

Policy Consulting in the Age of Corona

The corona crisis underscores the importance of research-based policy consulting. In Europe, the aim must therefore be to further improve cooperation between policy-makers and think tanks.

By Oliver Thränert

The current corona crisis illustrates that without research-based policy consulting, policy-makers would at best be able to navigate by dead reckoning, and would stumble more or less blindly through the crisis. It is therefore vital, particularly in Europe, to improve the mechanisms that govern the interplay between policymaking and academia.

Despite the importance of policy consulting, one thing must be borne in mind: Unlike political decision-makers, political consultants have no democratically legitimized mandate to pass decisions. These can only be taken by the elected representatives of the people. Nevertheless, in making these decisions, those at the helm are confronted with the inescapable reality that a lack of clear-cut alternatives means that one must carefully consider a variety of, and at times competing, interests. In this delicate process, political consulting can only serve to indicate the expected outcomes of a decision, but it cannot relieve decision-makers of their responsibility to make choices based on deliberations on their likely outcomes. Thus, the aim should not be to pave the way for a technocratic concept of politics. On the contrary, in a world increasingly marked by crises and uncertainty, democratically legitimized decisionmaking processes require research-based, interdisciplinary policy consulting to foster crisis management strategies that enjoy broad societal acceptance.

Corona: A profound crisis

There are several characteristics that make the corona crisis a fundamental challenge:

First, many experts believe that the crisis will only be fully overcome once an effective and safe vaccine has been developed and administered to the majority of the

Key Points

- The corona crisis illustrates that without research-based policy consulting, policy-makers would at best be able to navigate by dead reckoning, and would stumble more or less blindly through the crisis.
- The coronavirus has triggered an exceptional crisis in terms of its expected duration, the high levels of uncertainty, and its magnitude, but other similar crises might follow.
- In the US, the polarization of society has brought an end to the golden age of policy consulting. In Europe, however, the desired efforts to improve the interplay between policymaking and academia can take a cue from certain mechanisms that are commonplace in the US.
- European institutions should aim for an increased exchange of personnel between governments and think tanks, as well as more practice-oriented training of think tank staff. Furthermore, establishing interdisciplinary policy consultancy should be accompanied by relevant – that is, more policy-oriented – formats, and by an improved selection of topics.

global population. While efforts are in full swing, it may take many more months before this is achieved. To avoid excessive strain on public healthcare infrastructures struggling to treat patients with severe disease progressions, it is important to ensure that the infection rate remains as low as possible. Policy-makers are faced with a counterintuitive task: On the one hand, they must attempt to prolong the duration of the crisis in order to “flatten the curve” and, hopefully, reduce the overall severity of the pandemic. On the other hand, they must ensure that the associated consequences, particularly in the economic realm, remain as manageable as possible. This balancing act entails formidable challenges, since the restrictions on daily life can be intermittently relaxed, but must then be re-imposed when the infection rates begin to soar once again. The result is a herculean task for political communication, given that both the general public as well as the corporate sectors are likely to become increasingly impatient. Moreover, and as has become apparent, some states are exploiting the corona crisis to cast doubt on the actions of other governments and undermine the cohesiveness of their societies, *inter alia*, through a variety of foreign influence campaigns.

Secondly, the corona crisis is characterized by a multiplicity of unknowns. It is thus uncertain how many individuals have been infected worldwide, whether survivors develop an immunity, and, if so, how long such immunity might last. Overall, we still know far too little about the coronavirus and the possibilities for developing reliable counter-strategies. There is also uncertainty when it comes to gauging the impact of the corona crisis: How will the national measures affect employment? How long will schools manage to sustain remote learning? What societal effects will emerge from keeping the population cooped up in confined spaces, especially in the already densely populated areas?

Thirdly, the crisis is leaving significant marks on society. Questions arise over the legitimacy of measures that infringe on civil rights, as well as the economic impact of shutting down public life. Moreover, as governments struggle to curtail the negative effects of the crisis, notably soaring unemployment rates and corporate insolvencies, a deep economic recession is unavoidable. In addition, debates over social redistribution are likely to ensue. The inadequate funding of healthcare systems, especially in more wealthy states, is no longer acceptable for many people. Military forces will also be affected by redistribution. In many countries, including Switzerland, the armed forces have an important role in combating the pandemic, and are likely to be held in higher esteem as a result. At the same time, global threat scenarios are changing. Many citizens



