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Taskforces: a cure for all ills? Policy advisory systems in times of polycrises

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the flourishing claims to create crisis taskforces in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Are taskforces a remedy for all crises? Taskforces are ad-hoc created groups of highly specialized experts who provide advice to policymakers. They have the advantages of flexibility and allow to recruit high-level competences for short-term mandates. However, taskforces are not a panacea, as different types of crises (e.g. creeping crises, disruptive events, cyclical crises) require different types of policy advisory systems. A taskforce is also a short-term, reactive model, which runs the risk of politicization. This article analyzes the suitability of the taskforce model in various situations and compares expert advice provided to decision-makers during the financial crisis and during the COVID-19 pandemic in Switzerland. It answers the question of what types of advisory systems suit what type of crisis. The contribution shows that in the era of polycrises, one size does not fit all and the distinctive characteristics of crises must be considered to find a fit-for-purpose approach.

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1. Introduction: are taskforces a short-term solution to long-lasting issues?

A specific type of policy advisory system, “taskforces”, is burgeoning in the wake of the COVID-19. During the pandemic, taskforces have been established in countries worldwide to provide governments with state-of-the-art evidence. Taskforces gather authoritative experts to help governments to cope with topics requiring cutting-edge knowledge on highly specialized matters (Thomas and Wolman 1969).

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During the COVID-19, taskforces proved to be valuable assets in the governmental crisis governance toolkit: they helped navigate a complex crisis and provided a constant actualization of quickly evolving evidence. For experts, taskforces bear the promise of privileged access to decision-makers and an official recognition of the value of science. Next to these manifest functions, taskforces also fulfilled unforeseen functions such as helping political authorities to manage the blame (Galanti and Saracino 2021; Hinterleitner, Honegger, and Sager 2023; Mavrot 2024).

Taskforces can be created overnight to provide authorities with the best available knowledge, which makes them attractive. While taskforces have a long history in policymaking (Thomas and Wolman, 1969), their advantages have recently caught public attention, and they seem to have become an easy choice. However, their sometimes-overlooked drawbacks should be part of the equation. As much as taskforces are a manifestation of agile governance through the temporary and targeted creation of an advisory arrangement, these characteristics raise questions regarding their articulation with existing politico-administrative structures (Thomas and Wolman 1969). Moreover, the nomination of experts to tackle salient issues raises questions of democratic legitimacy. Even if the accusations of technocracy should be put into perspective, populist or even conspiracist controversies might break out about taskforces. Finally, not all crises are equal. From cyclical financial crises to creeping climate change or pandemic episodes, there is a wide range of crises. They have different requirements regarding preparation, governance, and the duration of public action.

Polycrises present particular challenges, given that they are characterized by a simultaneity of complex events that intersect and mutually reinforce the crisis (Davies and Hobson 2023). This leads to spillovers and a layering of problems, whereby solving one problem might aggravate another (Dinan et al. 2024; Zaki et al. 2024). Even though polycrises share common characteristics, it does not mean that they all require a unique advisory model. To avoid falling into the trap of a one-size-fits-all solution, the crisis management toolkit in the context of polycrises should be scrutinized, and the relevance of taskforces be closely analyzed. Practitioners should be provided with a systematic assessment of the pros and cons of taskforces, to be able to make informed choices as to the adequateness of this type of advisory system.

To address this research interest and consolidate future abilities to cope with high-stake public problems, this article poses the following questions: Are taskforces a remedy for all crises or only fit to navigate specific types of crises? Do they purely meet a need for specialized expertise or are they at risk of justifying weak administrative capacity or poor crisis preparedness by providing the illusion of safety? Are they a short-term solution to long-lasting issues?

