

COVID-19: Germany Rethinks Civil Protection

Coordination at the national level is key to managing complex crises. In many countries, the COVID-19 pandemic showed a lack of coordination. To address this shortcoming, Germany plans to reform its crisis response authorities. This includes creating a Joint Competence Center for Civil Protection. Other countries could use this as a source of inspiration for reassessing their own crisis management systems.

By Benjamin Scharte

The public perception in Germany is that the German Federal Office of Civil Protection and Disaster Assistance (BBK) was sidelined during the COVID-19 pandemic. An example of that perception is an article in the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* with the title “the forgotten office” (*Das vergessene Amt*), published in May 2020. The pandemic is among the most severe challenges with which Germany has been confronted in recent times. One would assume that a national authority responsible for civil protection and disaster assistance would play an important role in managing such a challenge, given that the BBK possesses the relevant expertise. However, organizational limitations hindered it from engaging more actively in pandemic crisis management.

The BBK’s primary responsibility is managing civil response activities in case of an armed conflict (civil defense). Only if called upon by the *Bundesländer* (federated states) – in the event of catastrophic disruptions that cannot be handled at sub-national levels – can the BBK take over responsibility for coordinating civil protection response measures. This did not happen during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Instead, the German response was twofold. On the sub-national level, the *Bundesländer* were directly responsible for crisis manage-



BBK president Armin Schuster presents the concept for the realignment of the BBK together with the Federal Minister of the Interior, Horst Seehofer. Markus Schreiber / Reuters

ment within their jurisdictions. At the national level, the Federal Ministry of Health (BMG) and its subordinate upper-level federal agency, the Robert Koch Institute (RKI), managed the pandemic. This twofold approach led to a lack of coordination between stakeholders at the federal level (horizontal) and also between the federal level and the *Bundesländer* (vertical). This was the case because the latter are only re-

sponsible for their own states and the BMG as well as the RKI are not authorities with a genuine focus on crisis management. Both thus lack expertise in the area of systemic crisis coordination.

In order to be better prepared for the next crisis, societies can learn from the pandemic. Germany and its civil protection system provides a helpful example in this respect.

Similar to many other countries, including Switzerland, the COVID-19 crisis management in Germany witnessed a wide range of problems. As a result, the BBK initiated an assessment process that resulted in a concept for a realignment, which was published in March 2021. To make sense of the concept and the recommendations included therein, it is necessary to understand the role and mandate of the BBK first. Then, this needs to be considered alongside the needs posed by complex crises like a pandemic.

Mandate and Capacities of the BBK

Following Germany's Basic Law (Grundgesetz) the exercise of state powers, except as otherwise provided or permitted by the Basic Law, is a matter for the *Bundesländer*. This also applies to civil protection and crisis management, including in the event of a pandemic. One specific exception to this general rule is that the Federation (the national level) has exclusive legislative power with respect to foreign affairs and defense, including the protection of the civilian population in an armed conflict (civil defense). In Germany, the term civil defense refers to a special form of protection of the population that is only used in cases of armed conflicts. Therefore, it differs from civil protection, which is used in all other major emergencies, including natural hazards or pandemics, for example.

The German Civil Protection and Disaster Assistance Act (*Gesetz über den Zivilschutz und die Katastrophenhilfe des Bundes*) specifies the Basic Law. It assigns the responsibility for civil defense to the BBK. This includes assisting federal authorities in civil defense planning, the training of civil defense executives, and informing the population about civil defense. The Act also states that federal capacities for civil defense are available to the *Bundesländer* for their civil protection activities. Interestingly, the Act enables the *Bundesländer* to profit from the BBK's capacities in situational awareness, resource management, and coordination, should they request it. Thus, the BBK could serve as a coordination instrument, while responsibility for operative crisis management remains with the *Bundesländer*.

Based on this mandate, the BBK fulfils a broad range of tasks that go well beyond narrowly defined civil defense. Among them is planning and preparation of cooperation between the national level and the

Bundesländer with regard to special hazards – hazards with overarching impact that the latter cannot manage on their own. The functions also include supporting critical infrastructure operators with plans and concepts for critical infrastructure protection, training and education activities for civil protection, research on civil protection, and national risk assessments. The BBK is responsible for planning and organizing large-scale crisis simulation exercises (*Länder- und Ressortübergreifende Krisenmanagementübung*). It also hosts the Joint Information and Situation Center of the Federal Government and the Federal States (*Gemeinsames Lagezentrum von Bund und Ländern*), whose tasks are based on the Civil Protection and Disaster Assistance Act. This Center prepares situation reports on civil protection-related topics,

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serves as contact point for international cooperation, including to the European Union's Civil Protection Mechanism, and is responsible for the effective use of resources during crises. As a whole, the BBK has vast, systemic knowledge of hazards and risks, and how to manage them. This includes a sound knowledge of and established networks to all relevant actors in the realm of civil protection in Germany.

