

WHAT DOES GOOD POLICY ADVICE LOOK LIKE IN TIMES OF CRISIS?

IN BRIEF

- Crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic confront science and politics with new challenges.
- Scientific policy advice informs administration and politics, and its quality and effectiveness depend on various criteria.
- In order to increase efficiency and create trust, scientific policy advice must be transparent.
- At the same time, trust is strengthened during chronic crises when a variety of perspectives are taken into account.
- In order to provide adequate advice, it is essential that sufficient resources are available.

WHAT IS IT ABOUT?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, governments had to make their decisions under great uncertainty and ignorance. Science played a central role in political crisis management. It had to generate data under intense pressure and produce robust findings to inform political decisions. The acute need for political action for immediate health protection turned into a tough and prolonged crisis with many pressing fields of action. In addition to health aspects, psychosocial and economic aspects also became relevant. How can policymakers be advised in the best possible way during such complex crisis situations? What can science do in confusing situations where evidence and validated knowledge are lacking? The UK and Germany already had established scientific advisory systems, whereas in Austria such system only became more professional during the

course of the pandemic. In the UK, a government body translates political questions into scientific ones, for which expert committees compile evidence. A higher-level advisory body (Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies – SAGE) assesses this evidence and formulates recommendations for policymakers. In Germany, departmental research (“Ressortforschung”) in the form of the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) did research and gave advice on infectious diseases. At the same time, independent advisory bodies (Leopoldina, German Ethics Council) also made their voices heard.



A comparison of three European countries: different advisory structures and political strategies.

In Austria, various committees dealt with COVID-19, and their responsibilities became more differentiated over the course of the pandemic (including the Task Force and Corona Commission). The Austrian Covid Crisis Coordination Unit (“Gesamtstaatliche COVID-Krisenkoordination” – GECKO), an independent body of experts convened by Federal Chancellor Karl Nehammer, which was only founded at the end of 2021, represented a centralisation of scientific policy advice in Austria. In order to respond to the government’s questions to the Commission with utmost precision, GECKO internally structured into different working groups. As a result, there was no room for fundamental controversies, for example about the chosen problem framing or the role of the participating disciplines in the committee. Consequently, the potential for deeper reflection in the social sciences, for example, could not be fully utilised.

BASIC DATA

Project title:	Epistemic security – on scientific expertise in chronic crises (EPISTEMIS)
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KEY RESULTS

Compared to the UK and Germany, there was no institutionalised form of evidence building for the Austrian policy advisory bodies. In the UK, SAGE was able to generate evidence via organised specialist groups. In Germany, the RKI relied on its own research network. In Austria, on the other hand, the process of evidence generation shifted to the leisure time of the experts involved because of a lack of appropriate resources.



Resources: Evidence building must not remain a “personal matter” for self-motivated actors.

Whilst the exclusive focus on protecting health and life was undisputed in political rhetoric (and in Germany and Austria also in the measures) at the beginning of the pandemic, it was increasingly called into question as the crisis progressed. As a result, other aspects of the crisis, such as the psychological or social impact of the pandemic and the taken measures, were taken into account in the public and political debate. This emphasises the need to include many different voices from the scientific community (multi- and interdisciplinarity) as well as from society (e.g. those affected) in consultation processes.

In all three countries, the lack of transparency and independence of scientific advice was criticised, both with regard to the disciplinary composition of the advisory bodies and the specific (and sometimes non-transparent) selection procedures for experts. In Austria, some committees were made up of representatives from both science and administration, which resulted in blurred boundaries between science and politics. As a result, particular attention must be paid to the reflexive organisation of the interface between science and politics. However, the form and intensity with which politicians incorporate scientific findings into their decision-making processes ultimately remains unpredictable.

WHAT TO DO?

Several points are central to making scientific policy advice better and more efficient:

- *Scientific advice requires a clear understanding of roles:* Scientific information and political decision-making must be clearly separated. Clear boundaries and responsibilities prevent instrumentalisation on both sides.
- *Transparency creates trust:* The selection of advisors and the advisory processes must be organised transparently in compliance with clear rules. Recommendations and majorities within the Commission must be comprehensible, and key advisory documents must be publicly available.
- *Scientific advice must make use of diversity:* In order to successfully address the diverse problems of chronic crises, scientific policy advice must incorporate different perspectives (disciplines, professionals, and laypeople) at an early stage.
- *Scientific advice needs resources:* Scientific expertise is based on reliable data, facts, and evidence. Resources must be made available for the necessary evidence building and scientific monitoring of political interventions, such as (subordinate) sections and a dedicated office.
- *Scientific advice needs appreciation:* Relief efforts are needed in the advisors’ professional environment, such as reducing other professional obligations (e.g. teaching) and preparing for counselling activities (communication, understanding of roles).

FURTHER READING

Bogner, A., Buntfuß, P., Fuchs, D., Sinozic-Martinez, T. (2023): Wissenschaftliche Politikberatung in Krisenzeiten. Eine vergleichende Analyse ihrer Prozesse, Praktiken und Probleme mit Blick auf Österreich, Deutschland und Großbritannien, Abschlussbericht 05-2023, ITA: Vienna
pub.oeaw.ac.at/ita/ita-projektberichte/ITA-pb-2024-01.pdf

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