existing and divergent interests. [Deepa et al. \(2025\)](#) claimed that opposite perspectives and interests in the process after crisis may contribute to institutional changes when dealing with tensions between different actors. [Benford and Snow \(2000\)](#) argued that this is why actors can deliberately act to shape and create frames to mobilize others for support or to reduce resistance to an issue or project ([Benford and Snow, 2000](#)). Sensemaking can therefore be used to rationalize organizational behaviors and mobilize others to act ([Weick et al., 2005](#)).

Sense-making as an adapting process

A predominant portion of studies on sensemaking are based on specific episodes (e.g. [Weick, 1988](#); [Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010](#)). [Weick \(2009\)](#) argued that numerous everyday occurrences disrupt daily practices, leading to sensemaking. The emphasis on sensemaking related to specific events in many studies has led to a focus on sensemaking as an episodic phenomenon rather than as an ongoing process of organizing that is part of daily life. Change, however, is continuous and has no clear beginning or end ([Weick and Quinn, 1999](#)). [Powell and Rerup \(2017\)](#) claimed that the focus on studying episodes has resulted in sensemaking rarely being examined in relation to its significance beyond time and space within its institutional context or across organizational boundaries.

Expectations of imminent crises can shift attention to other potential problems that could later develop into crises ([Weick, 1988](#)). This does not mean that sensemaking is irrelevant to the future – quite the opposite. [Weick and Sutcliffe \(2001\)](#) addressed the significance of sensemaking for the future, arguing that the combination of continuous scrutiny and existing expectations evolves with new experiences, interests, and capabilities. This creates new expectations for sensemaking in unexpected events and a more nuanced appreciation of context thereby enhancing foresight ([Weick and Sutcliffe, 2001](#)). Research has criticized studies on sensemaking for focusing solely on retrospective sensemaking and “particularly significant events” (e.g. [Kaplan and Orlikowski, 2013](#); [Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015](#)). Weick’s perspective does not exclude the future. He emphasizes that sensemaking of the future is based on existing frames and past experiences.

[Weick \(2009\)](#) contended that decisions are often made to manage situations and potential risks where meaning is created retrospectively. People tend to see, justify and defend their actions against criticism, which involves creating meaning around decisions, shaping the dynamics of those decisions. This means that the meanings and arguments for decisions can change over time. A decision made to address a situation at one time and in one context may later be used to create meaning for a subsequent period ([Weick, 2005](#)). Looking backward at the past and previous events is therefore about the present and understanding and making sense of the future ([Weick and Sutcliffe, 2015](#)).

Creating meaning through future visions

In ambitions to constructing the perfect future, sensemaking is used in a forward-looking manner to visualize how the ideal future can be realized ([Weick, 1979](#)). [Wenzel et al. \(2020\)](#) argued that organizational activities have always been future-oriented, but there is a lack of extensive research on future-oriented practices as an organizational phenomenon.

Previous studies have shown that future orientation and future-creating practices are closely linked to sensemaking. [Kaplan and Orlikowski \(2013\)](#) demonstrated that sensemaking occurs through multiple interpretations of current problems and past experiences, which contribute to shaping present perspectives. [Seeger et al. \(2005\)](#) argued that after a crisis the discourse tends to become prospective and future-oriented focusing on renewal as opposed to explanations of the past. Thus, thoughts about the future are always intertwined with perceptions of the past and present. [Garud et al. \(2014\)](#) claimed that future-oriented narratives create expectations and a dynamic that can lend legitimacy, though this is paradoxical. If expectations are not met, legitimacy can instead be lost.

[Augustine et al. \(2019\)](#) suggested that actors can more easily relate to the future collectively since the future represents opportunities in times of uncertainty. They noted that while much research on the future focuses on the near future or immediate problems, it also considers the future on a broader societal level. These considerations are often based on moral and cosmological perspectives, meaning that discursive attempts are made to concretize and establish credibility through “what-if” reasoning ([Augustine et al., 2019](#)). [Müller et al. \(2025\)](#) argue shared values with a common purpose may help when navigating through crisis forward set social missions.

