

Some Reflections and Thoughts on Risk Governance of COVID-19 in Germany

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Current status of Covid-19 challenges Germany and Japan as of 22 May, 2020

- Affected people: 179, 021
 - Dead: 8309
 - Case Fatality Rate: 4.1 %
 - Population: 82.7 million (2017)
- Affected people (tests limited): 16.518
 - Dead: 799
 - Case Fatality Rate: 3.2 %
 - Population: 125.96 million (2020)

Germany's Strategies

- Test as many people as possible to get adequate numbers
- Isolate infected people from the rest of the population
- Avoid unmanageable stress for the healthcare system
- Engage in fairly strict lockout (physical distancing)
- Be rather cautious with tracking apps (only voluntary, no central register)
- Remove restrictions step by step if infection rate is low (less than 50 people per 10,000 inhabitants)
- Delicate balance between federal and state level (authority is on the state level)

Tensions between central and regional governments

- Federal level is responsible for overall strategy but not for regional standards and implementation of standards
- State level is responsible for setting limits and standards
- Community level: can release higher standards and is basically responsible for implementation and control

National Government

- Was not well prepared for this type of special new coronavirus epidemics/pandemics
- Was in the beginning reluctant to issue strict measure and rules (won't happen to us)
- Once the seriousness of the infection was acknowledged, the central government acted swiftly and effectively
- Strong reliance on science and scientific institutions, in particular Robert-Koch-Institute
- Approval rates of central government increased dramatically (CDU regained popularity and would get 40% of the votes if there were an election now)
- Approval of strict rules by vast majority

State and Local Governments

- Were much in line with the the Federal Government during the first weeks of the epidemic
- However, similar to other countries, some states were highly affected (Bavaria, NRW and Baden-Württemberg), others only marginally (in particular in former East-Germany). However, there were local hotspots also in states with low infection rates
- Recently, States act more independently from the federal government and set their own rules and restrictions
- State prime ministers see this also as an opportunity to gain a better public profile (sometimes on the expense of national coherence)
- At this point in time, state leaders press for removal of restrictions although the public majority still supports strict measures (the minority is, however, very vocal)

The role of scientists and specialists

- In Germany, science institutions such as the Robert Koch Institute played a major role in framing the debate and suggesting measures and rules
- The debate was first highly dominated by virologists and epidemiologists; in recent weeks, however, economists, psychologists and social scientists have become more vocal in particular with the evaluation of measures and regulation with respect to proportionality
- The Government asked highly respected institutions such as the National Academy of Sciences for advice

The public response to the crisis

- In the beginning there was a strong diversity of viewpoints ranging from downplaying the risk and dramatizing the risk (when the crisis appeared in China and neighboring countries)
- In the second phase, there was a consensus emerging of complying with national rules and supporting the national government
- In the third phase, more pluralisms in assessing the crisis and the appropriateness of governmental strategy has emerged leading to local protests against the alleged violation of human rights and to a more relaxed atmosphere of compliance

Social science aspects of the crisis

- *Psychologically*, the impacts of different response clusters (freezing, fleeing, fighting) could be well observed and provided challenges for crisis communication
- *Sociologically*, there is much evidence for large inequalities in terms of health impacts but in particular the personal and economic impacts triggered by the regulations for different parts of the population
- *Politically*, there is the emerging danger of instrumentalization of the crisis for extreme ideologies: right wing nationalism, left wing capitalism bashing and all kinds of conspiracy theories

Challenges for the future

- *Economics:* Germany like many other countries has announced a major recovery program for the economy. Financially Germany has the power to come up with an ambitious program, but there will be fierce fights for fairness in distributing the money.
- *Critical infrastructure:* There will be a boost for investing in resilient structures of public health, social support systems and major services. This might be accompanied by a re-nationalization of critical supply chains.
- *Future visions:* The planned recovery programs will be exposed to many conflicting expectations for the direction of these programs. The most sensitive issue is the vision for a green and sustainable economic development and the implications for respective governmental incentives.
- *International Relationships:* There will be a strong plea for solidarity with nations that are more affected than Germany. This applies to the southern states of Europe but also to third world countries. In addition, the conflict between China and the US may also affect Germany and the rest of the world.

Conclusions

- Germany started late with combatting Covid-19 but was then fairly effective in managing the crisis
- The division between central and regional level has been effective and allowed for flexible approaches. However, it also provided opportunities for state leaders to use the crisis for political gains.
- The German public supports the Government in the first phase of the crisis but is getting more nervous and polarized with the continuation over the regulations and rules
- The German policy making process is highly influenced by scientific advice, primarily virologists
- The future challenges will be on recovery programs in the direction of sustainability and the compensation for inequitable consequences nationally and internationally