ROBUST

CRISIS GOVERNANCE IN TURBULENT TIMES

ROBUST POLICY BRIEF

Lifeworld Knowledge for Robust Crisis Governance

Authors: Chiara Russo and Wouter Van Dooren

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.

This policy brief reflects on the role that lifeworld knowledge – the knowledge of lived experiences – plays in developing robust crisis governance. While deliberation with citizens might seem counterintuitive to the fast decision-making needed in times of crisis, relying exclusively on expert knowledge for crisis governance risks critique and a limited pool of solutions. Therefore, we argue that our democracies need infrastructures, what we call knowledge interfaces, where actors can exchange and negotiate their diverse knowledge types – such as the expert knowledge of an epidemiologist; political knowledge of a civil servant; and the lifeworld knowledge of a social worker who has visited the homes of fragile families. These interfaces can take the form of, for example, a consultative forum, an advisory committee, or a task force.

Our findings from the COVID-19 crisis led us to three recommendations for robust crisis governance:

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Knowledge interfaces:** Define the knowledge needs and work on setting up interfaces allowing knowledge exchange and negotiation with relevant actors. It is essential that participants perceive their input as legitimate and impactful on policy outcomes.
2. **Lifeworld knowledge:** Rapid decision-making is pointless if citizens cannot relate their experiences to the measures adopted. Lifeworld knowledge must be included in crisis governance to attain an integrated and whole-of-society approach.
3. **Responsiveness and legitimacy:** Knowledge interfaces including lifeworld knowledge are necessary infrastructure. For these structures to bring about robust crisis governance, the interfaces need to (a) meet regularly and (b) allow for contestation and feedback to keep measures up-to-date with evolving societal needs.

Lifeworld knowledge:
Why do we need it, and how can it complement expert knowledge?

Case

How can we include lifeworld knowledge in crisis governance? And how can this complement expert knowledge? Crisis times are characterized by heightened uncertainty with missing or messy information. Processes of sense-making and decision-making become more chaotic, and there is a high demand for relevant knowledge.

While an instinct in many cases has been to resort to expert advice, it is essential to question the purpose of involving experts, and whether we have been too quick to discard opportunities for deliberative processes that would ultimately lead to more robust crisis solutions.

On the one hand, the majority of citizens keep trusting science and experts. On the other, this should not necessarily result in relying solely on expert-based advisory bodies, or not building arenas for productive contestation and making space for different knowledge types to inform policy-making. Citizens' trust in science decreases when, for example, crisis management measures do not reflect their lived experiences.

Our democracies need infrastructures where individuals with different knowledge types can interact and negotiate, developing the societal intelligence needed for robust crisis governance. We recognize this opportunity in knowledge interfaces, which are arenas for knowledge exchange that were set up during the COVID-19 crisis in all European countries in different forms, ranging from expert committees to informal consultations with civil society.

Drawing from ROBUST case studies, this policy brief underlines how lifeworld knowledge has been included in knowledge interfaces during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to more recognizable, responsive, innovative and ultimately robust policies.

Policy context

The need to include lifeworld knowledge in crisis decision-making at different levels of governance is reflected in the mission letter to the EU Commissioner-designate for Preparedness and Crisis Management, and in her written answers to the questionnaire received at the time of her confirmation hearing.

The mission letter calls for an "integrated approach to crisis management", while the Commissioner-designate Lahbib speaks of a "whole-of-society" approach to "achieve a true Preparedness Union". But what do words such as integrated and whole-of-society approach mean?

From a critical knowledge approach to crisis governance, this resonates with the impression that previous crisis episodes have been focusing on certain knowledge

types to cope with uncertainty – while excluding others. For example, in the case of COVID-19, this meant inviting epidemiologists and vaccinologists on advisory and expert committees, while only later (if ever) widening the knowledge negotiation to include other disciplines or other civil society actors.

This reliance on expert knowledge is not new, especially when considering the parallel calls for evidence-based policy making. However, it is equally relevant to consider the risks related to the strategic use of scientific knowledge in crisis times, which can lead to blame avoidance or blame shifting dynamics, and attempts at improving one's reputation and legitimacy.

An additional danger of relying solely on scientific models is the detachment from lived reality, from citizens' experiences and their risk perception. Complementing expert knowledge with lifeworld knowledge for crisis decision-making fulfills the essential task of staying firmly rooted in citizens' evolving needs and understanding the collateral implications of policies. Deliberation and emergency response have often been portrayed as processes that cannot run parallel, for example due to time pressure. However, moving away from this preconception also means strengthening early warning mechanisms due to involvement of people on the ground, which is another important goal of the portfolio on Preparedness and Crisis Management. This would foster a crisis governance that is more responsive, more legitimate, and ultimately robust.

