



ROBUST

CRISIS GOVERNANCE IN TURBULENT TIMES



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ROBUST POLICY BRIEF

How governance hybrids foster robust crisis responses

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Executive summary

As Europe works towards building societal crisis preparedness, the ROBUST project provides a novel framework to help guide these efforts based on real-world examples of robust crisis governance. Based on more than 50 case studies and more than 250 interviews with leaders and frontline workers in the public and private sectors who have faced crises head on, ROBUST has gathered new insights into the foundations of robustness. Aiming for common lessons from diverse situations, ROBUST is a truly cross-European effort by partners from Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, and Spain. ROBUST is funded by the European Commission's Horizon Europe program.

We have studied existing literature and collected data on 19 empirical illustrations of crisis responses to investigate the impact of governance hybrids on robust crisis governance. For our study, governance hybrids referred to the combinations of different structure and process-based crisis response measures. Crisis response measures included formal measures in crisis governance, such as emergency acts, but also informal tools, which can be linked with fostering solidarity and informal connections between stakeholders. Governance hybrids offer public managers a new integrated way to rethink and adapt policy tools at their disposal. By being pragmatic and flexibly combining different resources and ideas, public managers may be able to improve robustness by “building back better” to maintain core values for public administrations.

In this policy brief we highlight our key findings and share five recommendations, oriented towards public managers involved in coordinating crisis preparation and responses. The results are also insightful for civil servants and other professionals seeking a long-term perspective on integrated crisis management in their policy area.

The research findings indicate that robustness is fostered by expanding available opportunities and developing capacity to continuously evaluate them. Through pre-crisis preparedness, and developing collaboration and learning capacities, public managers can nurture robustness through governance hybrids. Crisis preparedness develops awareness of the relevant stakeholders, networks and initial crisis response actions. Collaboration and learning capacities allow public managers to critically evaluate crisis situations and adapt accordingly.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Build and improve cross-organizational ties between actors (potentially) engaged in the crisis response.
2. Develop skills of public managers for managing multiple crises and analyzing crisis response measures.
3. Establish feedback mechanisms during and after the crisis.
4. When including private and societal actors, define clear objectives and purpose for their engagement to ensure their long-term motivation.
5. Public managers should consider the mechanisms in place for maintaining legitimacy in the crisis governance structure and processes.

Case Studies

The findings are based on insights from 19 examples of governance hybrids from nine European countries (Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway and Spain).

The choice of examples – school closures and vaccination promotion and admission – were based on policy measures that were prominent amongst countries during the peak wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The cross-country study enabled analysis of crisis governance structures in systems of either high or low levels of crisis preparedness.

The COVID-19 pandemic reflects the complex conditions governments face, where crises have become more frequent and transboundary, cutting across organizations, policy domains and countries. With crises becoming increasingly the norm, governments have to look towards policy tools to address the crisis, whilst also maintaining the core functions and goals.

Findings

Our findings show that in times of crises, governments adopt a variety of governance hybrids to manage the crisis. These included combinations of coordinating logics across hierarchy (through command and control), market (through incentivization) and networks (through solidarity). The findings suggest that governance hybrids contribute to robust crisis governance when decision makers look to expand on potential policy measures and tools available, and are able to consistently evaluate and analyze the chosen policy measures and tools.

While public managers tend to have preferred policy measures for crisis response, such as emergency regulation and plans, crises tend to evolve in unforeseen and unexpected ways, rendering existing policy measures insufficient. For example, governments with prior experience in only small, localized emergencies had to adapt to a nation-wide pandemic.

The capacity to adjust and expand on the policy choices for governance hybrids is dependent on prior reform efforts and existent governance structures.

- Prior reform efforts can develop crucial capacities in policy areas and institute good practices for responding to complex problems through governance hybrids. For example, prior reforms adopting evidence-based policy making can increase experience in engaging specialized knowledge (e.g. NGOs, policy makers, civil servants, researchers from different academic disciplines) that enables governments to adopt a more integrated crisis approach.

- Governance structures influence both the perspectives involved in shaping a crisis response and how the policy tools are adapted to different local contexts. To illustrate, national level crisis committees can engage and coordinate with local municipality representatives to receive important knowledge about the ability to implement restrictive measures in contexts impacted differently by the crisis.