The setting

This study was conducted in a major city in Sweden and in the managerial board of the city’s reception for refugees. The material in this article draws upon documents (411 files) produced between 2014 and 2019. From November 2017 to March 2019, one of the authors undertook 14 interviews with directors, managers and coordinators and observed 12 board and sub-board meetings and one whole day workshop with the board and sub-board. This story is a compilation of these different sources to provide context for how and why the process of sensemaking came to be. This investigation was conducted in strict accordance with the core principles of research ethics, including the requirements for information, informed consent, confidentiality, use and the protection of individuals, as outlined by the [Vetenskapsrådet, Swedish Research Council \(2017\)](#).

Data analysis

This study adopts a performative perspective, which makes it possible to explore and analyze organizing during and after crisis as phenomena coming into being. The performative perspective implies that phenomena, as well as organizations, perceptions, norms and values, are not regarded as objective entities but rather the results of complex social processes situated within their contexts ([Czarniawska, 2014](#)). The material was based on using ethnographic methods, including interviews ([Silverman, 2006](#)), observations ([Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007](#)) and shadowing ([Czarniawska, 2014](#)), combined with document analysis. The analysis followed the principles of grounded theory ([Charmaz, 2006](#)) as a flexible set of techniques to develop theoretical understanding. Collection of field material, coding and analysis were conducted reflexively rather than sequentially, allowing emerging insights to guide further inquiry. Field materials generated through observations, interviews and workshops were analyzed through constant comparison and memo writing, which facilitated conceptualization and the identification of patterns, ensuring a dynamic and iterative analytical process ([Charmaz, 2006](#); [Charmaz, K och Bryant, A, 2007](#)). To provide structure and facilitate understanding of the empirical narrative, one part of the analysis was inspired by [Langley \(1999\)](#). All actions and activities in the material were organized along a timeline using a design tool that enabled infinite scaling of the model. This timeline was analyzed in relation to exploring how one period could give rise to the next, and how contextual changes might shape actions in subsequent periods [Langley \(1999\)](#). This analytical approach was complemented by coding and categorization, drawing on the analytical tools developed by [Charmaz \(2006\)](#).

Findings

The formation of the board for the reception of asylum seekers

The decision to institute the Board for the city’s reception for asylum seekers (here on by referred to as The Board) was taken in December 2014. The Board was headed by a high-ranking city official and consisted of directors from all sectors of the city, from three of 10 city districts and from the city’s housing group. The assignment was given to the Board by the municipality to achieve a coordination and collaboration with regards to the city’s efforts to receive recent immigrants and strengthen cooperation with other key actors: The Public

Employment Service. The County Administrative Board (of the area), The Swedish Migration Board and the Regional Authority. In the spring of 2015 before the advent of its institution, the Board's task was related to past experiences of collaborating across organizational boundaries, the ongoing war in Syria and the increase in the number of asylum seekers that had arrived in Europe. The Board's proponents stated that this situation required preparedness, planning, and the allocation of responsibility as part of the efforts to grant those who flee violence and persecution an adequate short- and long-term reception.

The assignment highlights the city's experience of receiving asylum seekers and the responsibility for coordination for the municipality was with the municipality between 1985 and 2010. It puts forward changes in responsibility with the establishment reform, the "Act on Establishment Activities for Some New Immigrants" (prop. 2009/10: 60), but identifies that the municipalities are to continue to have tasks regarding language and other adult education, civic orientation, practical support, social and rehabilitation efforts and housing issues.

The assignment involved strategic issues that were stated to be addressed within the framework of this collaboration. Responsibilities of the board included reception throughout the city, housing issues, development of establishment efforts and planning of newly arrived persons' [1] schooling and economic conditions. The aim of the assignment was to take measures that ensured that the reception of new arrivals in the city was quality assured and streamlined with efficacy in dialogue with the city council office and the municipal council. To create consensus and preparedness for action, and a long-term strategy, a planning team was appointed. The decisions were to be taken within organizational lines [2] by the board member's mandates, strengthening collaboration with government and regional agencies and contributing to implementing improvement measures. The board's members were responsible for information and anchoring in their own sectors and in relevant collaborative groupings.