Findings

Using the data collected at various levels of governance from the nine partner countries of the ROBUST project, we have identified and analyzed cases of more or less robust knowledge interfaces during the COVID-19 crisis. These cases highlight on the one hand the role played by lifeworld knowledge in building robust crisis solutions and, on the other, the advantages and limitations of interfaces relying exclusively on expert knowledge.

Our research has analyzed interfaces on five conditions, which we believe can play a role in developing robust governance solutions. These conditions are:

- **Inclusivity:** Who was invited?
- **Productive contestation:** Were different understandings considered legitimate?
- **Self-efficacy:** Did the actors' input have an impact?
- **Intensity:** How often was the interface meeting?
- **Adaptability:** Did the interface adapt in goals, output, or composition?

Knowledge interfaces including only expert knowledge can be found in different European countries. Examples include the economic expert group in Denmark, the scientific advisory board in Estonia, the outbreak management team in the Netherlands, the group of experts for the COVID-19 management strategy in Belgium, and the technical scientific committee in Italy.

These interfaces often displayed significant self-efficacy, as the recommendations made by these experts were closely followed by their principals, e.g. local or national governments. As an illustration, the outbreak management team in the Netherlands disputed the effectiveness of facemasks at the beginning of the crisis, and this resulted in facemasks not being obligatory to wear in the country despite other countries already using this containment measure.

In terms of other conditions, expert-based interfaces seemed to not be championing adaptability, with the exception of the technical-scientific committee in Italy which grew in numbers as the crisis progressed, moving from seven to twenty-five members. However, despite this growth, all the members still belonged to the field of medicine, limiting the available perspectives.

Regarding the inclusivity condition, there is some notable effort in few cases in either including ad-hoc actors, such as representatives from regional laboratories in the Dutch team, or in bringing in expertise from other disciplines than the medical one, such as psychology in the Belgian group. However, for the most part, we observed expert groups having a significant impact on the crisis management measures while including knowledge from very few, specific disciplines.

This brings us to question which knowledge is considered legitimate in a crisis. Such choices have an impact on the potential for contestation and diverse solutions proposed, and ultimately on the robustness of crisis governance. How has lifeworld knowledge complemented expert knowledge and brought about that robustness?

Inclusivity has taken different forms during the crisis in the countries we have analyzed. For example, emergency scenarios in the Czech Republic were discussed at the local level in a broad group that included the mayor, civil servants from different departments, the hospital administration, and the regional administration. Together, they discussed and negotiated potential emergency scenarios in an exchange of political, expert, and lifeworld knowledge.

The Belgian case offers additional examples of how involvement of diverse expert knowledge such as civil society can to bring lifeworld knowledge to the table. For example, during the development of the contact tracing app "Coronalert", two consultations were launched to receive insights from academic experts in a variety of disciplines, from law to computer science; professionals in app development, public health and more; municipalities; and concerned citizens. In a similar vein, the education minister in the Belgian Flemish region regularly consulted with a broad range of stakeholders during the crisis. These included parent representatives, teacher trade unions, psychologists, virologists, pedagogy experts and even student representatives. Evidence from interviews underlines how these contacts reduced uncertainty, supported knowledge negotiation and building joint solutions, and allowed stakeholders to provide early and continuous feedback on the measures implemented.
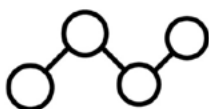
Recommendations

In times of crisis, there seems to be an assumed opposition between deliberation and urgent action. However, the two are intimately related, and deliberation is exactly what makes action possible.

We need to protect that ongoing capacity for deliberation in our crisis governance at different government levels. To do so, we propose to develop knowledge interfaces as epistemic infrastructures of democracy. Such infrastructure has the potential to allow for negotiation between different knowledge types, productive contestation, impact on decision-making, ongoing feedback loops, and the adaptation needed in turbulent times.

Based on our findings, we propose the following three recommendations:

Knowledge interfaces: Define the knowledge needs and work on setting up knowledge interfaces that allow for knowledge exchange and negotiation with relevant actors. It is essential that participants perceive their input as legitimate and impactful on policy outcomes.

Lifeworld knowledge: Rapid decision-making is pointless if citizens cannot relate their experiences to the measures adopted. Lifeworld knowledge must be included in crisis governance to attain an integrated and whole-of-society approach.

Responsiveness and legitimacy: Knowledge interfaces that include lifeworld knowledge are necessary infrastructure. For these structures to bring about robust crisis governance, the interfaces need to (a) meet regularly and (b) allow for contestation and feedback that keep the measure up-to-date with evolving societal needs.