A man gazes at the sculpture “House of Knowledge” by Spanish artist Jaume Plensa at a Sotheby’s sales exhibition at Chatsworth House, Derbyshire, 16 September 2008. *Darren Staples / Reuters*

will probably acknowledge and credit the role of the military in combating the pandemic, but does it also imply that funding for expensive military gear, to be used for traditional missions, ought to be cut back as a result? One might argue that it would certainly be shortsighted to abandon the established rationales that justified military expenditures before the corona crisis. Not least because these reasonings were themselves based on threat assessments that have by no means been rendered obsolete. This debate will take place against the background of parallel shifts in international relations. Will the pandemic weaken China’s global status? Will the crisis diminish the willingness of the US to take action at the international level? How will the US crisis management strategy affect transatlantic relations, especially if Washington increasingly opts for a go-it-alone approach and pursues a national agenda? Will the EU manage to strengthen its internal cohesion through joint crisis management strategies? Or, conversely, will it be decisively weakened by a return to nation-state mindsets? Or might it even disintegrate altogether? Is the corona crisis more likely to promote sectoral de-globalization, since certain dependencies related to the functioning of international supply chains are no longer tenable? Alternatively, will we see the opposite development: increasing international cooperation, based on a global awareness that challenges such as pandemics cannot be successfully overcome through lone efforts and isolationism?

The US – the homeland of policy consulting

A successful response to this complex web of challenges and uncertainties necessitates comprehensive cooperation between policymaking and policy consultancy that relies on the know-how of various academic disciplines. Leading the way is the United States, the homeland of research-based policy consulting. There, a number of internationally renowned and influential think tanks have established them-

selves, such as the RAND Corporation, the Brookings Institution, and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and whose impact has long transcended the boundaries of US discourse. The significance of these institutions is based primarily on a political practice that is rather uncommon in most European systems of governance – the so-called “revolving door” culture. In the wake of a presidential election, it is thus commonplace for think tank experts to secure important positions as political appointees in the new administration. What this means in practices is that those working for a renowned think tank today, and far from the halls of political power, may tomorrow find themselves at the center of the action in Washington, D.C. This makes think tank careers particularly attractive in the US. At the same time, think tanks also foster close relationships with the legislative branch of government. Their staffers give presentations in countless committee and sub-committee hearings of the US Congress on a plethora of topics, and inject their knowledge directly into the opinion-formation processes of senators and representatives.

As it stands today, however, the golden age of collaboration between the administration, Congress, and think tanks in the US appears to be over. This is largely due to the widespread and profound polarization of American society. Against this backdrop, the demand for research-based, independent consultancy is dwindling. Well-reasoned arguments are being replaced by the strident promotion of simplistic solutions. What complicates matters further is the fact that Congress can only execute its oversight responsibilities of the executive branch in a very limited manner. The importance of Congressional hearings is therefore rapidly diminishing. Whether and to what extent US think tanks will manage to regain their influence will not only depend on the outcome of November’s presidential election, but also on the US response to the coronavirus pandemic, and whether it will serve to further aggravate or rather diminish the polarization that is already dividing the country.

Policy consulting in Europe

Some of Europe’s most important contemporary think tanks in the fields of international politics and security have closely modeled themselves according to their US counterparts. A notable difference being the lack of a corresponding European “revolving door culture,” promoting the exchange of personnel between the policymaking and policy consultancy spheres. Indeed, the career paths as well as the organizational mindsets and working practices remain rather distinct. Thus, ministry staff and think tank members often find that they are rooted in two separate worlds that only overlap in quite

haphazard ways. One world is comprised of government officials, who are embedded in highly hierarchical structures, and are constantly seeking immediate, politically viable solutions; the other, in turn, contains think tankers, whose training has been far removed from political practice, and who largely remain wedded to an academic mindset. Moreover, European parliaments tend to make far less use of the possibility to invite think tankers to testify and elucidate their positions and viewpoints at parliamentary hearings.

Five proposals for improved policy consulting

What, then, should we in Europe do to improve the interplay between policymaking and research-based consulting?

First, it is necessary to improve the exchange of personnel. As is already the case across the Atlantic, the trend in Europe must also be to better amalgamate the administrative and academic career tracks. Efforts should be undertaken to ensure that government members spend extended parts of their careers in think tanks, and conversely, that academics have the opportunity to gain professional experience in public policy and administration. This is the only way for them to learn how best to inject their knowledge into the cogwheels of the administrative apparatus.