Methodologically, we tackle these questions with a comparative study of the science-policy interface in the COVID-19 crisis and the 2008–2009 finance crisis in Switzerland. Both crises have been discussed in the polycrisis literature (Lawrence et al. 2024) and are characterized by different features that are expected to have an impact on the suitability of taskforces. While the case studies illustrate situations in which taskforces might be required or not, the discussion of the results focuses on the research question, i.e. the suitability of taskforces to tackle crises and the ways to enhance taskforces as a specific type of advisory body. We study Switzerland to keep the national

political context stable, which allows us to flesh out the relevance of crisis characteristics for the adequateness of taskforces. In addition, the focus on different crises in Switzerland allows us to examine the cases within a unique type of national advisory system and observe the variations in how this national system is adapted in different situations. The institutional characteristics of the Swiss political system—especially direct democracy and consociationalism—have a substantial impact on the system of policy advice. They require that advisory bodies are accepted by the whole political spectrum in the context of consensus democracy. Central sources of scientific expertise in Switzerland are (1) extra-parliamentary permanent commissions and expert commissions, (2) internal administrative expertise and departmental research, and (3) advice from private (research) institutes. Because of these interdependent structures of policy advice and the high need for consensus in the system, the sudden creation of ad-hoc taskforces appears unusual in Switzerland; hence, if they prove suitable in this particular institutional setting, their suitability in other national institutional contexts can be assumed and derived. In addition, the creation of the Swiss COVID-19 task force is a pure case of ad hoc constitution of a whole new advisory body, out of the previously planned and preexisting crisis structures and without embeddedness in the institutional architecture. It can thus be conceived as representative of task force creation and provide learning for other contexts. Empirically, we rely on a documentary analysis of publicly available documentation related to crisis management, such as administrative reports, position papers and policy evaluations, as well as on interviews conducted in 2021–2022 with key players of crisis governance from the COVID-19 and/or financial crisis: members of the federal government, public servants, and scientists from advisory bodies. The information from the document analysis and from the interviews have been triangulated to strengthen the robustness and accuracy of the data. In total, 25 interviews have been made: 18 with actors involved in the COVID-19 governance and 13 in the finance crisis (some interviewees, for instance members of the federal government, were involved in the management of both crises). Interviewees have been questioned on three main dimensions: (i) Assessment of the policy advisory system in the concerned field before the crisis (e.g. through which channels was the dialogue between scientists/experts and government/administration organized? What type of formal and informal interactions? How strongly were experts involved in crisis preparation?); (ii) Assessment of the advisory system during the crisis (e.g. how was the expert-government communication organized? How strong was expertise considered? What factors impeded expert-politics communication?); (iii) Assessment of future needs (e.g. should the policy advisory system take another organizational form or be located elsewhere? What science-for-policy mechanism does the country need in the future?). Interview statements were coded and analyzed with a qualitative content analysis software based on both deductively derived categories that reflect the expected influence of crisis characteristics and inductively developed categories that concern all aspects of advisory activities (e.g. communication, structure and procedures, relation with politics).

2. Policy problem: expert-politics relationship in crisis governance

The rapid circulation of the “taskforce” model among countries during the pandemic is striking: the Swiss National COVID-19 Science Task Force, the Task Force

COVID-19 Therapeutics in Belgium, the White House Coronavirus Task Force in the USA, or the numerous COVID-19 task forces in Italy, to cite only a few. However, the rushing in seeing in taskforces the remedy to contemporary problems raises questions. We talk of policy advisory systems as “the interlocking set of actors and organizations (...) in each sector and jurisdiction that provides recommendations for action to policymakers” (Craft and Halligan 2017, citing Halligan 1995). Analytical competencies are a key dimension of policy capacities, and should be analyzed at the individual, organizational, and system levels (Howlett and Ramesh 2016). Next to that, overarching governance capacities contribute to robust crisis governance, for instance high-level public trust, strong bureaucracy, high level of public spending, and preparedness (Christensen and Lægheid 2020).

