Can crisis governance drive out the capacity for complexity governance?
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The contribution of the UN Committee of Experts on Public Administration (CEPA) to the 2023 HLPF contains eight topical recommendations. This blog is inspired by the first recommendation, which is about the very dynamic context in which governments currently have to operate and find effective responses to a diversity of challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced governments in a crisis management mode, and many of them performed relatively well in this respect – but others did not. Meanwhile, the pandemic is only one of the many crises that are cascading in most countries, varying from climate-related natural (but human-made) disasters to geopolitical tensions and wars. We have begun talking about a polycrisis – and some already suspect that this polycrisis could become permanent: a permacrisis. Will that be the new normal?

Nobody can predict what will happen in the next decade(s) but dealing with crises will certainly remain an important challenge for national and subnational governments. Not only out of necessity but partially also because a crisis brings unprecedented power and resources to the ruling government. We can already see that some governments have started using emergency legislation shortcuts for less urgent issues, while bypassing parliaments, stakeholders, the best available knowledge, and a long-term outlook. There is no reason to believe that the old saying that power corrupts does not often apply.

Complex, 'wicked' problems

This situation is a problem for various reasons, but one important reason may not be so obvious: the fact that much of the political focus and resources are being used for crisis management can divert attention from complex, 'wicked' problems. The point here is that many crises are either complex, wicked problems themselves – or they are caused by them. Climate change is both a crisis and a complex problem. The same applies to a pandemic. Such complex, wicked problems are not like fires that can be easily extinguished. They keep on burning, like an underground peat fire. Addressing them requires (in)formal, deliberative, and inclusive institutions and processes. Wicked problems are difficult to define, have a non-linear dynamic and seem unsolvable. They are ambiguous and the list of potential solutions is endless. No single country or public sector organisation – from a solitary city to the central government – can tackle these issues alone. This may result in paralysis, or an overestimation of what policy can do about wicked problems. Some of these challenges are called super-wicked problems: time is running out, the central authority needed to address it is weak or non-existent, and policy responses discount future costs and impacts in an irrational way. Climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic share characteristics of such problems.

Crisis management needs fast, decisive action and availability of resources. It requires linear thinking. Addressing wicked problems is slow, needs an inclusive approach and specific knowledge. It is not linear. The paradox is that addressing the big issues of our time requires at the same time crisis governance and complexity governance; we need to be thinking fast and slow – to paraphrase Daniel Kahneman – simultaneously.

Possible way forward

On a positive note, paradoxes are seemingly contradictory situations. There may be ways out. One example is to train public officers to apply different governance approaches for different problems, mixing approaches and switching between them according to the requirements of the situation. This existing practice of going beyond the normal or fashionable governance style is called metagovernance (governance of governance). Another example is that when governments focus too much of their attention on issues framed as crises and the related emergency measures, societal stakeholders – civil society, the private sector and academia – can sometimes step up and organize their role as "countervailing powers", helping to keep governments accountable and on track to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, with a long-term perspective and at all levels. A third example is that a government organisation could discipline itself to maintain the 'slow' pace in parallel to 'fast' crisis management. The European Commission, while at the same time battling the COVID-19 pandemic and preparing a comprehensive response to the climate crisis in 2021, decided that from then on all its ex ante regulatory impact assessments of new legal and policy initiatives should integrate the SDGs and foresight, while maintaining a high level of knowledge input and stakeholder involvement. Last but not least, civil servants need to be trained to address trade-offs in a way so that mutual gains are achieved instead of having a win-lose situation.

There is also a response that should be prevented, namely focusing solely on efficiency again. The economist Mariana Mazzucato has clearly shown that the dominance of efficiency over effectiveness has made governments weaker and less responsive to emerging challenges. The polycrisis might again trigger an efficiency movement because of the huge costs of tackling crises. However, the result would be further destruction of the institutions we have to support the public cause.

To conclude: yes, crisis governance drives out the capacity for complexity governance, and this requires seemingly contradictory governance responses. But there are ways to work constructively from this reality, and they start with awareness of the paradox.

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