The initiation of the board meetings

At the time of its inception, the Board was based on a management structure with a strategic purpose. Work was initiated by identifying strategic areas around the process of receiving asylum-seekers. In the summer of 2015, the number of refugees arriving to Sweden, and the city increased. When the Board met in the summer of 2015 members highlighted that "the pressure" for accommodation had "increased dramatically". A meeting protocol recalls the comment of one member: "we start new accommodations every two weeks, but it is not enough".

The Board became a key actor in coordinating and problem-solving. When more refugees arrived in the fall of 2015, the board work intensified regarding accommodation. When issues were bound to certain sectors, the board was open for collaboration and fast tracks of communications made the board an arena for coordinating and information sharing. The members used the Board to identify and close organizational gaps identified between sectors and joined forces for solutions and communication. Against the background of increasing numbers of asylum seekers, the city took a political decision to financially compensate all activities retrospectively.

Apart from changes in the allocation of funding, the organizing of the Board's activities changed. Meetings were held more frequently. Informal contacts between the board members and politicians increased. The board members decided to work stated with their own words "operative" and were described in retrospect with examples as directors calling personnel for temporary housing during a weekend or directors leaving other meetings to call people to find blankets for asylum seekers arriving at the central station. At this time, the Board had a high presence of the members. A communicator was connected to the group to take care of all communications. Solutions to the housing impasse were created by giving land leases to private housing companies in return for the provision of four-year leases on apartments for recent immigrants. Another decision by the city suggested by the Board was that the category of "newly arrived" in the city counts for four years instead of the more common and national set of two years related to the city's queues for housing.

In relation to national policy, changes and updates in legislation kept the Board in a constant responsive mode to the effects of new legislation. In January of 2016, the Swedish borders were closed, and no more refugees arrived. In interviews, this was mentioned as a “*shock*”. Members stated that the city had far more capacity to receive refugees.

The Board continued to meet every two weeks focusing on housing. In this phase, the Board’s members and other city officials had planned for continuing arrival of refugees leaving some sectors to reduce the size of the upscaled organization. The focus of the Board was still on an “operative level”. In the spring of 2016, they decided to move on to “strategic mode” with lesser meetings. In this time, the protocols became shorter, more filled with goals and identified organizational gaps and accountabilities. Meetings were focused on forecasts and figures in relation to being prepared for extraordinary events.

Revision of the assignment

On May 2, 2016, the Board’s task was redesigned, broadened in content and revised, partly because of the decision of the government in January 2016 to introduce a new law on obligations in all municipalities to receive new arrivals for residence as a “joint responsibility for the reception of New Arrivals” (Prop. 2015/16: 54). In this revised assignment, the planning group became transformed into a coordination group with representatives from various sectors working with the reception of newly arrived migrants. The strategic issues were reformulated from short-term to long-term. Housing and education policies were formulated to ensure housing for newly arrived refugees and to create the conditions for newborn children and young people’s education expanding to whom it may concern. The revised assignment highlighted creating conditions for involvement in society, long-term provision of skills and identifying shortcomings in collaboration with external actors and taking initiatives to eliminate them.

Unlike the first assignment in which the planning group had not defined tasks, the *Coordination Group* was given a mandate for decisions, planning documentation and acting on its own initiative within their respective responsibilities and place in the organizational scheme. The responsibility for communication within sectors and linked collaborative groups remained and a communication strategy was linked to the new assignment to keep the combined internal and external communication in the city and responsibility for updating the communication plan.

Revision of the assignment for the second time

In 2018, the Board received an evaluation assignment from the city council about their future aim, purpose and work. Organizational gaps seemed to have been filled, and the Board’s and the coordinating group’s meetings focused on forecasts and prognosis, continuing responsiveness and understanding consequences of new legislation, together with updating status and challenges within members’ own sectors. In the spring of 2018, the Board and the Coordination group met for a one-day workshop with the purpose of providing a basis for the evaluation assignment. Participants talked about the focus in 2015, a sense of accomplishments, the “innovative” decisions that were made continuously connecting the past, present and future stating that “*this is the time to keep the feeling of crisis because it is now that the challenges are coming with establishment in the labor market, social inclusion and housing*” (Member of the Board at workshop on the April 10th, 2018).

Discussions were held in theme groups with members from schools, housing, health and establishment/employment units.