Policy advisory systems are made of experts qualified to provide advice through their specialized knowledge. Their legitimacy is epistemic, and “derives from the perceived authority of science” (Galanti 2023). However, policy advisory systems are not restricted to academics and can also include practitioners (e.g. public servants) whose legitimacy is based on field knowledge. Advisory systems can be created ad hoc (e.g. expert task forces) or permanently rooted in the institutional landscape (Hustedt and Veit 2017; Tuohy Carolyn et al. 2023). They can also be in-house or located outside of the governments (Aubin and Brans 2021). Depending on location, functioning, and the characteristics of their members, advisory systems enjoy a greater or lesser political independence. They experience a tension between impact and autonomy: when controlled by governments, they are more likely to be heard but lose independence (Li 2021). Therefore, while advisory bodies and procedures serve the evidence-based rationalization of decision-making, they are also strategically used to justify political action (Hustedt and Veit 2017) and external expertise can be subject to politicization (Craft and Howlett 2013; Dunlop 2010; Mavrot & Pattyn 2022; Zaki and Wayenberg 2020). Finally, an important dimension is the type of knowledge required to address a problem. Situations with a high epistemic uncertainty like COVID-19 might call for a broad range of expertise to shed light on an emerging issue, contrary to routinized crises, such as financial crises, for which more established knowledge might be sufficient (van den Hove 2007).

We focus here on taskforces defined as nonpermanent expert advisory bodies composed of specialists from outside of government who provide expertise and advice to face matters requiring specialized knowledge (Nair and Garg 2024; Thomas and Wolman 1969). Taskforces as advisors to governments originated in US policymaking in the 1960s (Thomas and Wolman 1969) but have been employed since then in a variety of contexts. Taskforces may play different roles in policymaking: give specialized expert advice and provide scientific knowledge, coordinate between governmental agencies, supplement bureaucratic processes to deal with administrative burden, or provide linkage to interest groups (Nair and Garg 2024; Nash and Durden 1964). While ad hoc taskforces have the advantage of being flexible, integrating new ideas in policymaking, and expanding the range of expertise (Deutschmann 1995; Nash and Durden 1964), previous literature has highlighted pitfalls such as missed opportunities for policy learning (Nair and Garg 2024), the lack of realism of taskforces proposals, or resentments encountered inside bureaucracy (Thomas and Wolman 1969). In contrast, bureaucrats or

members of institutions close to the state know how to provide applicable advice (Capano et al. 2024). Policy learning literature still lacks focus on how learners' own agency shape opportunities for learning within advisory configurations (Zaki 2024). A micro-focus on taskforce as specific advisory configurations contributes to this question.

Advisory needs depend on the type of crisis, which differ regarding their timing, scale of action, intersectoral coordination needs, or target groups. A major category of crisis is the creeping ones. Creeping crises are slow-burning crises with a long incubation time and no clear beginning and end (Boin, Ekengren, and Rhinard 2020). They are large-scale issues with deeply rooted origins and a multi-sectoral character (Boin, Ekengren, and Rhinard 2020). Hence, they are multidimensional (Zaki, Pattyn, and Wayenberg 2023), and transboundary in nature (Boin, Ekengren, and Rhinard 2020). They are usually not perceived as urgent until a tipping point is reached (*op. cit.*). Hence, given their inherent features (long-term development, difficulty to circumscribe the issue), they are difficulty addressed by policymakers (Zaki 2023). Typically, the COVID-19 is categorized as a creeping crisis, with “a seemingly permanent, epochal character, generating regular outbursts without reaching closure” (Boin, Ekengren, and Rhinard 2020: 120).

Cyclical crises have clearer beginnings and ends, and they happen because of risks that are better identified. We know such crises will continue to happen in the future, although it is difficult to know when and in what proportion. Cyclical crises have therefore more to do with risk management, allowing the government to build up their response capacity (Boin and Lodge 2016). Examples are finance crises or natural disasters. Because of their predictability, crisis management systems are likely to be strongly integrated into the state architecture.

3. Discussion: comparing types of crises and their advisory needs

Our results show the advantages and drawbacks of different policy advisory systems. Advisory bodies used in Switzerland during the financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic differed in two important aspects: their long-term vs. short-term nature and the use of internal vs. external advisors. The financial crisis was managed by activating an already existing advisory system composed of experts from within the administration and from the national bank, an institution close to the government (Interviews 1, 3, 4, 8, 17, 20). During COVID-19, the need for cutting-edge epidemiological knowledge led to the ad hoc creation of the Swiss National COVID-19 Science Task Force. The initiative came from the academic community and authoritative experts from universities were integrated into this body (Interviews 2, 7, 14, 16, 24). Two other permanent expert advisory system already existed in the form of extra-parliamentary commissions on pandemic preparedness and on vaccination issue but were only partially activated during the pandemic (Interviews 6, 15, 16, 24, 26).

