

Centralised or multi-level: which governance systems are having a 'good' pandemic?



Using Switzerland and England's responses to COVID-19, [Jen Gaskell](#) and [Gerry Stoker](#) explain how decentralised capacity, combined with a constructive relationship at different levels of governance, may result in a more effective strategy during a crisis.

There is growing awareness that the current crisis caused by the novel coronavirus is impacting the [very foundations](#) of many of the world's democracies, which suggests there is a debate to be had on the strengths and weaknesses of different governance arrangements leveraged in response to the crisis. It feels like it might be a profound learning opportunity – but is it?

It is helpful not to simply focus on the constitutional features of various democratic governments. As [colleagues have previously shown](#), those may not matter much in attempts to avoid severe policy or other disasters. Rather, it is better to focus on the ways these structures are arranged into working governance systems. Even then, equating good governance arrangements to good covid-19 response outcomes is not straightforward, nor are we arguing for such a simplistic view. Instead, we highlight how four positive qualities of multi-level governance can contribute, when combined, to greater chances of positive practical outcomes in times of crisis:

- Central capacity
- Decentralised capacity
- Mutual learning and integration
- Celebrating differences

To illustrate our point, we take the examples of Switzerland and England (and more generally the UK), whose responses to the coronavirus pandemic highlight advantages and disadvantages within their respective governance systems.

Central capacity

There are clear benefits to having a strong central capacity in terms of the ability to implement rapid, decisive action. In the UK for example, measures designed to mitigate the spread and impacts of the coronavirus were centrally issued on 3 March 2020 when the government unveiled its [plan to tackle the outbreak](#). At the time, there were [51 cases and no fatalities](#). This was then followed two weeks later by a [rapid change in tone and course](#) in response to a model by a team at Imperial College in London predicting high levels of death unless more stringent measures were adopted. Indeed [some have argued](#) that over-centralisation has resulted in a greater tendency for policy mistakes. This is echoed in a [recent assessment](#) of the length of time it took Boris Johnson's scientific advisors to raise the alarm regarding the coronavirus threat.

By contrast, it took the Swiss Federal Council until 13 March [to declare](#) an 'extraordinary situation' thus reclaiming the ability to adopt stringent measures designed to curb the spread of the virus. By that point, it had [1,176 cases and 8 fatalities](#), and was receiving heavy criticism from the medical community for its lack of coordinated action. While the declaration legitimated the Swiss Federal Council's ability to lead the response, it had to continue doing so in close collaboration with its 26 Cantons, who had until then led their own responses.

Decentralised capacity

The evident tension between speed of reaction and the need to include a broader range of stakeholders in decision-making was counter-balanced by the strength of Switzerland's decentralised capabilities. Indeed, all three governance levels – Federal, Cantonal (regional) and Communal (equivalent to county or city councils) – have mobilised different resources to tackle the outbreak. Each 'commune' can issue its own specific guidance in line with Federal and Cantonal ones. Evolène, in Valais, for example, has a dedicated [page on its website for local measures in place](#) which go far beyond reposting links to the Federal ones. According to the Swiss press, they are at the [frontline](#) of the response effort.

By contrast, it is not clear what role or agency local councils or other bodies have in the UK's response to the crisis on the ground. Local authorities in England have through the austerity measures of the last decade lost a great deal of capacity. NHS bodies seemed tied up in a complex system that seems to discourage initiative in favour of regulation and performance measurement. The country's lack of decentralised capabilities at the local levels also led to confusion in how to implement central government's orders in various sectors. For example for a time [NHS 111 contradicted](#) information provided by Ministers; more recently in the construction sector, the government published guidelines to close sites where the 2m distancing rule could not be followed but [withdrew them hours later](#) following protests that the rules could not be implemented.

Decentralised capacity alone is moreover not sufficient to generate a response like the one seen in Switzerland. In the United States for example, the Washington Post's long exposé on the '[denial and dysfunction](#)' that characterised the American response to the pandemic emphasises how power struggles and mistrust between the various department and agencies responsible for dealing with such an outbreak led to delays and failures that are central to the dire situation the country currently faces. The way the relationship between different centre of power is constructed seems equally as important to the effectiveness of a response.

Mutual learning and integration

In the Swiss example, mutual learning is institutionalised in the [consultation processes](#) at the Cantonal and Communal levels, which informs and is integrated into central decision-making. During the crisis, these consultation mechanisms have been accelerated rather than abandoned, and continue to feed into central decision-making albeit with a much faster turnaround.

Perhaps cultural differences account for the discrepancy in capacity for mutual learning among different governance levels and centres. Swiss historian and political commentator Claude Longchamp notes the long-standing [tradition of consensus building](#) in Swiss political life, whereas Lowndes [identifies](#) that relationships between local and central government departments and agencies in the UK have notoriously been characterised by a lack of trust, conflict and competition. And it is the institutionalisation of processes of mutual learning, that occur on an *ad hoc* basis in the UK, that has been leveraged successfully in the Swiss case to ensure locally-relevant and appropriate responses are not only welcome, they are able to influence the general course of the country's strategy.

Celebrating differences

This is combined finally by a commitment to celebrating differences by providing local governance centre with the freedom and resources to undertake what they feel is needed for their communities. The Commune of Bovernier, for instance, a small village with 900 inhabitants in the Canton of Valais, decided to [call each of the 110 households](#) with a resident over the age of 65 to arrange food and medicine deliveries. In Geneva, the [immediate focus](#) was on job security and support for commercial organisations. In this way, different approaches are celebrated for their localised capacity to innovate rapid, relevant responses, in contrast to centralised edicts such as the construction site closure example discussed earlier which struggled to get implemented effectively as the realisation emerged among various stakeholders that 'one-size might not fit all'.

These and other examples such as Germany's demonstrated success in case testing capabilities, which relies on a network of [400 public health offices](#) capable of testing three times as many patients per head of population than the UK, illustrate that decentralised capacity, combined with a constructive relationship at different levels of governance, might provide a more effective strategy throughout a crisis set to last for the foreseeable future.

We are at early stages in the process and lack enough evidence to be able make clear, let alone definitive judgments. But it does seem worth asking whether we can start a process of learning from an event causing immense human suffering to help us understand whether better governance systems, supporting human welfare, can be identified for the future.

About the Authors



[**Jen Gaskell**](#) is Research Fellow with the TrustGov project at the University of Southampton.



[**Gerry Stoker**](#) is Professor of Politics and Governance at the University of Southampton.

All articles posted on this blog give the views of the author(s), and not the position of LSE British Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science. Featured image credit: [engin akyurt](#) on [Unsplash](#).