

FOLLOW THE SCIENCE? POLICY ADVICE IN TIMES OF CRISIS

IN BRIEF

- Whether it is corona or the climate, in many crises and conflicts battles are being fought over better knowledge. In these disputes, scientific expertise is the trump card.
- Rational policy is always legitimised by scientific findings. To this end, all relevant scientific voices must be heard.
- The slogan “Follow the science!” falls short, because politics is more than just reacting to scientific data and facts. What is needed is policy advice that takes into account questions of knowledge and values.

WHAT IS IT ABOUT?

Coronavirus crisis, climate crisis, democracy crisis: many contemporary crises are negotiated as a problem of knowledge. This means that it is assumed that these crises are exacerbated by ignorance and resistance to facts, but can be overcome through education and information. As a result, aspects of knowledge, i.e. facts, evidence, and cognitive competencies, have become the focus of the debates. As important as science and education are, especially in times of crisis: in the course of scientification, there is the danger that the political mission will be fought for on the terrain of science.

This is particularly evident in the climate debate: whilst climate activists demand that politics should finally follow science, climate skeptics claim that the facts give no reason for concern. The fact that many crises and conflicts focus on knowledge and expertise is reflected in the terms we use for fundamental opposition: we call

them “coronavirus deniers”, “climate change deniers” or “evolution deniers”. The ideological opponents of yesterday have become today’s enemies of reason. Even where the use of pesticides in agriculture (glyphosate), the risks of electromagnetic fields (5G network) or nanoparticles are concerned – in all these cases, the discussion and argument is about the reliability of studies and data, the credibility of scenarios and models or the validity of thresholds and key figures. It is therefore assumed that politics should enforce any scientifically recommended measures as soon as there is broad expert consensus on these risk and environmental issues.



Image: ITA

Science informs, politics balances interests.

“Follow the science” then? This slogan should not be misunderstood. There are seldom scientifically correct, i.e. value- and ideology-free answers to typical politically controversial questions (such as: “Do we need stricter measures?”).

In other words, no matter how precise the figures, data, and forecasts, they do not release policymakers from their duty to make decisions. In short, scientific fact does not imply a political programme of action. This is another point on which technology assessment must educate policymakers. If understood correctly, “follow the science” means that policymakers should allow themselves to be informed by science. They must justify why they do not follow some of the experts’ recommendations.

Take mask-wearing, for example: it is now beyond question that this measure is effective. Any politics that do not follow this finding must justify themselves. Of course there are conflicting interests and values that cast doubt on the requirement to wear masks, such as cost arguments or ideals of freedom. It is the task of politicians to weigh up these conflicting positions. But politics must not simply ignore the scientific majority.

UNCERTAINTY & POLITICS

Acute crises are characterised by ambiguity and uncertainty. This also applies to crisis-relevant expertise because data and robust findings are often lacking. In a crisis, science demonstrates its learning successes live and in real time, so to speak. This takes time. Politicians, on the other hand, hope for quick and unanimous, compact answers.



In acute crises, politicians usually make their decisions on the basis of incomplete data.

This creates tension between knowledge and decision-making, and makes one thing clear: the attempt to “keep politics out” of complex problems and to act as if there was only one rational option for action is not credible.

The slogan “Follow the science” therefore falls short if its meaning is to convey that politics should limit itself to carrying out the instructions of science. This not only misses the essence of politics, which consists of constructive balancing of conflicting opinions and interests. It also falsely assumes that science can actually speak with one voice in situations where sound knowledge is lacking.

Finally, in doing so one also misses the political character of the current crises and conflicts. Even if the main arguments are about the reliability of studies and data, the credibility of scenarios and models, or the validity of thresholds and key figures: all these disputes are ultimately fuelled by conflicting interests and values.

WHAT TO DO?

The pandemic raises epistemic questions about routes of infection, mutation rates, and hospitalisation rates. It also raises normative questions about rights, values, and the adequacy of political measures. What does this mean in terms of scientific policy advice?

- In times of crisis, when faced with surprising, complex problems, independent and transparently organised policy advice plays an important role for responsible decision-making and credible politics.
- Tough, protracted crises are characterised, amongst other things, by conflicts over adequate policies. In this situation, interdisciplinary policy advice is of great importance: besides medicine, complexity research, and virology, economics, psychology, technology assessment, ethics or educational research are also relevant.
- In addition, the public should also be involved. “Mini publics” could be one idea to give informed laypersons a voice. Such participation experiments have a long tradition in technology assessment and have been thoroughly tested.

FURTHER READING

Bogner, A. (2021): Die Epistemisierung des Politischen. Wie die Macht des Wissens die Demokratie gefährdet. Stuttgart: Reclam.
oeaw.ac.at/ita/publikationen/buecher/die-epistemisierung-des-politischen

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