However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the *Bundesländer* and the responsible authorities at the national level did not coordinate via the BBK. Instead, crisis management on the national level was led by the BMG and the RKI. This is in line with the mandate of the RKI. Following the German Infection Protection Act (*Infektionsschutzgesetz*), the RKI is the national authority for the prevention of communicable diseases and for the early detection and prevention of the further spread of viruses. As part of that, the RKI is responsible for providing a scientific basis for health-related political decision-making, and for informing and advising political decision-makers, the scientific sector and the public. In the event of a pandemic, it is also responsible for coordinating the cooperation between the national level and the *Bundesländer*. At the same time, the Infection Protection Act does not assign roles to the BBK or even mention it. To call on the RKI in case of a

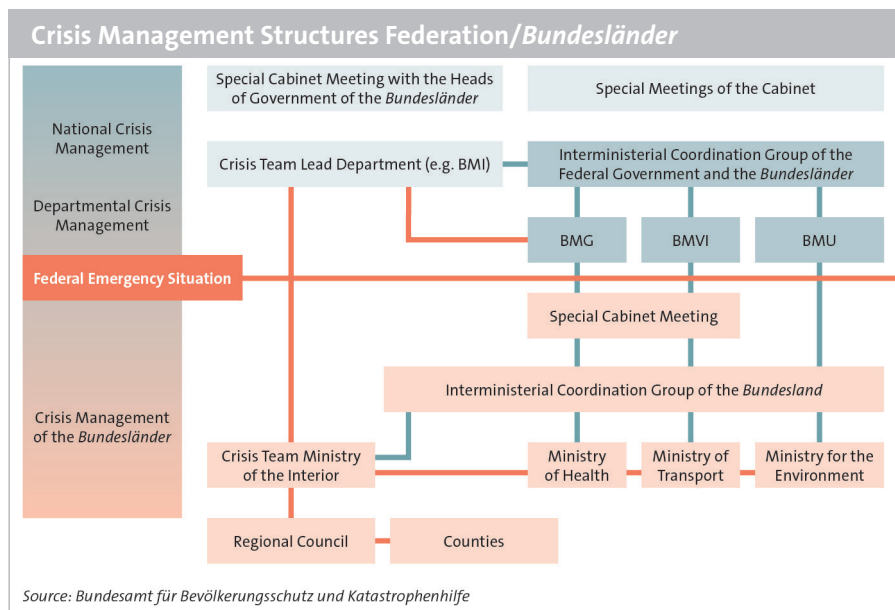
pandemic seems logical. Yet, the RKI's mandate is limited to the epidemiological aspects of such a crisis. The RKI is thus not a body that can undertake overall coordination in a complex crisis.

Managing Complex Crises

To understand the challenges that the German civil protection system had to face when responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is necessary to examine the specific characteristics of such events more closely. A pandemic is a complex crisis. Actions taken to mitigate the crisis can lead to unforeseeable interaction and cascading effects – beyond the domain of epidemiology. The way in which modern, globalized society functions, creates an ideal environment for an uncontrolled – and to a certain degree uncontrollable – spread of communicable diseases. International travel, globalized supply chains, and tightly integrated geographical areas such as the European continent, together with the characteristic of the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, which renders people infectious before they show symptoms, facilitated the outbreak of the pandemic. To slow and ultimately stop the virus from spreading, many governments took decisive measures. Before vaccines became widely available, most of these measures focused on deliberately decoupling important parts of interdependent systems, restricting non-essential travel, and shutting down large parts of economic and social systems. While these measures in general proved to be effective in limiting the spread of the virus, they came with considerable economic, legal, and societal costs. They produced a vast amount of unintended and unwanted consequences, such as heavy economic downturn, rising unemployment, supply chain disruptions, a growing number of mental health issues or an upturn in domestic violence.

Pandemics are not the only hazard that can lead to such complex crises. A long-lasting failure of the energy system or an uncontrolled attack against critical IT infrastructure could lead to similar widespread damage and impact many different parts of the complex, intertwined societies. The very complexity of such an event makes it hard to control. Measures taken to mitigate negative effects in one part of the system will probably have cascading effects in other parts of the system. Thus, a management approach that leads to responding to an overarching crisis in silos is inadequate.

Research into complex systems, systemic risks, and resilience shows that in order to



manage such events successfully, coordination is key. Dictionary definitions of coordination contain the notion of organizing people or elements as part of different groups so as to enable them to work together effectively and efficiently. Coordination is creating a functional ordering among interacting components in space and time. With respect to crisis management, coordination enables crisis managers from different authorities or state levels to identify interdependencies and possible cascading effects between their respective sectors of responsibility. Thus, while creating an authority that is able to control complex situations in a centralized fashion is not possible, it is nevertheless necessary to assign and define responsibilities for establishing adequate structures for coordination – independent of the specific hazard the system has to deal with.

