ROBUST

ROBUST POLICY BRIEF

Pathways to Robustness

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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 35 local case studies from nine countries and 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 building blocks of robustness. Aiming for common lessons from diverse situations, ROBUST is a cross-European effort by partners from Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, and Spain. ROBUST is funded by the European Commission's Horizon Europe program.

In this policy brief, we reflect on pathways to robust governance in turbulent times. Building on the configurational analysis conducted (see Deliverable 7.2), we provide insights into different governance factors contributing to robustness across different phases of societal turbulence. Empirically, we focus on 35 public value solutions that were formulated and implemented to protect child wellbeing during COVID-19. As the findings show no single factor or strategy proved sufficient to achieve robustness, we argue adaptive collaborations between different types of actors and flexible modes of coordination are essential to protect and strengthen core values, goals and functions of society across varying phases of turbulence.

The findings from the configurational analysis led to three recommendations for robustness in turbulent times:

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Promote and institutionalize multi-level and hybrid governance structures
2. Invest in societal intelligence through inclusive knowledge interfaces involving citizens and end-users
3. Support actor-centered robustness strategies emphasizing distributed networks and accountable autonomy

Configurations for robust governance

A call for adaptive capacity in response to societal turbulence

Case

Contemporary societies face increasing and enduring societal turbulence, marked by uncertainty, unpredictability, and unrest. Turbulence conditions challenge the capacity of public institutions to uphold core societal functions and democratic values. To respond to such circumstances and facilitate robust governance to 'build back better', governmental and non-governmental actors must respond in ways that are adaptive, innovative, effective and legitimate.

The ROBUST project studies the factors that enable or impede robust governance, to explore which combinations of governance conditions contribute to robustness across different phases of societal turbulence. We studied 35 public value solutions that were formulated and implemented to protect child wellbeing during COVID-19. Using Qualitative Comparative Analaysis , we identified how multi-level governance, hybridity of governance, and societal intelligence interact to shape robust responses. We also light on the role of actor-centered robustness strategies, i.e., day-to-day activities employed by (groups of) actors in providing robustness.

Rather than pointing to one-size-fits-all solutions, the findings from ROBUST show that robustness emerges from different configurations, changing over time. Specific constellations of conditions prove impactful in different phases of turbulence and different local contexts. This policy brief provides insights into these constellations. We argue that adaptive governance capacity and flexible involvement of different (types of) actors, rather than fixed institutional templates, is needed in turbulent times.

Policy context

The need to strengthen robust governance capacity is reflected in the mission letter from the President of the European Commission to the Commissioner-designate for Preparedness and Crisis Management. The mission letter stresses how "we need to shift from reaction to proactive readiness", and calls for "an integrated approach to crisis management". This integrated approach implies coordination

across policy domains and governance levels, recognizing that crises often span sectors (e.g., health, economy, security, environment) and that their impacts are interwoven and mutually reinforcing.

In addition to such integrative efforts, the Commissioner emphasizes the importance of "a broader establishment of a culture of preparedness and resilience in Europe" to employ a "whole-of-society approach". This refers not only to coordination between institutions, but to broad societal engagement. Thus, the Commissioner underlines the pivotal role of collaborations with different types of stakeholders, including non-governmental actors, businesses, scientists and citizens.

The ROBUST project supports these objectives. It seeks to help advance these ambitions, e.g., by paying specific attention to the broad impact of specific instances of turbulence and the role of various actors from different governance levels (i.e., international, national, regional, local) and sectors (including governmental, non-governmental, and private sector actors).

Findings

This policy brief draws on findings from 35 case studies of public value solutions boosting child wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic, across nine European countries. We used a fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis to identify which combinations of governance conditions and actor-centered robustness strategies contributed to robust responses in different phases of the crisis.

Our key finding: no single factor or actor can guarantee robustness. Instead, robustness results from different configurations of governance factors and different combinations of actors, which also change over time. Various governance factors (i.e. multi-level governance, hybridity of governance, and societal intelligence) played different roles across pandemic phases. To illustrate, societal intelligence was vital during the first wave, while multi-level governance and hybridity became more prominent in later stages.

