

Five Lessons in Resilience: What We Should Learn from Today's Blackout Event in Europe

By Wayne Visser

I was in Porto today when the lights went out - literally. And not just the lights; also the internet, mobile phones, traffic lights, ATMs, water pumps, trains, airports. Within minutes grocery shops were shuttered. Most workplaces ground to a halt. And the impact was way wider than one city. The power cut hit most of Portugal and Spain and parts of France and Belgium, impacting millions of people.

As I write, 8 hours since the crisis began, electricity has yet to be restored. It didn't take long before I sensed panic rising among my colleagues. How could this happen here? Is it a cyberattack, or worse? Will there be a tide of looting tonight? Do we have enough food and water? Why weren't we more prepared? There will be technical answers to why and how the blackout happened. Here are more strategic lessons:

● Lesson 1: Defence

The best way to deal with disruption is to be prepared for it, and preferably to avoid it. REN, Portugal's grid operator, claims the outage was caused by extreme temperature variations in Spain, causing "anomalous oscillations" in very high-voltage lines. The implication is that Europe's grid is no longer fit-for-purpose in a climate damaged world.

● Lesson 2: Decentralisation

For years, sustainability advocates have been calling for distributed renewables on micro-grids. If Europe had listened, today's crisis would be far smaller and more manageable. Any centralised system is more vulnerable to system-wide failure than decentralised systems with local capacity and relative self-sufficiency.

● Lesson 3: Diversification

We all know the saying "don't put all your eggs in the same basket". Europe has already learned to its cost from Russia's war on Ukraine that it is extremely unwise to be over-reliant on limited sources of energy, notably oil and gas. As it happens, Portugal and Spain have diverse sources of energy, including renewables, but they all rely on the same grid.

● Lesson 4: Duplication

In our modern economies, everything is optimised for efficiency. Any spare capacity or duplicate resources are seen as waste. Yet redundancy is crucial for resilience. In this crisis, it was clear that very few businesses and households have back-up sources of

energy like generators, or backup systems of operation, like analog, paper-based procedures.

○ **Lesson 5: Decoupling**

Our greatest risk is the dependency of our economies on the exploitation of nature. Therefore decoupling economic growth from environmental impacts is one of the best ways to improve resilience in the long term. The sooner we make the energy transition away from fossil fuels, the sooner climate risks can be brought back down to pre-crisis levels.

My bestselling book, *Thriving*, is now available in paperback from most e-tailers.

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