In the financial crisis, internal specialized expertise was at disposition inside public administration, because the financial area is considered as a core task of the state (Interviews 1, 4, 8):

It was organized with internal federal staff only. It really happened with the specialists from the Federal Department of Finance, and the National Bank has a small department of its own that deals with financial stability. These people are relatively close to science. (...) We were able to benefit from them. (Interview 4).

This preexisting internal advisory system had several advantages. It was efficient as experts and politicians were used to working together: communication channels and trust existed, operating procedures were quickly put in place (Interviews 4, 9). Experts and politicians had a common understanding of the crisis management objectives and shared the same epistemic background (stance toward the dominant economic paradigm) (Interviews 1, 6):

What was central, is the high amount of trust that we had in this [advisory body], we had achieved this because we had already discussed very intensively for two or three years beforehand and had a “unity of doctrine” (Interview 4).

Drawbacks were the lack of opinion diversity that triggered debate after the crisis, when the parliament and the population questioned the chosen path (priority given to saving the Union Bank of Switzerland) (Interviews 4, 9, 17, 20). In addition, experts and politicians had worked confidentially to avoid market panic, which ensured decisive action but lacked transparency (Interviews 1, 4, 17).

In contrast, the ad hoc created taskforce advising the government during COVID-19 had several advantages. The taskforce was deemed legitimate regarding the academic expertise of its members (Interviews 1, 6), and its independence toward the government. Several drawbacks also existed. The lack of diversity of the taskforce’s predominantly epidemiological expertise was criticized. In addition, task force members were not used to collaborate with authorities (SNCSTF/Swiss National COVID-19 Science Task Force 2022) and it took a long time to find a constructive routine with the public administration (Interviews 2, 16, 23):

(...) generally, the contact with the [Federal Office of Public Health] as an administration was very weak at the beginning (...) I have the impression on their side as well, the mutual understanding that we have now, we didn’t have that at all at the time (Interview 2).

The taskforce also sometimes publicly criticized the government, which created friction with politicians and the administration (Interviews 1, 2, 5, 7, 10, 14, 15, 16, 23, 24, 27). As time is essential in sensitive crisis situations, it had to be agreed upon which player would give its directions at what time and in which form, to avoid confusion (SNCSTF/Swiss National COVID-19 Science Task Force 2022). Hence, the workflows, attributions, and communication prerogatives of the taskforce had to be clarified during the crisis:

What then became increasingly clear, was that we had to clarify the roles, how to communicate. Not only how [to communicate] in the media, but what in the media and what not. And this was in my view a lengthy determination process (Interview 5).

The (dis)advantages of the taskforce policy advisory model are pictured in Table 1.

Table 1. Advantages and drawbacks of taskforces in crisis governance.

		Advantages	Drawbacks
<i>Operational dimensions</i>	Structure	Fit-to-purpose	Deus ex-machina (articulation issues with existing structures)
	Communication	No fear of electoral sanction	Complex content
	Composition	Subject-tailored	Lack of politico-administrative broker
	Type of expertise	Cutting-edge academic expertise	Risk of tunnel vision (e.g. over-medicalized COVID-19 taskforces)
	Type of legitimacy	Epistemic legitimacy	Possible lack of democratic legitimacy
	Independency	Leeway to criticize political decisions	Possible frictions with politics
	Relations with political authorities	Legitimate political action or provides a scapegoat	Diverging ethos and finalities
	Relations with administrative authorities	Complementary expertise	Concurrence with specialized administrative agencies
<i>Strategic dimensions</i>	Relation with the public	Embodiment of the "voice of science"	Risk of anti-technocratic controversy
	Nomination mode	Political appointment	Risk of science politicization
	Temporal factor	Flexible creation depending on needs	Short-term initiative

Source: based on Hirschi et al. (2022).