Making sense of the post-crisis phase

Drawing on Weick (1975), the situation and experiences from 2016 can be understood as cues for interpreting and making sense of future situations related to these challenges.

[Participant 1] - We must dare and have the strength to persevere; the crisis is not over; this will continue for another two or three terms of office. It will not be an election issue, and why not? It is simply “resolved”.

Participant 1 reflects a forward-looking perspective, emphasizing perseverance and the anticipation of continued crisis over multiple terms of office. This aligns with Weick's (1995, 2005) argument that past experiences and current interpretations serve as cues for understanding and shaping future actions. The notion that the crisis is “not over” exemplifies how individuals construct meaning around ongoing events, linking past and present circumstances to expectations for the future.

[Participant 2] - Part of the issue has shifted to security and crime, which has its ideological roots in migration, and it should be addressed in a different context than it is now.

Participant 2 highlights a shift in the focus of the crisis, from one dimension to another, which resonates with the sensemaking literature on reframing and mobilizing collective action (Benford and Snow, 2000; Snow *et al.*, 1986). By identifying the ideological roots in migration, the participant demonstrates how actors interpret situations by connecting multiple frames and considering the implications for future organizational or policy responses.

[Participant 3] We also need to keep talking about new arrivals; they are just one group, and there is a need to talk about new arrivals separately. I have sometimes noticed that the issue of new arrivals disappears. (Observation, group Theme: Establishment, 20180410 Workshop)

Participant 3 emphasizes the need to maintain attention on subgroups, noting that issues concerning new arrivals may “disappear” over time. This reflects Weick's (1988, 2009) notion that sensemaking is both continuous and episodic: individuals must actively construct and maintain narratives to guide action and ensure that certain concerns remain visible across periods. It also demonstrates the forward-looking aspect of sensemaking, where ongoing dialogue about specific groups shapes expectations and strategies for future engagement (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2001; Garud *et al.*, 2014).

Future needs were identified relating to factors like labor market integration, education and democratic inclusiveness with identified risks of poor results in schools in areas with high numbers of foreign-born people leading to unemployment or poverty. The day ended with six prioritization themes, including “No one's” mission, future reception of arrivals, adults into working life, the assignment from the municipal council and identify and prioritize goals. Due to the absence of participants, a follow-up workshop was held and additional two prioritizing themes were added, health for and those who work with newly arrived and social integration. In later meetings, a new discussion arose about whether the board and coordination group should focus on the receiving process and the time when these people were categorized as newly arrived or should they focus on efforts for integration for foreign-born persons.

The city faces a major challenge in both the short and long term. Now it is important to dare and have the strength to persevere. The crisis and its consequences will continue for several terms of office to come. (From documentation ‘Workshop on new arrivals’ 20180410)

Workshop documentation underscores the long-term and forward-looking nature of sensemaking in complex organizational contexts. By noting that “the crisis and its consequences will continue for several terms of office,” the text exemplifies Weick's (1995, 2005) argument that past and present experiences are used as cues to interpret future developments. This mirrors Participant 1's reflection on the need for perseverance and illustrates how organizational actors construct meaning across time to anticipate and plan for ongoing challenges. Together with Participant 2 and Participant 3, this statement highlights the dynamic nature of sensemaking: actors continuously interpret evolving situations, identify shifting problem frames (e.g. migration, security or integration issues) and negotiate which aspects require sustained attention. It demonstrates how sensemaking is both episodic and

continuous, linking current observations and past experiences to projections for the future, and shaping organizational narratives and potential collective actions (Weick, 1988; Weick and Sutcliffe, 2001; Garud *et al.*, 2014).

Making sense of the aim and urgency of the board tasks

Two themes emerged when discussing the aim and purpose of the Board's assignment. The first theme demonstrated the two perspectives of interests either concentrating on the assignment of reception and establishment of refugees and or with the wished focus on efforts of integration of foreign-born persons viewed in a long-term perspective. The second theme represented how crisis as a concept was used to construct a sense of urgency to permanent actions of ephemerality as a practice of normalcy.

