

Democracy in Crisis: Establishing democratic Crisis-Governance!

Dr. Raban Daniel Fuhrmann, April 2020.

Introduction

In times of crisis we show our true face – institutions and states do this as well. Governments everywhere are taking rigorous action. But is this directive intervention style of far-reaching restrictions enough to really tame the extent and impact of the crisis, meaning not only to fight it, but to defeat it? How can society as a whole – not just the health system – be at its best? To what extent can participation become part of the solution? Democratic Crisis-Governance tries to give answers to questions like these.

The following article shows some starting points how we can get better in developing the co-creative potential (the potential of our collective creativity) for crisis management both in and after the corona crisis and in mastering the refurbishing and reviewing of the manifold consequences. The approaches and instruments considered here should serve as inspiration for further thinking and for breaking down to one's own contexts and requirements at local and community level. For this reason, they are deliberately outlined here in an open and detached manner.

From Government to (Crisis) Governance

A crisis begins when we (as a person, organization or nation) have to sail beyond our comfort zone¹, when it becomes uncomfortable or even existentially threatening; when the usual routines and available resources are not sufficient and when we are overwhelmed by our known possibilities. Depending on how crisis-resistant and -responsive we are as a society, even a crisis like the corona virus has different catastrophic effects.

The concept of governance is already the answer to this question, because governance begins when I as an organization or nation want to solve a problem or advance a cause beyond my own resources and competences. Governance begins when government and management reach their limits – when power and money are no longer sufficient to solve all the problems.

Government (the State) can prescribe and prohibit, but this state monopoly on force reaches its limits: The behavior of people and organizations can only be bought and controlled to a limited extent and many actions are intrinsically motivated. This form of self-directed behavior is particularly important during a crisis, where responsible, co-thinking, appropriate and solidary behavior is required.

This is exactly what Crisis-Governance is all about: How can we tackle massive and threatening challenges beyond existing organizational forms, rules and instruments? How can we sail beyond our current capabilities and capacities and handle challenges that go beyond our current ideas and possibilities, resources and procedures? How can we switch from a reactive to a co-creative crisis management mode? Because Crisis-Governance is about activating and unlocking the true potential of a community – the co-creative potential that is not within but between us, people and institutions.

¹ Governance, like government comes from lat. gubernare; the steering of a ship. Governance is therefore the art of navigation under adverse, uncontrollable circumstances. Crises – storms, shoals, pirates, mutiny – have always been part of this.

How can these crisis management reserves be tapped? How can the trans-sectoral, interpersonal and supranational potentials be developed and channeled?

In the following, I would like to give food for thought on this subject by means of five modes of Crisis-Governance that build upon each other and should be jointly driven up and down:

1. Reactive Preparation

The crisis begins with its proclamation. If and how this happens, decides how one gets into the crisis: does one slide or step into it? This shows whether one is mentally and organizationally prepared for crises. What can be built upon and connect to? Does everyone immediately know where their posts are and what the agreed initial routines are? The announcement and the step-by-step ramp-up into crisis mode are therefore crucial to prepare the organization or the community in an orderly and appropriate manner for the coming challenge.

Essential measures for a meaningful transition to the first step of active Crisis-Governance are a general "fitness check" with regard to the expected turbulences and disruptions. It is crucial to be able to assess as precisely as possible where things could probably get tight (masks, intensive care beds, ventilators) but also how the dynamics might develop: What will be the driving factors, the tipping points, where does the risk of loss of control exist. This phase of the reactive mode is usually well covered in conventional crisis management – but it only works well if it is broadly and deeply established and played through. This is the preliminary stage of Crisis-Governance.

2. Proactive Communication

The actual Crisis-Governance begins when the system switches from reactive to proactive mode. The first central factor here too is communication. It is essential to address not only the head (mind), but also the heart (emotions) and hand (energy). After all, especially in new types of threatening situations, there is not only a great need for education, but also the danger of great insecurity and despondency. Therefore, a regular, proactive, transparent and understanding communication and information policy is of central importance.

In addition, there must also be a proactive, meaning precautionary and comprehensive, response to misinformation, rumors and conspiracy theories. In times of social media, this is only possible in a cooperative manner: by building and activating a broad alliance of partners who independently provide information.

However, the decisive factor here is not preventing and fighting, but winning and mobilizing society. Comprehensive and transparent information about the emerging consequences and the status of preparations is essential, because it must be clear to everyone how things will most likely develop and where the most concerning problems might occur. Since some official bodies will find it difficult to do this for security reasons, an independent and autonomous crisis communication office is an essential part of proactive Crisis-Governance. Such an office does not have to consider re-election, feel that it has to go easy on the population or hide a lack of preparation.