4. How to deal with the next crisis? Implications for research and practice

4.1. Adapting the advisory model to the type of crisis

Our study of comparative crisis governance in Switzerland (Hirschi et al. 2022) results in a typology of three types of crises: cyclical predictable ones (e.g. financial crises, earthquakes), creeping, slow-burning ones (e.g. climate change, pandemic), and unexpected black swans as difficultly predictable crises (e.g. a critical infrastructure accident). Because of their characteristics, these crises are more or less suited to the creation of taskforces, which we address in the following subsection.

It should be underlined that while being a creeping crisis, the COVID-19 has been de facto treated as a black swan by many governments including the Swiss one (Hirschi et al. 2022). It was a predictable event however ill-anticipated and therefore de facto treated as unexpected, i.e. like a false black swan, with the creation of a special taskforce. Hence in reality, the lines between creeping crises and unexpected crises might be blurred regarding how they are effectively managed by authorities. These types of crises—cyclical, creeping, black swan—all happen in a general era of polycrises and might intersect with each other.

4.1.1. Cyclical crises

Cyclical crises are predictable and recurrent events. They often touch upon technical and mono-sectoral areas. As showed in the case study of the financial crisis, because of these characteristics—recurrence and technicality—they might be best addressed by a junction of public action and specialized expertise located inside public administration or in specialized institutions close to governments (e.g. national banks) or in dedicated research institutes. Because these crises are bound to recur, the existence

of specialized institutions to help navigate them is adequate. Expertise located in external institutions but close to the government can ensure smooth processes and rapid action. Contrary to taskforces, no time need to be invested in developing working routines with experts that would be strangers to the government. In addition, such specialized institutions can guarantee secrecy (crucial in financial crises) and be filled with experts that know how to deliver hands-on expertise. Dangers are a possible lack of epistemic diversity and a lack of transparency.

4.1.2. Creeping crises

Because they concern long-developing problems, creeping crises like climate change would require long-term, proactive, and anticipatory political action. Such action would be ideally part of a sustained governmental action and therefore embedded in governmental structures—with, however, the possibility to involve academic experts in any necessary area. The exact articulation between external and in-state expertise would depend on each country's historical politico-institutional structures and legal provisions. Dangers are a possible lack of independence toward the political hierarchy if the expertise is mainly administrative. The COVID-19 pandemic could have been anticipated and treated like a creeping crisis. Signs of an upcoming big-scale issue (multiplication of zoonoses (McNeely 2021)) had been ignored. In such cases, if the creeping crisis reaches its tipping point, a taskforce can save the day and help manage the overlooked emergence of the problem (false black swan).

4.1.3. Black swans

This type of crisis would be a truly disruptive, unexpected one. Low-probability/high-impact events fall within this category. Such crises might concern various topics. The crisis governance toolkit must include the possibility of such events. This type of crisis might be best suited to be addressed with an ad hoc, tailored taskforce. Dangers to consider regard the lack of articulation with the state. But because these events are difficult to predict, the taskforce model ensures a quick reactive answer to the threat. In addition, as such crises could virtually happen in any policy field, they are not necessarily all covered by in-house crisis governance structure.

In the following, we review the elements that should be considered by decision-makers when considering the creation of taskforces. These elements are both drawn from the results of the comparison of the advisory structures in the financial and COVID-19 crises in Switzerland and the international literature.

4.2. Preventing the shortcomings of the taskforce model

4.2.1. Operational dimensions

- Structure. The main advantage of taskforces is their fit-for-purposeness, defined as the capacity to put together an advisory structure that is both tailored to the specific topic of the crisis (Nair and Garg 2024) (e.g. epidemiological expertise on infectious diseases) and to the operational needs of governments

(Thomas and Wolman 1969) (e.g. round-the-clock expertise). As a drawback, such advisory bodies come to play as *Deus ex machina*. They must suddenly collaborate with authorities, without being able to rely on preexisting articulation with governmental structures. Governments could therefore anticipate future areas of crisis and create networks of scientists in the event of a crisis (Hofmänner 2021).

