

# The COVID-19 Pandemic Demonstrates the Need for Robust Governance Responses to Turbulent Problems

Christopher Ansell<sup>1\*</sup>, Eva Sørensen<sup>2</sup> and Jacob Torfing<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Political Science, University of California, Berkeley, USA

<sup>2</sup>Department of Social Sciences and Business, Roskilde University, Denmark

## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic provides us with a magnifying glass into how the public sector confronts problems that are not only simple or complex, but also turbulent. Turbulent problems demand robust solutions that are flexible, adaptive, and polyvalent enough to realize a particular agenda, function, and value in the face of challenges, stressors or threats that are surprising or unexpected. As such, the current crisis urges us to expand public administration research on the nexus between turbulence and robustness. As a first step toward advancing this research agenda, we identify a repertoire of robust governance strategies to deal with turbulent problems, such as the immensely disruptive COVID-19 pandemic. We also seek to flesh out the implications of the search for robust responses to turbulence for public organizations and public leadership.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; Governance; Turbulence; Robustness; Organization; Leadership

## The COVID-19 Crisis is a Magnifying Glass

Against a tragic background, the COVID-19 pandemic serves as a magnifying glass for studying several key issues pertaining to public governance and administration in the field of health promotion and disease control. First, the roles of political leaders and scientific experts—particularly their interaction, relative influence and ability to send a clear message to the population—has come into focus and calls for further research. Second, the impact of citizen trust in government on the ability to curb the spread of the virus is a salient issue that deserves further analysis. Third, the distinct and combined contributions of hierarchical forms of government, competitive markets and collaborative governance networks in addressing the health crisis and dealing with its socioeconomic repercussions needs additional inquiry. Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic raises questions about the different types of problems the public sector confronts and how it should deal with them. This mini-review of our article in PMR considers the last question and argues that turbulent problems are here to stay and call for robust governance strategies.

## Turbulent Problems

The COVID-19 crisis has made it clear that the public sector is not only facing simple problems to be dealt with through bureaucratic service production and complex problems that call for collaborative innovation [1]. The public sector also confronts turbulent problems characterized by the advent of surprising, inconsistent, unpredictable, and uncertain events that persistently disrupt our society and challenge the public sector [2]. While the current COVID-19 pandemic has tested the public sector and wider society in extremis, it is merely the latest in a long list of turbulent problems that includes violent terror attacks, extreme weather induced by global warming, a global financial meltdown, the US opioid crisis, pervasive anti-racism protests, large streams of refugees, and many more. In the future, turbulent problems will haunt us in ways we cannot yet imagine. Hence, we better start thinking about the nature of turbulent problems and how we deal with them.

In the face of COVID-19 and other disruptive problems, it has become increasingly clear that the public sector must learn how to respond to problems that are not only complex, but also surprising, partly unknown, inconsistent, unpredictable, and uncertain. We refer to such problems as ‘turbulent problems’ and draw on recent turbulence research to understand the causes that trigger their emergence. The triggers include economic globalization, new disruptive technologies,

mediatized communication, processes of political dis-alignment, and planetary limits to growth [3].

What is particularly challenging about turbulent problems is that they tend to preclude the existence of ready-made solutions and undermine classical coping strategies such as forecasting, protection and resilience [2,4,5]. Instead, they demand robust strategies that are flexible, adaptable and polyvalent in the face of setbacks, reversals, and shifting currents.

## Robust Governance is the Answer

Social science appreciation for turbulence is hardly new. What is new is that the traditional strategies for dealing with turbulence are no longer effective. To put it bluntly, we cannot deal with turbulent problems simply by having dedicated, well-trained staffs and warehouses full of state-of-the-art emergency equipment ready when the next unknown, unpredictable, and uncertain problem hits the public sector. Instead, the public sector must meet turbulence with robust strategies that aim to uphold or realize a public agenda, function, or goal through the flexible adaptation, agile modification, and pragmatic redirection of governance solutions [6,7].

This definition of robust governance strategies embodies the notion of dynamic resilience in which social and political actors facing societal disruption abandon the idea of restoring a past equilibrium, and instead engage in an adaptive search for a new, emerging order [2,8]. Robust governance relies on adaptation and may change political and administrative institutions, regulatory processes, policy instruments and service provision to meet new and emerging conditions. Hence, whereas a stable system can resist change, remain the same, or recover in the face of perturbations, a robust system aims to transform itself to achieve an agenda, function, or objective in the face of turbulence. In our PMR-article, we present and illustrate six types of strategies that appear promising for more robust governance solutions [9].

**\*Corresponding author:** C Ansell, Department of Political Science, University of California, Berkeley, USA

**Received date:** November 04, 2020; **Accepted date:** November 19, 2020; **Published date:** November 26, 2020

**Citation:** Ansell C, Eva S, Jacob T (2020) The COVID-19 Pandemic Demonstrates the Need For Robust Governance Responses to Turbulent Problems. J Infect Dis Ther 8:440.

**Copyright:** © 2020 Ansell C, et al. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

- Scalability aims to flexibly mobilize and de-mobilize resources across organizations, levels, and sectors to scale the provision of particular solutions to meet changing needs and demands [2]. During the current COVID-19 pandemic, some countries created a public job bank where trainees and retired healthcare workers could sign up to assist public employees in carrying out healthcare work on a voluntary basis in the event of acute shortages of health personnel.

