
Using experience gained from the pandemic for the future

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The first comprehensive study on the role of science in the Covid-19 pandemic policy response shows a positive track record but also identifies a need for optimization. The potential of science advice to policy is left largely untapped in Switzerland due to its uncertain legal bases and low level of institutionalization. The study by PD Dr. Alexandra Hofmänner documents events, contexts and general conditions during the Covid-19 pandemic and presents six options for future action.

What role did science play in managing the Covid-19 pandemic from January to December 2020? In what way did the Swiss experience differ from selected other countries? Where is there a need for action in the future? “It is important to seize this historic opportunity and use the experience gained from the pandemic to address the challenges of the future,” says Alexandra Hofmänner, the author of the study on the response of science to the Covid-19 pandemic. In her study, the natural scientist with a habilitation in Science and Technology Studies (STS) from the University of Basel, documents the events surrounding the Swiss National Covid-19 Science Taskforce, reveals specific features of the Swiss political system, draws comparisons with other countries, and presents options for future action. These include establishing a Science Policy Advisory Council, a Special Commission on Science Advice, specifying the science advisory roles for policy of the scientific institutions, but also increasing the importance of scientific policy advice for academic careers. “The analysis provides both insight and outlook!”, says Prof. Dr. Marcel Tanner, President of the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences. “We should better equip ourselves for future crises”.

A positive track record, but a need for optimization

In Switzerland, the Federal Council established the Swiss National Covid-19 Science Task Force (NCS-TF) on April 1, 2020, initiated by four of the main science institutions at the science policy interface. Comparison with selected countries also indicates a good track record, which is mainly due to the exceptional commitment of all the actors involved in science, politics, public administration and the media. The report acknowledges its efficient establishment within two weeks, its broad professional composition, its inter- and transdisciplinary procedures and the quality of its scientific advisory services. At the same time, scientific policy advisory bodies were criticized in Switzerland - as in most countries during the pandemic - by politicians, the media and society with respect to their legitimacy, transparency and communication. “In liberal democratic societies, policy activities conducted through informal channels naturally provoke critical debate”, the author soberly states.

Uncertain legal bases

Motivated by experiences with infectious diseases, several countries such as New Zealand, Japan and the United Kingdom, have reviewed, expanded and professionalized their national science policy advisory systems. In Switzerland, however, science is not consistently involved across all stages of the policy cycle. Scientific analyses and evaluations of strategies and programmes are regularly conducted by departmental research according to the evaluation mandate under the federal constitution. These are often carried out by private consulting companies. Unlike other countries, Switzerland stipulates no special legal provisions for science in crises. The Epidemics Act assigns no special tasks to science and the scientific potential of universities and research institutions remains untapped. In the absence of a legal basis, the general conditions for the Swiss National Covid-19 Science Task Force changed depending on the situation. Thus, in the Special Situation, direct interaction with the highest authorities - as practised regularly during the Extraordinary Situation - were ceased and rules on public communication changed.

Extensive literature, nearly 40 interviews and a joint online workshop

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The study, published in the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences' Reports series, is based on extensive comparative literature research and nearly 40 interviews with stakeholders from science, politics, public administration and the media. An online workshop was run by the td-net of the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences to foster interaction between persons involved to source their pandemic experience and discuss potential room for improvement in the future.

More information: <https://akademien-schweiz.ch/en/current/covid-19/the-role-of-science-in-the-swiss-policy>

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