- **Composition.** A crisis requires close expert-politics cooperation. The brightest knowledge is worth nothing if it does not come at hand for politicians and administrations, that both have distinctive needs for advice (Sager et al. 2020). Academics in taskforces are no experts in policy-making processes and could be educated to these aspects (Hofmänner 2021). In addition, taskforces would benefit from the inclusion of policy experts, that can act as brokers between scientists and politicians and repackage the knowledge into a usable form (Craft and Howlett 2013, citing Lindvall 2009).
- **Type of expertise.** Taskforces provide the opportunity to gather the best available knowledge on a topic. The COVID-19 has, however, shown limitations with the overwhelming weight given to medical expertise in many advisory committees. Learning processes in (creeping) crises require a diversity of expertise, because these crises are complex, multidimensional, technical, and ambiguous (Zaki 2023). Interdisciplinarity is even more required when facing polycrises, a context in which several simultaneous crises interact with, and amplify each other (Davies and Hobson 2023). Advisory bodies should therefore include complementary sets of expertise to avoid tunnel vision. This includes expertise that questions short, middle- and long-time effects of the crisis, and that focuses on social, economic, ethical, and specialized dimensions (Hirschi et al. 2022).
- **Communication.** Regarding internal communication within the taskforce, peer discussion should be the gold standard, as it is in scientific activity. Ideally, the discussions should be held in the open, to ensure public transparency. Regarding external communication, taskforces can express their views without fear of electoral sanction and assume to be hard-liners. This can be an asset in crisis governance and politicians can strategically use that to share the blame for passing strong restrictions (Galanti and Saracino 2021; Hinterleitner, Honegger, and Sager 2023; Mavrot 2024).
- **Type of legitimacy.** Taskforce's experts lack of democratic legitimacy has often been held against them during COVID-19. Two elements might consolidate taskforce's legitimacy: explaining to the public on what criteria experts have been chosen, and communicating on the limitation of the taskforce's mission, to avoid confusion about their prerogative (SNCSTF/Swiss National COVID-19 Science Task Force 2022).
- **Independence.** A specificity of a taskforce is their autonomy toward political authorities. This is a key difference with in-house expertise provided by administrations or institutions close to governments. However, this independence can create frictions that risk putting the science-politics relationship in jeopardy. Solutions must therefore be found to strike the right balance between independence and proximity (Li 2021).

- Relations with politicians. Possible tension between taskforces and politicians calls for an early clarification of the taskforce's communication prerogatives to avoid indecisiveness and distrust. It should be clarified whether the experts' mission is limited to providing evidence, elaborating scenarios, or providing recommendations for action (SNCSTF/Swiss National COVID-19 Science Task Force 2022).
- Relations with administrations. The relationship between taskforces and public administrations is crucial. While specialized administrations are used to being the main governmental advisers, they must contend with a rival expertise when a taskforce is created. While taskforce experts rather have a theoretical perspective, administrative experts know the requirements of state action. This differing ethos can lead to dissent. In already established, permanent advisory bodies, clear lines of accountability exist, and procedures are already up and running (Tuohy Carolyn et al. 2023). Cooperation between experts and administrations must similarly be carefully planned for future crises. This includes having a cooperation agreement ready—including arbitration procedures—and an organizational chart regulating institutional connection (Hirschi et al. 2022).
- Relations with the public. The popular acceptance of crisis governance structures is key. Ad hoc advisory groups undertake an important role of communication toward stakeholders during a crisis (Nair and Garg 2024). It is therefore crucial that the population acknowledges the legitimacy of a taskforce. However, to avoid the rejection of evidence, taskforces should stick to their mission and avoid overstepping their prerogative. They should communicate transparently areas of scientific uncertainty (van den Hove 2007). It must be made clear that the final arbitrators are politicians, that are democratically elected and legitimate to weigh social interests in a political decision.