Secondly, there is a need to develop a more practice-oriented training regime for think tank staff. At many of Europe’s universities, social science degrees and courses tend to be rather theory-oriented, and natural scientists are told very little, if anything at all, about the political significance of their knowledge and activities. As a consequence, neither social science nor natural science students effectively learn how to formulate incisive texts and communicate their knowledge to policy-makers. Changing this would require integrating experienced policy consultants more closely into academic training regimes. At the same

Further reading

Think Tanks in America Thomas Medvetz, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012. A comprehensive portrayal and analysis of important think tanks in the US.

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP): Entwicklungsgeschichte einer Institution politikbezogener Forschung Albrecht Zunker, Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2007. A history of the foundation and development of one of Europe’s biggest research-based consulting institutes in the sphere of international politics and security, which was modeled on US examples.

Darum ist die Corona Pandemie nicht in wenigen Wochen vorbei

Mathias Tertilt and Andrea Wille, www.quarks.de, 7 April 2020.

A comprehensive analysis of countermeasures against the coronavirus and their impact.

time, more trainee positions should be created in policy consulting institutions in order to teach university graduates the art of policy consulting. Naturally, this also entails a certain degree of topical specialization. Since politicians are usually generalists, those think tanks that advise them must have people in their ranks that possess extensive knowledge on relevant subject matters.

Thirdly, policy consulting must become more interdisciplinary. As the corona crisis is now making unmistakably clear, appropriate crisis management is simply not possible without close cooperation between natural scientists and social scientists on the one hand, and policy-makers on the other. Yet, the existing think tanks on the European landscape are largely populated by political scientists or economists, with natural scientists representing the exception, rather than the rule. This can be somewhat problematic, particularly if the main challenge confronting governments is an epidemic, to take just one example. In such an eventuality, it would be rather unrealistic to expect political scientists to quickly amass the necessary scientific expertise in order to effectively support those at the helm of the crisis. An urgent requirement, therefore, is to both strengthen and promote interdisciplinarity, as well as interdisciplinary cooperation within Europe's think tanks.

Fourthly, more policy-oriented consulting formats should be established. Policy consulting relies heavily on the written word, and this will continue to be the case for the foreseeable future. In the realm of politics, however, attention spans are often compressed to a point that leaves little time to read and digest longer papers, unless these cover problems of immediate urgency. Furthermore, written publications are often very ponderous, and extensive lead times are required to provide quality control for these products, which, while indispensable, is also rather time-consuming. As a result, good publications often simply arrive too late to affect political decisionmaking processes. Oral delivery formats for consultancy are therefore essential. Not only are they more flexible and interactive, they also allow the experts to tailor their responses to the needs of their audience. In such a framework of oral consulting, mutual trust is crucial – it is the key ingredient to foster a healthy and fruitful exchange between policy-makers and academia. Only then will policy-makers and government staffers share their insider knowledge with external ad-

visors, which, in turn, is a prerequisite for the latter to dispense expertise that is of actual value to the recipients. It is therefore important for all parties to agree that the delivery of oral consulting takes place in a protected space.

Finally, the topics chosen for consultation should become more aligned with policy-relevant questions, as they are discussed on the ground. Policy consulting can only succeed if it deals with topics that are considered relevant and important from the perspective of decision-makers – a need that is exemplified by the corona crisis. Of course, this is not without difficulty, as the relevance and importance of topics fluctuates according to national, regional and/or global developments. Only weeks ago, the growing power rivalry between the US and China was given a great deal of attention. While it has not been relegated to the sidelines, the topic now appears in a different light due to the pandemic. It is thus imperative that here, too, policy-makers and consultants remain in direct contact. Only then can government officials indicate early on which topics and perspectives are relevant to their current work.

The corona crisis will be replete with lessons. Certainly, one of these will be the need to improve the network of relationships between the political and the academic spheres, as well as between those that provide and those that seek research-based expertise. Our societies and governments invest a great deal of funding in academic institutions. These funds are generally well invested: The fundamental research conducted at European universities generates exceptional results, and the institutions continue to educate respectable numbers of top-level scientists. Nevertheless, what is often missing is the ability to leverage both this knowledge and these capabilities in a manner that can help policy-makers navigate and respond to crises. It may still take several months, if not years, for the corona crisis to abate, and even if it can be fully overcome, other, and possibly quite different ones will follow. To manage what lies ahead, it is therefore vital to improve and foster cooperation between policymaking and research-based policy consulting.

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