After choosing the policy measures for crisis governance, public managers must actively evaluate and analyze the governance hybrids used. As modern crises evolve, the surrounding conditions and environments continue to change. This affects the impact of policy measures, which may over time become illegitimate, ineffective or even illegal. Our findings emphasize that robustness is developed by engaging in the process of creating potential synergies between the policy measures in governance hybrids and developing the ability to substitute non-working measures.

- By being open to adopting different policy measures, governance hybrids can facilitate complementing dynamics and limit potential tensions. For example, decision makers can engage affected stakeholders (e.g. school leaders, community leaders) to formulate and implement restrictive measures (e.g. mandatory closures, punitive fines), to mitigate the negative impact from the restrictions.
- Over time, changes in crisis conditions inevitably results in some policy measures becoming outdated. By relying on strategic foresight and anticipation, crisis governance structures can phase out and adapt non-working processes and structures. For example, COVID-19 required adaptations to expert committees, with epidemiological expertise over time complemented with other scientific disciplines (e.g. economics, mathematical statistics, psychology, communication studies). The integration of different streams of knowledge provided a better-informed perspective on the benefits and costs of policy measures.

Crisis governance structures become hybrid by engaging in bricolage, i.e. by recombining and repurposing the policy measures available for the public managers. The repurposing itself should assess the values and priorities in terms of legitimacy, legality and effectiveness.



Recommendations

In this section, we highlight the most important recommendations from our research regarding the use of hybridity in robust crisis governance.



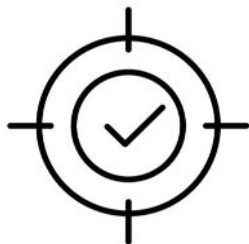
Build and improve cross-organizational ties between actors (potentially) engaged in the crisis response. Crisis situations require urgent responses, yet public managers receive a lot of information from different sources (e.g, signals from bottom-up within the established administrative structure; requests for intervention from non-governmental actors; media reporting over first occurrences of crisis situations). During crisis situations it takes time to establish connections with other actors. By developing networks prior to the crises, public managers expand their alternatives for turbulent situations and build capacity for more immediate policy responses through consolidated networks.



Consider developing the skills of public managers for managing multiple crises and analyzing crisis response measures. Past crisis trainings and simulations have primarily focused on one-off and short-term crises. Modern poly-crisis settings have led to consistent pressure on public managers over longer time-periods, requiring the skillset to repurpose and reuse available crisis response measures through governance hybrids. By orienting training more towards poly-crisis settings (e.g. time management skills, capacity for engaging and managing collaborations and fostering creative thinking towards ad-hoc interventions), public sector organizations are better able to maintain resources in turbulent contexts for both short- and long-term scenarios.



Consider establishing feedback mechanisms for drawing lessons during and after the crisis. As public managers develop capacity to adjust and adapt according to input from different sources of knowledge, they are better able to evaluate the efficacy and effectiveness of governance hybrids. With crises becoming transboundary, relying on post-crisis learning has become increasingly costly for the public sector. Furthermore, the drain on resources may result in public actors becoming simply unable to keep up the efforts long-term, limiting options for future interventions. Learning and timely adaptations are crucial for maintaining the long-term crisis response capacity of public sector organizations.



When looking at the inclusion of private and societal actors, consider defining clear objectives and purpose for their engagement to ensure their long-term motivation. Non-governmental actors can have specialized knowledge on crisis situations that could support public managers. This requires coordination skills to design conditions for the engagement of non-governmental actors in a timely and effective manner. Incentive systems may encourage non-governmental actors to develop and deploy resources and knowledge for crisis situations. At the same time, public managers should maintain motivation by reducing over-engagement and participation fatigue from activities that require high effort but produce low value. This would limit potential problems from misunderstandings and false expectations.



Public managers should consider the mechanisms in place for maintaining legitimacy in the crisis governance structure and processes. During crisis situations, the established routines for legitimacy come under pressure, as citizens expect quick solutions to uncertain and complex problems. Public managers therefore need to engage in trade-offs, where they prioritise certain values. However, unsuitable decisions lead to legitimacy challenges, which affect the ability of governments to respond to crises long-term. Public managers need to therefore consider the impact of crisis measures towards legitimacy and its effect towards the capacity to respond to crises in a long-term perspective.





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