Furthermore, detailed and verifiable reporting should be provided on what measures are being ramped up, who is working on what, where there are successes, but also where things are lacking behind. In this way, societal actors can be given the chance to get involved where it is needed. It is therefore misleading to first proclaim that one is "well prepared", but then to gradually suggest that shortages prevail and that crisis management is deficient, as was done in many countries in their responses to the Corona crisis. This may have been done for fear of losing public confidence and causing panic. However, these are not necessary consequences of communicating the shortcomings –

on the contrary: Through a transparent and thoughtful disclosure of the current state of preparations and the weak points, the population knows where it stands, can provide support in the right places and give credit for what is already being done by the state.

3. Creative Coordination

The coordination of the potential of tens of millions of people and institutions requires strategic guidance. Only when it is clear where the foreseeable and most acute problems will occur and what exactly the triggers, dynamics and countermeasures are, will the different actors be able to focus their actions properly. Although centralized and directive operational control is needed, it reaches its limits especially in fluid, highly complex and disruptive crises – indeed, there is a risk of becoming too one-sided and making mistakes.

Complex crises require complex solutions, possibly involving unusual instruments that are carried out by very different actors. Agile coordination instruments can do great work here and could be taken care of by, for example, proven process managers and facilitators from the business community. In recent years, a bunch of such agile and mindful, fluid and systemic process design approaches have become known, especially in organizational and leadership development. Examples are Scrum and other agile methods as well as mindfulness-based approaches such as Theory-U, Mindful Leadership or Genuine Contact².

If we want to awaken the sleeping potential for crisis management, we should use the best of approaches, methods and actors and integrate them in a targeted and coordinated manner. This requires a state-institution for Crisis-Governance that takes care of the overarching coordination and strategy. This unit could collect and communicate where there is a need for what, as well as disseminate successfully tested approaches and examples and agree on standards. This meta-coordination would not be a directive and determining, but a directing and arranging management. Because in order to awaken the best in people and thus better manage crises, one has to invite, motivate and support and not force or pay. Tangible incentives and playful competitions should only provide additional motivation.

One example of such a playful competition is the format of the Hackathon, as commissioned by the German government in mid-March with a very large response³. Such contests for ideas and solutions, which can help for example to create Corona tracking apps within a few days, can also be enriched with prizes, bonuses and support offers. In this stage of Crisis-Governance, it is also important that there is no alibi-participation. Nevertheless, the playful ambition should be stimulated – not only among professionals, but in the sense of Citizen Science also among laymen. The more dramatic the crisis, the more innovative ways and players must be allowed. Experimentation clauses and relaxations for regulations help to achieve this.

In the crisis, technology, methods and facilitators have to be top-notch – there must be no cutting back. Groundbreaking solutions that might make the crucial difference between aggravation and rescue need particularly supportive conditions! Nevertheless, in the end, crises are not just about finding the solution, but about implementing it in the best possible way. In the best case, this should be done quickly, as cheaply as possible, fairly and sustainably and without side effects. Collaboration is therefore required as the next step.

² These procedural competencies are not only helpful in crises but could also otherwise improve the work in administration and politics.

³ wirvsvirushackathon.org

4. Co-Creative Collaboration

If the aim is not only to generate the best solutions, but to implement them as quickly and responsibly as possible, further activation and involvement of a broad collection of people, especially those that are affected, is needed. In the current COVID-19 pandemic, actually everyone is affected and should therefore ideally be part of the co-creative processes. Such a comprehensive ignition of the enormous potential of co-intelligence and co-creativity can only succeed with intrinsic motivation – creativity is given voluntarily and cannot be ordered.

At this point at the latest, the prevailing executive style of command and control and top-down must be abandoned. A co-creative style of governance is, rather, characterized by an embrace of complexity – of individuality, difference and identity. Value creation needs appreciation: In order to share one's own knowledge and skills, we need collaboration at eye level. Participation and co-determination are therefore central and the way out of the crisis must be a comprehensively democratic one.