Navigating organizational mandates and priorities

What I mean by crisis is a sense of urgency, or as others put it, that we need to maintain a sense of crisis. By crisis, I also mean that it is important that we do this, and I think that is absolutely right. Then we must make sure that the integration is successful. If we don't have that as a high priority, which of the city's strategies are most important for the city's future development . . . If we haven't made ourselves aware of this and consciously thought about the strategies, then the process risks increasing segregation. (Interview with a director)

The director's statement highlights how a sense of crisis functions as both a lens and a motivator in organizational sensemaking. By framing crisis as a "sense of urgency" that must be maintained, the director emphasizes the need to actively interpret current circumstances to guide future strategies, particularly regarding successful integration. This reflects Weick's (1995, 2005) notion that actors use past experiences and present cues to construct meaning and anticipate potential outcomes, shaping organizational decisions accordingly. The director illustrates the forward-looking dimension of sensemaking: without consciously reflecting on and prioritizing strategies, there is a risk of negative consequences, such as increased segregation. In this way, the sense of crisis serves as a cognitive and motivational framework that connects present awareness with future organizational action.

During meetings and through interviews, two perspectives on who the strategic work was for in the assignment for the Board emerged. One perspective where the focus on the assignment arose from the perspective of time of establishment counted in relation to state set time of two years and the city's policy on four years, but still focused on the process before the social responsibilities become the municipalities. The other perspective of integration on long-term which viewed the board's assignment as the possibility to put focus and gain recourse on efforts supporting integration.

One explanation for the shift of focus from reception to integration was explained relating to current needs and in seeing the board's possibilities.

In 2015 it was very much here and now, to solve the issues. After that, we've had huge challenges in our sectors but there is more to do in the board. Since we do collaborate well, we are starting to orient us forewards integration, from migration to integration. (Interview with a director)

Here, a board member referred to 2015 as a retrospective marker and related it to the challenges that were faced and overcome together, using it as a standpoint to what the board can accomplish. The notion of "we" was reoccurring when speaking about the time of 2015, even though some of the members of the board had shifted was often used to emphasize "we" relating to the board's current members. In meetings, discussions about whether the assignment was to be done with a focus on reception or integration were frequently recurring when discussing the assignment and purpose of the Board. The discussion came up in a different way relating to creating an inclusive democratic society for newly arrived people and in direct discussions related to defining the target group for their strategic work. There was

never a noticeable disagreement in relation to the value and importance of integration or the need for efforts, but the disagreement occurred in relation to the assignment. The assignment had been enforced concerning perspectives on integrations with the forward integration having been emphasized in the revised assignment from 2015 and the discussions in the spring of 2018. In meetings, representatives from sectors with responsibilities that worked closer to foreign-born persons, such as directors representing city districts with a high frequency of foreign-born persons or social sectors, tended to argue for a perspective on integration and representatives closer to the politics or directors from sectors without responsibilities after the time of establishment seemed to argue for the process of reception of new arrivals.

I believe that City office is more faithful to how the assignment is formulated and in that I can say that I'm not sure what the assignment is exactly but there I mean and can see that we have space and mandate as civic servants to act in that assignment because we need to show for the politicians what needs to be done. (Interview with a director)

The quote shows how the director viewed the city office closer to the assignment even though not being clear for oneself on what the assignment was. The director's statement illustrates how organizational actors interpret and navigate their mandate, creating meaning around ambiguous assignments and understanding their scope for action. This director focused on the possibilities of having the space and mandate that a strategic group as the Board gave. It was putting forward the ability to change and influence the design of the assignment in relation to identified needs. These needs were described as a focus in efforts for integration in the labor market, collaboration efforts between the labor market and schools or efforts to increase election participation. Interventions mentioned by those members in the group argued for the Board to focus on integration. Members focusing on the reception and establishment raised questions related to a newly arrived person during the first two [3] years, referred to as the period of establishment.

Sense of urgency

The shared experience of 2016 and opportunities presented by that situation established a foundation for how the "crisis" could generate mandate and engagement. Board members described this as an experience that fostered confidence to act. One director stated:

What did the confidence to act create? The safety, I think . . . I could see that safety in decision-making, then I think it's political? You knew that the highest levels of civil servants and highest political leadership were united in this, and they were so clear on this, that we all felt that this is it! (Interview with a director).