Reforming Germany's BBK

National authorities responsible for civil protection, like the BBK in Germany, could be a natural fit for such a role. As explained, the BBK possesses the procedural knowledge with respect to the necessities of complex crisis management and successful coordination. In principle, its mandate following the Civil Protection and Disaster Assistance Act would also allow for taking over a coordinative function in complex crisis management. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic it lacked the necessary organizational structures to fulfil an overarching coordinative role. As a result, neither the *Bundesländer* nor responsible

authorities at the national level, like the BMG and the RKI, called upon the BBK to take the coordinative lead. To change this in future crises, the concept to realign the BBK published by the latter and the Federal Ministry of the Interior, Building and Community (BMI) in March of this year, contains a number of high level strategic recommendations as to how to improve the BBK's capacities – and following this, civil protection in general in Germany. These recommendations could also be taken into consideration in other decentralized countries, such as Switzerland, when it comes to improving their ability to manage complex crises successfully.

Most important for improving the BBK's capacity to coordinate complex crisis management is the establishment of a Joint Competence Center for Civil Protection (*Gemeinsames Kompetenzzentrum Bevölkerungsschutz*). Following the concept, the Competence Center should serve as a coordination and communication platform for a continuing and institutionalized information exchange before, during, and after complex crises. The BBK should host the Center, but the latter will not be a part of the BBK. Instead, the BBK will help to facilitate the institutionalized coordination and cooperation processes within the Center. In a first step, the Center will be created in cooperation with all relevant federal offices and relief organizations. In a second step, the *Bundesländer* will have the oppor-

tunity to join the activities of the Center. Initial discussions with the *Bundesländer* show that they are very interested in the Center, but would like to be involved in its implementation from the very beginning and on an equal footing. The Joint Competence Center for Civil Protection explicitly aims at breaking up silo-structures within and between different authorities at different state levels. It should serve as the hub for Germany's civil protection system and include functions like early warning, better communication between all relevant stakeholders, rapid risk assessment, improved reporting, and better situational awareness (*360°-Lagebild*).

Publicly available information on the Center is still limited. In order for it to be successful, it has to fit into Germany's complicated civil protection system. Depending on the specific hazard, responsibility for coordinating crisis management at the national level lies with the Federal Ministry in charge of the specific hazard. The crisis unit of this Federal Ministry coordinates with other federal authorities and the *Bundesländer*. Responsibility for operative crisis management remains with the latter. In a pandemic, the BMI and the BMG build a joint crisis unit, which is tasked with coordinat-

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ing a joint and unified response. This was the case during the COVID-19 pandemic and the BBK served as supporting body for this crisis unit. In addition, the so-called Interministerial Coordination Group of the Federal Government and the *Bundesländer* (*Interministerielle Koordinierungsgruppe des Bundes und der Länder*) is another body for coordinating response activities in a complex crisis. Although pandemics are listed explicitly as a situation necessitating this Interministerial Coordination Group, the latter was not activated during the pandemic.

The Joint Competence Center for Civil Protection needs to place itself within this complicated framework. For example, as a permanent institution it would differ considerably from the Interministerial Coordination Group and ministerial crisis units. Permanent activity, before, during, and after crises, allows for the building of mutual trust between relevant stakeholders. This mutual trust is an essential part of successful coordination. At the same time, the BBK needs to make clear that it does not

plan to build sector-specific expertise to replace specialized authorities like the RKI or the BMG. After introducing the Joint Competence Center for Civil Protection,

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these specialized authorities will still be thematically responsible for managing a pandemic, for example. Ideally, the Center would serve as a powerful coordination tool, which brings together all relevant stakeholders, makes sense of the available data, provides everyone with timely situation reports, and allows for easily accessible crisis management capacities possessed by the BBK.

Strengthening Civil Protection

Managing complex crises is a task, which not only Germany and its BBK will have to

deal with more often in the future. Other federal countries, such as Switzerland, also need to be able to better cope with such situations. Thus, suitable organizational structures for coordinating response and recovery, as well as planning and preparedness, are of utmost importance. They need to be adapted to the specific circumstances of the affected systems, but also independent of the specific hazard.

Given the complexity of societies and the subsequent uncertainty of the occurrence of disruptive events like pandemics, it could make sense to build government bodies with a set of general, systemic crisis management capacities. These include generic strategy and planning, scenario thinking, decision support and situational awareness tools, risk and crisis communication strategies, in addition to organizational and structural knowledge about national civil protection systems. These bodies – in most cases, national civil protection authorities – could be responsible for over-

arching coordination during complex crises. To enable them to fulfill this function and build mutual trust among all relevant stakeholders, coordination activities must be permanent, implying that they take place before and after, not only during, crises. With the help of such structures, modern societies will be able to show resilience when dealing with complex crises.

For more on perspectives on Socio-technical resilience, see [CSS core theme page](#).

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