The evolving configurations over time become visible in an Italian public value solution, where student wellbeing was promoted through dialogue, counselling and workshops. A key characteristic of this solution in the first phase of COVID-19 was the exchange between different types of insights, represented by different types of actors, such as psychologists and teachers. 'Experiental knowledge' based on everyday encounters and specific expertise, translated to different professional domains and transmitted through ad-hoc meetings, contributed to the effectiveness and legitimacy of this initiative right after the outbreak of the pandemic. As the crisis evolved, more actors from different levels and sectors were involved and the collaborative effort was formalised. Collective meetings and bilateral meetings became more prominent, further underscoring the adaptations made over time to foster robustness.

Based on the data, we also identified two particularly influential actor-centered strategies: building distributed networks (in which actors are loosely coupled to advance e.g., mutual learning) and promoting accountable autonomy (to grant local actors independence to respond, in a broader framework of general goals and guidelines). These findings highlight the pivotal role of flexible collaborative arrangements, as well as leadership and trust at multiple levels of governance.

Ultimately, the findings show that robust crisis governance is not about fixed protocols or centralized control. It needs various actors in different combinations to respond to changing circumstances in turbulent times. Robustness thus requires adaptive collaboration across sectors and levels. This aligns with the EU's call for the "integrated approach to crisis management", as described in section 2 of this policy brief.

Recommendations and action points

To stimulate robust governance responses in times of increasing and enduring turbulence, we recommend policymakers and practitioners to prioritize adaptive capacity over rigid institutional designs. Robust governance emerges through flexible collaboration across sectors and levels, integrating diverse perspectives and modes of coordination in different phases of turbulence. This calls for trust-building and inclusive engagement. The European Commission and its Commissioner for Preparedness and Crisis Management can lead by fostering frameworks and incentives that encourage such adaptive governance approaches.

Based on the findings of the ROBUST project, we propose the following recommendations:

1. Promote and institutionalize multi-level and hybrid governance structures.

Who: European Commission, as well as national, regional and local governments What: Develop policies and funding mechanisms that incentivize collaboration across governance levels (international, national, regional, local) and between public, private, and civil society actors. Facilitate formal and informal arenas for cross-sector dialogue and coordination to address interconnected societal issues. Why: Effective crisis responses depend on combining the strengths of diverse actors and governance levels, adapting to evolving challenges as shown in the varying pandemic phases. Example from ROBUST dataset: the city of Reggio Emilia (Italy) deepened and broadened its existing collaborative arrangements around youth mental health and education. A 'steering committee' was established, which served as a coordination point for sharing insights, discussing challenges, and aligning interventions related to child and adolescent wellbeing.

2. Invest in societal intelligence through inclusive knowledge interfaces.

Who: Policymakers, local authorities, and crisis managers What: Create and support 'knowledge interfaces' where people bringing scientific expertise, lived experience, and political knowledge interact regularly. Why: Integrating diverse types of knowledge increases situational awareness and policy relevance, especially during the early and uncertain phases of turbulence. Example from ROBUST dataset: youth professionals from Antwerp, Belgium working in public spaces to provide low-threshold psychological support, based on prior trust, insights from local context and professional expertise.

3. Support actor-centered robustness strategies emphasizing distributed networks and accountable autonomy.

Who: Local governments, public institutions, and civil society organizations What: Encourage the development of distributed networks that facilitate (e.g.,) mutual learning. Grant local actors autonomy within clear frameworks to tailor responses to local needs, accompanied by accountability mechanisms. Why: Flexibility and local initiative enhance timely adaptation to rapidly changing conditions. Example from ROBUST dataset: youth workers in Utrecht, the Netherlands were stimulated to adapt their services independently to local needs, including organizing small-group outdoor activities, digital meet-ups and peer-to-peer mental health initiatives. While they operated with significant freedom, they remained accountable to the city administration through regular reporting.

These recommendations align with the Commissioner's mission to shift from reactive to proactive integrated crisis management. By embedding adaptive governance capacities and inclusive collaboration in policy frameworks, Europe can strengthen its robustness for future turbulence.

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