This statement illustrates how a shared perception of urgency and clarity at the top levels of the organization contributed to a sense of safety in decision-making, enabling actors to act with confidence and commitment. It reflects Weick (1995, 2005) framework of sensemaking, where meaning is co-constructed through social cues and collective interpretation, and where confidence and perceived legitimacy facilitate coordinated action during crises.

By using the word crisis, it becomes very clear that this needs to be resolved. You can see a direct effect, and even if roles are unclear, everyone contributes (Interview with a director).

The quote demonstrates how labeling a situation as a "crisis" is made with the aim of helping to clarify the need for action and creates a shared sense of urgency, even when roles are ambiguous.

It was impressive, and I believe it was more of a feeling when we said that we must hold on to the crisis. What the city mobilized and what civil society mobilized (Interview with a director).

The director's statement highlights how the sense of crisis operated as a cognitive framing and a mobilizing force for the city administration and civil society. This aligns with Weick's (1995,

2005) notion of sensemaking in crisis situations, where actors interpret events and construct meaning to coordinate action. It resonates with research on crisis communication and collective mobilization (e.g. Seeger *et al.*, 2005; Grodal and O'Mahony, 2017), emphasizing that a shared perception of urgency can generate coordinated efforts and align multiple stakeholders toward a common goal. Even though "2015" seemed to be a starting point and served as an anchoring frame for discussions it seemed to be referred to as "a crisis" when talking about the future and the desire to keep "the sense of crisis" or "create a mode of crisis" in relation to challenges of integration. When "2015" and "crisis" came together in discussions it was often in relation to success and accomplishments creating an organizational success story for future challenges, illustrating what Weick (1995) called "abstract cues". "Crisis" was used in backward- and forward-looking discussions. What "crisis" meant in the interviews revealed two main stories. The first story was the one from those who did not frequently use the word crisis. These actors stated that they were not so affected in the fall of 2015 and that they did not detect the impending crisis. When asked why they thought other used the word "crisis" to describe the past and future, they stated that they thought it was to motivate action and create a sense of urgency. Board members stated that the collaborative setting may not have been beneficial for them explicitly, but the understanding of challenges of other sectors had benefited them in perspectives and to help raise awareness within and outside their sector. It stated that when using the word crisis, the purpose was to frame and create a sense of urgency. The use of "2015" made it possible to look back retrospectively on the unfolding situation and how it was managed.

The term "sense of urgency" was frequently used in English in interviews and discussions. The reason for why "crisis" was used to construct urgency was outspoken and on occasion, they referred to literature on how to create a sense of urgency for organizations [4]. They stated that they do not see the past or current situation as a crisis except for the individuals it concerned but by framing integration as a crisis, they wanted to create a springboard for action. When talking about providing a sense of urgency, it was motivated by commitment to social inclusion and integration and the perspectives on the economic costs for the society of these people were to become dependent on social welfare. Risks were in that sense identified and formulated, risks such as long-term unemployment, poverty, poor school results, and alienation, referring to the time after establishment when the municipal had the social responsibilities.

When talking about the upcoming crisis and framing the crisis to create a sense of urgency, the possibilities with "2015" were mentioned, related to a need to shift the focus. The main challenges related to social inclusiveness. Challenges of different living conditions within the city were described to increase the urge to use the mandate and available space to reduce exclusion, unemployment, and poverty for foreign-born people.

After the revision and evaluation in 2018, the Board and Coordination Group continued but ended in 2021 due to reorganization. In 2021, another strategic guidance with a temporary organizational structure for crisis management of refugees was in place to be activated in emergencies.

Discussion

Permanentizing ephemerality in bureaucratic organizations

As we conclude, the informal actions of the Board in 2015 could be viewed as ephemeral, evolving from a rationality to act and the adaptability that the decision to be compensated for all actions created in advance. Lanzara (1983) and Weick (1995) put forward this type of events as suitable for sensemaking. The purpose of using "crisis" was to mobilize, gain mandate and legitimacy for action as a possibility for actors to shape and create frames to mobilize support (Benford and Snow, 2000) and to uphold the organizational possibilities that ephemeral organizing had provided in 2015. Future challenges and needs were identified when "crisis" was strategically used as a frame and concept to invoke a sense of urgency, leading to action within questions as labor market integration, education and democracy. While using past experiences of 2015 expectations for actions could be creating future events (Weick,