- Prototyping aims to create new, adaptive solutions through iterative rounds of prototyping, testing, and revision based on prompt feedback [10]. For example, the novelty of the COVID-19 virus has forced governments to propose tentative solutions, test them in practice, evaluate the processes and results in the light of new developments, and then quickly adjust everything to achieve the overall objective of curbing infection rates, optimize testing, tracing and treatment, and minimize casualties.

- Modularization aims to create solutions that are divided into a series of modules that can be used flexibly in response to changes in the different aspects of the problem at hand and the rise and fall in the threat level [11]. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, we have seen public strategies flexibly inventing, combining, and rearranging different modules pertaining to: a) testing, tracking, and quarantining; b) lockdown and social/physical distancing; c) compensatory economic packages; d) intensive care treatment; e) gradual opening of society, etc.

- Bounded autonomy aims to create a broad-based ownership and strategic commitment to an overall strategy by involving regional and local actors in the implementation of key tasks and regulations and encouraging them to adapt the overall governance strategy to the changing conditions on the ground [12]. To illustrate, there have been interesting cases of local municipalities, school principals, teachers, and parents collaborating to find safe and responsible ways of re-opening schools after the COVID-19 lockdown based on national health regulations that require interpretation and adjustment to fit local conditions.

- Bricolage aims to flexibly use and combine available ideas, tools, and resources to fashion a workable solution in the face of turbulence [13,14]. To illustrate, health authorities short on face masks and other protective measures rely on large companies to redirect their technological production capacities and exploit their trading connections and transportation systems in order to produce, purchase, and deliver what was needed. In the same vein, while waiting for a new vaccine, well-known medications developed to fight other diseases have been used to fight COVID-19.

- Strategic polyvalence aims to deliberately design solutions that can be taken in new directions and serve new purposes depending on situational analyses of demands, barriers, and emerging opportunities [15]. An example of this is how the testing of citizens for virus infection was upheld during the pandemic but served different purposes, such as contact tracing, the screening of healthcare workers, estimating the number of infected persons, and enabling people to work safely together with colleagues and contact elderly and weak family members without infecting them. This list by no means exhausts the range of robust governance strategies that may be combined to achieve a public agenda, function, or objective in the face of turbulent events and developments.

## Implications for Public Administration

The attempt to develop and deploy robust governance solutions to turbulent problems has profound consequences for public administration both for how it is organized and the way leadership is exercised. First, it is imperative that we make public organizations and

programs more flexible and agile so that they can transform and adapt themselves in response to turbulence and scale their problem-solving efforts up and down [16,17]. For example, flatter, modularized, and easily integrated organizations will tend to adapt to new and emerging demands more easily than large, compartmentalized, and insulated hierarchies.

Second, public leaders must reinvent themselves on several dimensions to enhance the capacity for designing robust solutions to turbulent problems. Adaptation to emergent problems is likely to be facilitated where organizations have already built strong patterns of collective leadership [18]. In addition, public leaders must engage in a dialogue with employees and stakeholders to elicit their inputs and persuade them to test new strategies in practice and help accelerate the learning process; hence, leaders should act as stewards rather than principals [19]. Finally, leaders will have to trust their instincts, consult real-time data, seek expert advice, and accept cognitive dissonance and imperfect solutions, build alliances, learn from experience, adapt to new circumstances, and look for next practice rather than being seen to apply a non-existing best practice [20-23].

## Conclusion

Our article elaborates these ideas about how to transform public organization and leadership in order to provide the conditions for meeting turbulent problems with robust answers. It also sets out an agenda for further research that not only includes further conceptualization of the key concepts of turbulence and robustness and expansion and refinement of the list of robustness strategies, but also empirical testing through comparative analysis.

## Funding

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 770591.

## References

1. Ansell C, Torfing J (2018) How does collaborative governance scale? Bristol: Policy press.
2. Ansell C, Trondal J (2018) Governing turbulence: An organizational-institutional agenda. *Perspect on Public Manag Governance* 1:43-57.
3. Ansell C, Trondal J, Morten O (2017) *Governance in turbulent times*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
4. Newland, Chester (2008) Public administration amid turbulence: facilitation of enhanced future governance?. *Int J Organ Theor Behav* 11:326-353.
5. Asselt, Marjolein, Renn O (2011) Risk governance. *J Risk Res* 14:431-449.
6. Anderies, John M, Marco A, Janssen (2013) Robustness of social-ecological systems: Implications for public policy. *Pol Stud J* 41:513-536.
7. Howlett, Michael, Capano G, Ramesh M (2018) Designing for robustness: Surprise, agility and improvisation in policy design. *Pol and Society* 37:405-421.
8. Simonovic, Sobodan P, Arunkumar R (2016) Comparison of static and dynamic resilience for a multipurpose reservoir operation. *Water Resour Res* 52:8630-8649.
9. Ansell C, Eva S, Torfing J (2020) The COVID-19 pandemic as a game changer for public administration and leadership? The need for robust governance responses to turbulent problems, public management review, online first.
10. Tim B, Wyatt J (2010) Design thinking for social innovation. *Develop Outreach* 12:29-43.
11. Ansell C, Gash A (2018) Collaborative platforms as a governance strategy. *J Public Adm Res Theory* 28: 16-32.
12. Fabrizio F, