



1. Learning from Covid-19

Main focus: acceptance

If understood as an infection caused by an emerging respiratory virus, the Covid-19 pandemic was both predictable and predicted. If understood as a point in time when social and economic orders changed to the point that Western nations started taking their cues from the East, or the price of oil futures collapsed below zero, it obviously was not predictable in all its ramifications.

In an emergency, there is a focus on immediate problems: medical treatment and equipment, public health, the economy. Accounting for social issues usually comes later. For this reason, the SSC decided to tackle these as a priority. One consideration appears central to a successful containment of the pandemic, and is applicable to many other kinds of crises: to which extent the general public is ready to follow the guidance of the authorities. This is so because, in a democratic system, enforcing new rules via the police or via the judicial system is inefficient in a time of emergency. Such a cooperation between the population and decision-makers is what the SSC means by acceptance.

Questions

- What went well (according to which criteria) and what not? How did the Swiss authorities do with regard to predictable versus unpredictable issues?
- How did compliance with prevention and mitigation measures evolve during the pandemic? Did certain subgroups in the population behave differently?
- How to explain the gap (if any) between statistics, media reports and individual perceptions? The spread of conspiracy theories?

2. Learning for the long term

Main focus: governance

To account for our natural bias towards short-term memory, we should consider past experiences as different as possible from the current pandemic, all while keeping in mind that future crises may develop that have no historical precedent. One novel factor, for instance, is the growing adoption of artificial intelligence in science, industry and the military, and the role of data integration and analysis in crisis management. Furthermore, and driven by global warming, some of the natural disasters we can expect to face might be known from the historical records. However, their impact on today's society and biodiversity is difficult to fully appreciate.

One aspect is front and centre when discussing crisis management in a Swiss context: the federal and liberal political system, distributing power over a number of actors. The question has been raised whether such a model of government is still appropriate for today's emergencies. Some authors have described the Swiss state as a model of robustness, adaptability and resilience¹. Still, nowadays others wonder whether the system allows for authorities taking unpopular decisions, and they contrast decisive corporate leaders (or less democratic heads of state) with ineffective public officers.

Questions

- How does the federal state handle risks and crises? How does this differ from crisis management processes in a corporate organisation?
- When is the federal structure promoting acceptance? How important is public participation, trust in governance and culture of leadership in a crisis?
- How to build up potential for meaningful action to address slow-moving, long-term crises? Can a federal state move efficiently on global warming?
- In a crisis, how functional is the interaction between human and artificial intelligence?

¹ For instance, Nassim Nicholas Taleb, author of *"The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable"* (2007), mentions Switzerland as the "antifragile" country in: N N Taleb (2012), *Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder*.

3. Learning from the stakeholders

Main focus: communication

Scientists produce knowledge that informs the decisions of politicians and administrators, up to the daily decisions of citizens. Such a representation tends to idealise the role of science as mostly explaining, and the role of authorities as mostly listening to science, while the public is being told what needs to be done. A more comprehensive communication model would look like a two-way street between civil society, decision-makers and scientists. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the private sector proved to be truly innovative, and the citizens very active, avidly consuming news reports, commenting scientific reports, participating in polls and protesting in the streets – including for other issues such as climate protection.

On 13 June 2021, 1,94 million citizens approved the Covid-19 Act, which contained a range of already ongoing economic and social policies. This also means that up to 40 % of the voters opposed the project. Obviously, criticising a policy and adhering to conspiracy theories are different positions. These distinctions should be carefully understood, just like the influence of social media.

Scientists contradicting each other on Twitter have been under unusually high scrutiny, all the more so when criticising political decisions. The scientific discourse will remain dialectic, as this challenge among peers is essential to the scientific process. Furthermore, many attitudes, such as vaccine refusal, are often based less on a lack of knowledge than on values. Therefore, the challenge at hand is not so much to improve communication techniques than to question roles and attitudes.

Questions

- Which means of communication were used as information sources by the public and by decision-makers? What role did media and social media play? Was something missing?
- How did decision-makers deal with the crisis? What did the public expect from them? What did scientists expect from the political authorities?
- How did scientists and scientific organisations deal with the crisis? What did the public, the administration and the political authorities expect from them?

Programme

| Dates | Venue | Languages |
|-----------------------------|--|-----------|
| Wednesday 11 August 2021 | Hotel Bern Zeughausgasse 9 3011 Bern | English |

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|--|---------------|--------------|
| 1. Learning from Covid-19 | 09:15 – 09:30 | Welcome |
| | 09:30 – 10:30 | Inputs |
| | 10:30 – 11:00 | Coffee break |
| | 11:00 – 12:30 | Discussion |

12:30 – 13:30

Lunch

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|--|---------------|--------------|
| 2. Learning for the long term | 13:30 – 14:30 | Inputs |
| | 14:30 – 15:00 | Coffee break |
| | 15:00 – 16:30 | Discussion |

| Dates | Venue | Languages |
|---------------------------|--|----------------------|
| Tuesday 31 August 2021 | Hotel Bern Zeughausgasse 9 3011 Bern | German and French |

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|--|---------------|------------------|
| 3. Learning from the stakeholders | 09:15 – 09:30 | Welcome |
| | 09:30 – 09:50 | Recap from day 1 |
| | 09:50 – 11:00 | Discussion |
| | 11:00 – 11:30 | Coffee break |
| | 11:30 – 13:00 | Discussion |

13:00 – 14:00

Lunch

Rationale for the workshop

Crises may strike abruptly like a nuclear accident, or creep up steadily like antibiotic resistance. They may be localised like an earthquake, or unfold on a global scale like rising sea levels. Some begin in the dark like a cyberattack, some in plain sight like a heat wave. Some are uncertain like a stock market collapse, others highly predictable, such as the disappearance of mountain communities.

Whatever the cause, a crisis can be described as a situation of great danger or trouble, requiring action. Thus, what counts as a crisis depends on the appreciation of a person, an organisation or a community.

In Switzerland, the Covid-19 pandemic has been characterised as the most severe crisis since the Second World War. It has challenged the healthcare system, the economy and nearly every aspect of social life. From previous emerging diseases, such as SARS (2003), H1N1 (2009), MERS (2012), Ebola (2014) or Zika (2016), many European nations inferred that viral infections were a concern for countries far away, in part thanks to advances in intensive medicine, public health and technology. The complacency was mistaken, but so would be an over-correction which could make Switzerland oblivious to other issues.

The Swiss Science Council SSC is the independent advising body of the Confederation for science, education, research and innovation. In its 2020–2023 Working Programme, the SSC undertook to investigate which science policy is needed for Switzerland to tackle unexpected challenges. To better understand the topic in all its dimensions, the SSC is requesting the insights from experts and stakeholders in a three-parts workshop.

Discussions focus on the following issues:

- Acceptance of crisis prevention and mitigation measures decided by the authorities;
- Governance and culture of leadership, and especially in the Swiss context, federalism;
- Communication between authorities, citizens and scientists.

Exchanges are structured in three sessions:

1. Learning from Covid-19 11 August, morning
2. Learning for the long term 11 August, afternoon
3. Learning from the stakeholders 31 August, morning



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Swiss Science
Council SSC

A discussion about science,
politics and science politics

Acceptance of crisis management measures

Workshop by the
Swiss Science Council SSC
on 11 and 31 August

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