2001). The sense of organizational insecurity was upheld by reoccurring focus on numbers in forecast and prognosis, reminders of impending risks for extraordinary events such as suddenly increasing number of refugees. Information on living conditions was used to point to another risk, the segregation from the labor market, education and democratic rights. Connecting to Weick (1988), it was possible to interpret that the risk of segregation was enacted through the experiences of “2015” and the process of forecasts information on living conditions, leading to a focus on an impending crisis. The overall ambition to would confirm Müller *et al.* (2025), that shared values with a common purpose may help when navigating through a crisis with set social missions.

Conclusion

Upholding and extending crisis in times of polycrises

Agamben (2013) argued that crisis has become a defining feature of contemporary politics, producing a new form of normality. Describing an event as a crisis creates something unique that signals an emergency, which creates legitimacy for rapid action and major changes (Agustín and Bak Jørgensen, 2019). In this way, real and rhetorical crises coexist and reinforce each other. By normalizing informal practices and extending crisis mandates related to noncrisis routine work public actors may contribute to a cycle of continued crisis conditions, making it more difficult to build long-term resilience. Instead of investing in sustainable and permanent support systems, authorities may continue to rely on temporary structures intended for emergency situations. This becomes particularly problematic in the context of polycrisis, where crises follow one another and exist simultaneously. The ongoing polycrises make it important to use a holistic and proactive approach to build long-term resilience and crisis preparedness systems, and politically prioritize resources and capacities to anticipate, adapt to and manage future crises. This makes it necessary for organizations to return to routine operations as soon as possible after the crisis. Crisis can mean a financial drain and the return to routine operations can prevent further financial losses. This is followed by an evaluation of the organization’s response to the crisis to improve the response capacity for future crises. This raises challenges for public servants who are expected to act within an increasingly politicized landscape. It brings into question the mandate of civil servants at the municipal level to engage in politically sensitive matters where accountability should be located.

Societal relevance

Since the material was collected, the changing world has experienced ongoing climate crises and escalating conflicts. Crises reach a point where there is a perceived resolution, yet the activities associated with crisis management continue reflecting organizational and societal demands. This article is societally relevant as it highlights how public servants work to maintain momentum around certain issues. This can be understood as leading to other issues being overshadowed or deprioritized and public servants within governmental organizations cannot rely solely on bureaucratic structures and predefined mandates to address and manage pressing and evolving concerns. The ambition to sustain a sense of urgency around societal challenges may be appealing, but it becomes problematic when unforeseen crises emerge. There is a risk of creating a “crying wolf” effect where the continued invocation of crisis diminishes its impact and undermines responsiveness to genuinely acute issues. This article exposes future dilemmas faced by public organizations operating within a society characterized by polycrises.

Practical implications

The study provides insights into how public servants shape and sustain political attention for complex social issues, beyond the immediate moments of crisis. It highlights the importance of

strategic use of mandates, organizational framing and internal mobilization within public administration. The findings caution against overreliance on prolonged crisis narratives as a tool for institutional change. While such strategies may offer short-term momentum, they may obscure other pressing concerns and reduce the legitimacy of future crisis responses. Public organizations need to develop governance strategies that balance responsiveness with long-term planning and enable institutional flexibility without defaulting to a state of permanent exception. For practitioners, this means cultivating reflexivity around when and how crisis framings are employed and ensuring that temporary mandates do not substitute for sustainable solutions. It suggests a need for clearer role boundaries and accountability structures in contexts where administrative and political responsibilities increasingly overlap.

Limitations and future directions of research

One limitation of this study is that it is based on a single event in one Swedish municipality. Since then, public administrations have faced new overlapping crises. This underscores the need for research into how public servants in other organizational and national contexts navigate emerging challenges.

Notes

1. Newly arrived: This term specifically describes individuals who have been approved for refugee status or asylum in Sweden but who are still in the early stages of their integration into Swedish society.
2. The word lines are frequently used by the participants aiming at the hierarchal line of decisions within their own organizations.
3. Four years when discussing housing in the city.
4. For example, references to John P. Kotter, "A sense of urgency".

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