4.2.2. *Strategical dimensions*

- Nomination mode. Governments usually appoint taskforces. This goes with a risk of politicization, as governments can strategically select expertise along a political logic rather than a learning-oriented one (Dunlop 2010). Taskforces might operate in controversial policy areas and for experts, the politicization of science is a serious threat that can lead to a loss of credibility (Hirschi et al. 2022). The more rigorously the relations between policymakers and experts are organized, including an institutional settlement of experts' independency, the least science is prone to political instrumentalization (Zaki and Wayenberg 2020).
- Temporal Factor. Another limitation of taskforces lies in their short-term nature. While this enables flexible action fitting the needs of the situation, this might also denote political short-termism. Advisory systems can reflect an either short-term/reactive or long-term/anticipatory approach of governments to problem-solving (Aubin and Brans 2021). Tackling crises in a reactive

manner with “fire-fighting advice” (Craft and Howlett 2013) is not suitable in an era of polycrisis. While some operational precautions can be taken to anticipate some shortcomings, taskforces remain provisory crisis governance instruments.

5. Conclusion

The taskforce model that regained vitality with COVID-19 bears promise. It symbolized the importance of science in tackling urgent crises. It led science and politics to work hand in hand to solve a major threat. In this sense, the “follow the science” strategy adopted in the handling of the pandemic has proven worth in Switzerland, which has not been the case in every national configuration (Kurzer & Ornston 2023). It allowed to pool the knowledge and capacities of public health agencies and academic experts on the one hand, and to include a broad number of scientists in the taskforce to reach a balanced scientific consensus on the other hand. However, the taskforce was coupled with important challenges, such as the legitimacy of experts’ involvement (accusations of technocracy) or the delimitation of the relevant expertise (inclusion of extra-epidemiological knowledge). The advisory body during the financial crisis in Switzerland, on the other hand, was composed of experts from bureaucracy that had been created a few years before the crisis. This had the advantage that processes of advice were based on preexisting rules and experience of cooperation between experts and decision-makers. The drawbacks of this model are the lack of transparency and of opinion diversity. The special case of Switzerland, with its non-majoritarian and consociational system, is a non-typical setting for the ad-hoc creation of task forces. It thereby shows the general value that task forces can (but do not have to) have in even such unfavorable settings and allowed to outline the crisis types for which they appear suitable. It also gave a pure example of out-of-the blue task force creation.

Flexibly allowing to enhance governments’ analytical competence, taskforces might provide temporary compensation for a lack of governance capacity. There is little doubt that taskforces will come to play again in a world of polycrisis. This instrument should, however, be systematically assessed to bear in mind its up- and downsides. Some weaknesses of taskforces might be improved at the operational level (e.g. structure, communication, relations with politicians, administrations, and the public). Many countries are currently drawing learnings from the COVID-19 to promote a better science-policy dialogue (e.g. Hofmänner 2021). As put by Boin, Lodge, and Luesink (2020), the pandemic “created (hesitant) rock stars out of obscure scientists”. This sudden spotlight inevitably went with trial-and-error. At the strategic level, two dimensions remain problematic and require a thoughtful use of this instrument. On the one hand, taskforces are at risk of political instrumentalization. It can have the unwarranted effect to politicize science. In such cases, science might lose its credibility and be undermined. On the other hand, the taskforce model fundamentally relates to a short term, reactive mode of crisis governance.

While taskforce fulfill their purpose in disruptive non-anticipated crises, a taskforce mindset could also reflect a refusal to face up creeping contemporary problems. As a corollary, this model brings into question the substantive policy measures

societies are willing to implement in a long-term perspective, and the basic governance capacity countries are ready to invest in. Hence, our results are not optimistic regarding governance capacity in a context of polycrises. On the one hand, governments currently show an important will to learn from COVID-19 management for future crises that may happen on other topics and to reform the policy advisory system to allow for a better inclusion of scientific evidence. On the other hand, these efforts remain limited to crisis management and no in-depth discussion addresses the causes of crises, for instance spillover effects and the interrelated causes of environmental degradation (including increased human-wildlife proximity) and pandemics. However, only actions directed to the causes of polycrises could really help address them.

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