Deliberative consulting – the participatory consulting of the state by representatives from business and civil society as well as citizens – is therefore the best and most sustainable way out of the crisis. Inter-sectoral and transversal consulting is necessary. Open and representative rooms for resonance and consultation that expand and substantiate the upcoming decisions could help here. Such additional advice and control bodies can not only increase the quality of decisions and measures, but also strengthen the acceptance of uncomfortable or risky measures and ultimately the resilience of our democratic, free social order. Ultimately, the best crisis management is one that actually makes society come out stronger and more united. How can this be achieved? – The following are some initial ideas, all of which can be realized digitally, so the current social distancing rules can be respected:

Plan-Ahead Teams:

This concept originates from management consulting and was recommended by the consulting firm McKinsey, among others. The idea is that a special committee always thinks about the next phase of the way in and out of a crisis and thus prepares and facilitates the actual process. "A plan-ahead team delivers scenarios, recommendations for actions, and trigger points to the CEO and the management team so that they can decide on the right course of action."⁴ Even if this additional body was conceived for companies – in addition to the usual crisis staffs – the logic is also transferable to political and social Crisis-Governance: In addition to the acute crisis management staffs, there should be challenge-specific anticipatory advisory councils which already think few steps ahead. In this way, the horizon can be opened not only temporally, but also sectorally and disciplinary. To meet political needs, these anticipation councils must therefore be deliberately broad and cross-cutting.

Crisis councils:

Crisis councils are advisory councils consisting of randomly selected citizens. In a similar form such aleatorically composed mini publics have become increasingly popular internationally over the past 40 years as addition to the regular democratic bodies. They bring together the three decisive criteria for good, sustainable and sensible decision-making:

1. comprehensive information: The participants are informed by experts about everything important, so that they can weigh up informedly.
2. deliberation: small groups of participants discuss and weigh up the issues in order to arrive at good recommendations and advice, which are then passed on to the political decision-makers.

⁴ [getting-ahead-of-the-next-stage-of-the-coronavirus-crisis](#)

3. unbiased deliberation: By random selection, a broad orientation towards the common good is achieved: Representatives and delegates cannot get out of this dilemma – random evaluators can.

The final decision is still up to the chosen responsible persons. However, they promise to submit all essential questions to this committee and to include its recommendations in the final decision (soft-law agreement). A model specialized for crises is currently being developed and introduced by the Academy Learning Democracy and other actors from the democracy development scene⁵.

HomeParliaments:

While crisis councils can rely on their representative composition, HomeParliaments enable very broad and low-threshold consultation by thousands. In HomeParliaments, the questions are selected by the political decision-makers and are incorporated into processing documents by a neutral body. These are then sent by e-mail to persons who have registered as hosts. They then invite 4-7 other friends, colleagues or neighbors to HomeParliaments. Together they discuss the questions – with the help of the documents provided – and return their findings and recommendations to the political decision-makers (members of parliament, government bodies, crisis management groups, etc.). Here too, concrete feedback and assessments can be obtained quickly and in a differentiated manner. The advantage here is the potentially enormous scalability⁶.

Conclusion: Establish and Institutionalize Crisis-Governance

These are just a few of the many procedures that show how participation – even under difficult crisis conditions – helps to better tap into the co-creative potential and to secure serious and uncertain decisions more broadly. In order to use this variety of suitable formats, to commission new ones or to further adapt them, we need expertise and – as a next step – (government) agencies that would be responsible for such democracy development measures. Possible would be some sort of department for Crisis-Governance that would be specially mandated and equipped for this purpose. In addition, a general, comprehensive approach to the topic of democracy development is needed, which will ensure that such methods are developed and applied so that our democratic processes run better both during and after (and before the next crisis).

After the crisis is before the crisis: The crisis management potential of our liberal democracies has been increasingly classified as insufficient overall in recent years (and not only by the Fridays for Future generation). The establishment of a continuous development of democracy in the sense of a learning democracy is therefore not only a core task in this crisis but will be indispensable for the sustainable coping with the Corona crisis. If we do not take care now that in the current crisis versatile positions are integrated, new ideas are promoted and developed, the co-creative potential is folded and the acceptance of the governmental measures is increased, then there is a risk of long-term damages for society, politics and economy.

If we enter the crisis as democracies, then let us also master it with the strengths of democracies: With professionally organized participation and consultation that helps us to overcome the corona and follow-up crises. So that future generations will speak of 2020 as a year of change and awakening, in which we have not only mastered corona together, but in which we have overall got our act together and learned to master the small and large crises of humanity together, co-creatively.

⁵ Further information is available at: www.lernende-demokratie.de

⁶ This method was developed by the author especially for the EU and has been successfully tested with Pulse of Europe in recent years. At the moment it is being relaunched with OpenPetition, so that it will be usable from the municipal to the European level from summer 2020 on. Further information on the procedure has already been published by the vhw in FWS 6 / November - December 2019 and on www.hausparlamente.de.