

Highlights virtual ESAF meeting, 24 June 2020¹



Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the annual ESAF meeting of 2020 was virtual. With over 45 participants, we shared lessons on the use of scientific advice in the COVID-19 crisis. In this document we gathered highlights from the discussion and the questionnaires, which most participants completed before the meeting.

Scientific advice structures

- Corona has taken us by surprise, yet it was actually an announced catastrophe. Existing preparations, however, have proven to be inaccurate for this virus. Furthermore, a pandemic is by definition a global problem. International co-operation and a long-term view are necessary in tackling a pandemic and its consequences.
- Not all countries already had an established scientific advisory structure for this type of pandemic, but most appeared to be able to organize the relevant expertise on short notice. Overall ad hoc structures operated effectively, and sometimes with more legitimacy and support from the general public. This raises the question whether established structures make us less flexible to determine what is needed for the specific crisis at hand?
- We need to invest in building science-policy interfaces in ‘peace time’, but our systems should be equipped to work in ‘war time’ as well. This might require different models, adaptability and an understanding that the effectiveness of our type of advice does not just depend on formal structures, but that the power of judgment and the communicative and listening skills of experts and politicians are as important.

Data sharing and cooperation between countries and disciplines

- The pandemic stressed the importance of international cooperation between science advisors, and we have seen unprecedented examples of cooperation on the epidemiological side of the pandemic that have been very useful. However, on the societal impact of the pandemic there is much less exchange of data or cooperation.
- Established scientific advisory structures, informed by the same scientific evidence, can contribute to better-coordinated or harmonized response measures by different European countries, for instance by working on common definitions for data.
- This crisis has stressed the importance of the involvement of expertise from several disciplines. However, most already established advisory structures and ad hoc structures are limited to expertise on epidemiology and public health. Multidisciplinarity needs to be organised and well-coordinated. There is a need to develop more structures for multidisciplinary advice.

¹ Participants: Joos Vandewalle, Nikolaos Mastriannopoulos, Frede Blaabjerg, Karin Kjaer Madsen, Maja Horst, Jean-Eric Paquet, Peter Piot, Pearl Dykstra, Nicole Grobert, Rolf Heuer, Paul Nurse, Renzo Tomellini, Dulce Boavida, Sigrid Weiland, Stephen Quest, David Mair, Kristian Krieger, Wim van Saarloos, Anne-Greet Keizer, Corien Prins, Frans Brom, Phylisia Codrington, Tarmo Soomere, Terje Tuisk, Jaakko Kuosmanen, Gerald Haug, Lucian Brujan, Achilleas Mitsos, Mark Ferguson, Ričardas Rotomkis, James Foden, Janusz Bujnicki, Helena Pereira, Madalin Bunoiu, Robert Mistrik, Marko Topić, Enric Banda, Sven Stafström, Gerd Folkers, Claudia Acklin, Stuart Wainright, Peter Halligan, and 9 observers.

Trust in scientific advice: transparency and communication

- In most countries the government relied heavily on scientific expertise, and in general citizens showed high trust in and acceptance of scientific expertise. Experts are in the frontline, but this also puts us in a difficult position. If we don't deliver, there is the potential risk of backlash.
- Communication of scientific insights to the general public is more than ever part of the task of science advisors. Scientific advisors need to be skilled communicators, able to transmit their findings both to policy makers and the wider public, and deal with fake facts. We should acknowledge that this type of communication is difficult, and should be practiced, improved and made transparent.
- In a crisis like this, we need to deal with uncertainty on all levels. Scientific advisors need to provide clarity about what is known, partially known, unknown and unknowable. Good communication and transparency is essential for keeping trust from policy makers and citizens in the long term, and for the legitimacy of policy choices.
- However, as scientific advisors we need to acknowledge that policy makers need to communicate certainty as well to create a basic level of trust that is required to get people to react sensibly to the measures.

Boundaries between giving scientific advice and making policy choices

- Permanent attention is needed for the division in the tasks between scientific advisors and policy makers. The general public should understand that scientific advisors provide expertise, and that it is the responsibility of politicians to weigh that advice against other considerations and make policy choices.
- The current crisis again stressed the importance of transparent communication of these boundaries to the general public. This is even more crucial now that the first phase of the crisis has passed, and other than health considerations become (a larger) part of public decision making.

An opportunity to learn lessons

- The current phase of the crisis is a unique opportunity to learn lessons, since the events are still fresh in our minds, and before ex-post rationalisations come in.
- Scientific advisors should actively stimulate and contribute to evaluations of the crisis measures, with attention for both successes and failures of underlying science based advice and scientific advisory structures. The evaluations should focus on learning for future crises, and should take place on the national level, but also from a European or international comparative perspective.

Shared topics for post COVID-19 scientific advice

- What are the organisational challenges for 'post-pandemic societies' that are socially and economically viable both in the short and the long run?
- How can we use the experiences with this pandemic to deal with other global challenges such as climate, energy and digital transitions?
- Most European societies and citizens have shown great flexibility and resilience in coping with this crisis. What can we learn for other societal challenges and future crises?