



ROBUST

CRISIS GOVERNANCE IN TURBULENT TIMES



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ROBUST POLICY BRIEF

Robust crisis responses through multilevel governance

Authors: Federico Cuomo, Tiziana Caponio and Stefania Ravazzi

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.

Multi-Level Governance (MLG) refers to the dispersion of state authority across different levels of government — local, regional, national, and supranational— and includes public and private actors. MLG emphasizes non-hierarchical interactions, where policy is formulated and implemented via coordinated actions, across various levels and sectors.

This approach, which includes both formal and informal processes, is seen as a critical mechanism for fostering robust crisis governance. During the COVID-19 crisis, MLG played a pivotal role in managing responses across European countries.

The research findings suggest that MLG policy making enhanced both the legitimacy and effectiveness of policy responses, especially during the reopening stages. The non-hierarchical and multivocality of MLG can take different forms, from highly institutionalized venues to flexible and informal arrangements. In any form, MLG enabled policy adaptation by engaging diverse stakeholders across different levels of government and private sectors. However, effective steering of MLG was key in gaining commitment from public and non-public actors, facilitating local adaptation of national measures, and supporting the scaling-up of local innovative solutions.

In conclusion, MLG fosters policy ownership and effective robust governance strategies, which is vital for addressing the complex and multi-dimensional challenges of crises.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. MLG should be at the center of the EU Preparedness Union Strategy**, incorporating institutions representing local/regional authorities and stakeholders; specifically the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee. City networks should provide up-to-date insights on local crisis preparedness, while umbrella organizations in strategic sectors offer valuable perspectives to inform the Preparedness Plan.
- 2. Multilevel networks should be mobilized by the EC when a crisis strikes**, to effectively establish a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to crisis management.
- 3. The Emergency Response Coordination Centre should play a pivotal role in steering for effective crisis management**, supporting national governments and guiding non-hierarchical engagement of local institutional and non-institutional actors.

Multi-Level Governance

The concept of multi-level governance (MLG) has been subject to lively scientific debate since the publication of the seminal works of Marks (1993) and Hooge and Marks (2001). Focusing on the European Union (European Community in the 1990s), these scholars defined MLG as the dispersion of state authority across a wide spectrum of interdependent and yet autonomous public and non-public organizations operating at different local, regional, national, and supranational scales. In other words, in response to top-down pressures for European integration and bottom-up demands for decentralization, state authority had become dispersed within and beyond nation states, producing a multi-layered polity based on interaction between states, levels of government, and public and private actors, each holding a certain amount of power (Hooge et al., 2013).

Debates on MLG have been echoed in EU policy circles, as shown in the Committee of the Regions' White Paper on Multilevel Governance adopted in June 2019, defining MLG as "coordinated action by the European Union, the member states and local and regional authorities based on partnership and aimed at drawing up and implementing EU policies". In a similar vein, OECD publications on MLG emphasize issues of efficient coordination and inter-institutional cooperation in increasingly decentralized political systems in Europe and beyond.

Additionally, recent literature has started to present multi-level governance as a specific mode of policy making through which policy is formulated and implemented involving not only governmental authorities at different levels but also an array of non-public and private actors (Alcantara and Nelles, 2014; Alcantara et al., 2016). In this perspective, three core features of MLG have been identified: 1) different levels of government are simultaneously involved in policy making; 2) non-governmental actors are participating at different levels; and 3) relationships between different levels of government and with non-governmental actors take the form of non-hierarchical networks (Alcantara and Nelles, 2014; Caponio and Jones-Correa, 2018). A key strength of this new conceptualization of MLG is that it pays attention to both horizontal and vertical relationships, considering formal and informal processes.

The provision of robust governance in the face of crisis-induced turbulence is likely to be highly dependent on the quality of the interactions between public and non-public actors from different levels. However, coordination is notoriously difficult in times of crisis, due to uncertainty, complexity, and time pressure underpinning these situations.

