



CRISIS MANAGEMENT AT LOCAL LEVEL : A PARADOXICAL CASE.

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ABSTRACT

In december 1999, the Erika sank, dumping 30,000 tonnes of fuel oil. 400 kilometres of coasts were soiled from southern Brittany to the Charente-Maritime. This was an unprecedented oil slick for many people.

Local communities, and more specifically the “communes” that were the victims of the disaster have taken an ambiguous stand in the crisis management. They called for the interference of a powerful state as it is the only level able to clean such a huge area. At the same time, communes were willing to manage the disaster on their area on their own. Their paradoxical behaviour underlines two conflicting frames.

At first, the communes, as victims, asked for state machine to take charge of the oil slick. To their mind, no one else can cope with such a pollution. Soon, central authorities managed the pollution since they own financial and logistic back-up to confront the disaster. Moreover, the setting off of Marpol strengthened their power. The situation was thus controlled by a stronger state with which local communities are physically and symbolically protected. Securing the population is one of the most fundamental missions of the government. If need be, the state is instinctively called upon. This practice squares with an age old tradition. Such a strong reflex resists change and reappears when the pollution lets local actors powerless. Authorities are pictured as the holder of power and expertise. This representation is efficient enough to shape behaviours. The state is seen as the last resort. Old images determine present attitudes more than we think.

The call for interventionist authorities was one of the first wishes of local communities. But they adopted an equivocal posture, willing to take part in the decisional process. Here is the core of the paradox in crisis management. Local actors stricken by the disaster could not act alone. However, they wanted to be involved in the resolution of the situation. Since 1982, local authorities have deeply assimilated the concept of self-government that the decentralization laws have implemented. Their relationships with the state have utterly



changed : from now on, they did not carry out central decisions any more but they work together. Even in a crisis period, the local power wants the services of the state to be a partner more than a leader.

Local level needs to take a major role in the disaster solving process. One event emphasises this will : public opening of the beaches. The DDASS' (departmental direction of sanitary and social affairs) agreement took a major role in this decision. Some of the mayors did not understand this situation or were angry about it. As a matter of fact, they thought this decision was theirs, and could not be taken by authorities. At that moment, they had to reinforce their decision-maker status. The oil slick reached an area where the representatives wanted to administer the pollution with state services. Sometimes state decisions about seaside resort were understood as an infringement on mayoral prerogatives because the beach is an important territory in an economic, political or symbolical stand. Representatives' inclinations have faced authorities that strongly assert themselves in leading depollution works. At that moment, the tension was obvious and conflicts broke out between local and central levels. This example shows how important it is for the communes to share in decisional process.

Two equivocal mechanisms have been put into focus. On the one hand, the call for a powerful state. On the other hand, the will to play an active role in the oil slick management. Consequently, communes have paradoxical behaviours and discourses. Twenty years after the decentralization process, they know how to manage their area with authorities as working-partners. They wish they could do the same during the crisis. However serious the situation is, the local autonomy cannot be put into question. Nevertheless, mayors have to admit their powerlessness : at financial, legal or logistic levels, they are not able to cope with events. Asking for an interventionist state is such a strong reflex that representatives could not help, actually. They call for a state in a leading position, without themselves offering alternatives. Authorities are expected to be in a key role because they have taken this posture for ages. When it is necessary, everybody wants the state to assume responsibilities which are shared in the ordinary course of things. When events are that crucial, the power tends -in its turn- to become caricatural ; this is unified, centralised, with a strong hierarchy. Communes then, seem to experience mixed feelings : they want to participate in decisions, but they are also relieved to see state authorities take charge of the situation.

The state is seen as the principal actor by local communities. Conversely, in the critical period, state services have recognised local authorities with difficulties. The crisis management requires a unified order in charge of important decisions. However, the local transformation that decentralization brought has changed order of the things a little bit only. The situation engendered by the oil-slick looks like a pre-decentralization period. This



statement could be done for the whole stricken area : a National Assembly report asked for a Marpol overhaul including local communities' participation, especially in the period when projects are being articulated.