Based on these observations, we posit that, to be conducive to robust crisis governance, MLG must present three key features:

- **Non-hierarchical relations.** MLG should engage actors from different sectors and levels of government on an equal footing, and through different formal and informal settings to align goals and better coordinate actions.
- **Multivocality.** MLG should engage all key stakeholders and concerned policymakers to ensure multiple voices and views are incorporated, enabling policy innovation and adaptation to changing conditions.
- **Steering.** Non-hierarchical relations and multivocality in MLG should have effective and legitimate steering, ensuring all actors are engaged and coordinated in policy actions.

The presence of these three features in MLG interactivity is crucial to support the emergence of robust governance responses in times of crisis. Through MLG interactions, policy makers and stakeholders at different levels and from different sectors engage in building consensus on policy goals, which is crucial to face uncertainty in crises. By participating in policy making, actors engage in mutual learning and commit to swift policy implementation, contributing to effectively solving emerging problems and challenges. In other words, MLG enhances a sense of policy ownership by partners. This is a fundamental condition for effective and legitimate deliberation, ensuring broad-based support to the changing solutions as well as to the overall system of governance.

MLG is of clear strategic relevance to the polycrises facing the EU and its citizens. As acknowledged by the mandate of the EU Commissioner for Preparedness and Crisis Management, “as crises are increasingly complex, a more comprehensive and integrated approach to crisis management is also required”. Well tailored and flexible MLG arrangements are key to ensure strengthened cooperation and coordination, across levels of government and with all relevant non-public actors from civil society organisations to private companies, depending on the issues at hand – to ensure integrated approaches to crisis management.



Findings

A key finding of the ROBUST project is that while traditional top-down and hierarchical modes of policymaking prevailed at the start of the crisis - such as when national governments introduced draconian measures like lockdowns to contain the spread of the virus - in the post-emergency phase, MLG policy making became crucial to the design and implementation of robust responses, enabling a gradual re-opening of economic activities and social life. Three features appear prominently in the examples below.

Examples of non-heirarchy and multi-vocality

Non-hierarchy and multi-vocality have assumed different forms, from highly institutionalized venues like governmental commissions or emergency committees, to more flexible and informal arrangements like occasional online exchanges and discussion fora. Regardless of these differences, MLG policy making allowed the adaptation of policy strategies to the changing conditions of local contexts and to cater flexibly to the needs of the concerned population.

A case in point is the National Crisis Committee set up by the Spanish government as an institutionalized MLG venue. Here, managers from the Ministry of Education met with regional authorities and other public and private stakeholders (representatives of trade unions, education specialists, psychologists, teachers, parents, companies and students), to design and implement consistent school closure strategies, while reducing disparities and favouring mutual learning across Autonomous Communities.

In Estonia, vaccination working groups composed of different actors were created to organize the vaccination campaign, including governmental organizations, such as the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Health Board, the Estonian Health Insurance Fund, and non-governmental actors, such as the Union of General Practitioners and the Estonian Association of SMEs. This MLG strategy provided the national government with a more comprehensive view of concerns and implications underpinning the implementation of the national vaccination strategy.

In Italy, local governments and trade unions took part in rounds of consultations with the Ministry of Education to define aspects of the vaccination campaign for school staff and students. The peer-to-peer engagement of the school managers in this venue was crucial in planning staggered timetables that would not put pressure on the local transport system.

Examples of effective and legitimate steering

Effective and legitimate steering has proven essential to foster robustness in policy making processes. Public actors' steering in MLG arrangements played two key functions. First, it catalyzed active engagement from relevant public and non-public actors, strengthening their commitment to solve issues at hand. Second, public steering facilitated the local adaptation of national measures and allowed for the scaling-up of innovative solutions at a local level.

In Belgium, the Corona Commissariat, a national ad-hoc committee built to coordinate responses to the COVID-19 crisis, supported by the Prime Minister's Office and the Health Minister's Office, enabled the coordination of measures adopted by various levels of government, including local authorities. While supporting and coordinating the committees set up at different - local and regional - levels, the Commissariat played a crucial role in ensuring the coherence and enhanced the legitimacy of the federal strategy by establishing actors as 'co-owners' of the implementation process.

In Denmark, a tradition of cooperation between the state, regions, and municipalities across various policy areas helped facilitate MLG interactions during the pandemic. At national level, the emergency board NOST provided a central platform for key decisions, coordination, and implementation — including the procurement of hygiene and testing equipment, and the enforcement of regulations on hygiene, social distancing, and the closure of schools, public institutions, and many businesses. To further streamline coordination, a National Pandemic Commission was established in spring 2021, replacing the five regional pandemic commissions to improve the management of hospitals and vaccination facilities. Within this complex MLG structure, Denmark's 98 municipalities played a pivotal role. Each municipality formed a crisis team, typically composed of the mayor, the municipal director, and heads of key departments (such as education, eldercare, and infrastructure). These local crisis teams acted as coordination hubs — connecting upwards with the regions on testing and vaccination rollout, and downwards with schools, eldercare centres, sports facilities, housing associations, transport services, and private employers — ensuring an integrated and responsive local pandemic response.

In the Netherlands, MLG coordination began in late January 2020 with the establishment of a central coordination board (LOT-C), led by the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport. This board brought together key stakeholders including the Dutch Safety Regions, the Association of Dutch Municipalities, the Municipal Health Services (GGD), and healthcare providers. Initially focused on preparing for a potential infectious disease crisis, LOT-C later played a central role in assessing the evolving situation and communicating challenges in implementing emergency regulations to the national government. During the reopening phases in spring-summer 2020, MLG consultations expanded beyond intergovernmental coordination. The national government engaged with a wider range of non-public actors, including trade unions, employer organisations, public transport operators, the education sector, and health sector representatives. This broader engagement reflected a more integrated governance approach, combining both vertical (intergovernmental) and horizontal (cross-sectoral) collaboration to shape and implement the pandemic response.

In Czechia, MLG interactions took shape primarily at the regional level, where Regional Crisis Committees served as key coordination hubs. These committees brought together a wide range of public and non-public actors — including municipal authorities, territorial police and fire brigade departments, hospital directors, representatives of general practitioners' associations, NGOs, and regional public health offices — to steer and align pandemic response measures. Importantly, the Crisis Committees put pressure on the national government to coordinate the vaccination strategy with local actors.

Recommendations

As shown by the research findings above, MLG arrangements based on non-hierarchical interactions, multivocality and steering have been key for the robust governance of the Covid-19 crisis, favouring the emergence of more coordinated and legitimate policy responses. Especially in the phase of gradual re-opening of the economy and society, MLG interactions between policymakers and stakeholders at different levels and from different sectors have facilitated the emergence of the necessary consensus and goal alignment on policy goals to face uncertain and turbulent conditions.

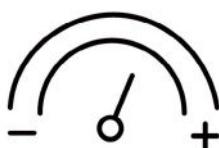
MLG policymaking is crucial to develop an EU whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to crisis management. Therefore, we put forward three key policy recommendations:



In terms of preparedness, MLG should be at the centre of the EU Preparedness Union Strategy. To better anticipate, prevent, and prepare for future crises, the European Commission (EC) can leverage established ties with regional and local authorities through the Committee of the Regions (CoR) and with social partners through the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC). Additionally, city networks can provide up-to-date insights on local crisis preparedness, while umbrella organizations in strategic sectors could offer valuable perspectives from key societal actors to inform the Preparedness Plan.



The same multilevel networks should be mobilized by the EC when a crisis strikes, to multiply vertical and horizontal connections and adopt a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to crisis management. For instance, relying on the CoR, the EC can host an online exchange platform for best practices, to inspire regional and local authorities to develop initiatives aimed at establishing connections with the various public and non-public actors that can help alleviate a crisis. Depending on the issue, the EESC or city networks can play a similar connecting role.



When an emergency strikes, centralized public steering of MLG arrangements is crucial to 'close ranks' and avoid the risk that policy actors get overwhelmed, risking losing sight of the overall picture and broader policy objectives. The Emergency Response Coordination Centre, as the EU crisis coordination hub, could play a crucial role by providing national governments and public authorities in different countries with specific support on how to steer MLG arrangements, and favoring knowledge exchange on practices of cooperative, non-hierarchical steering.



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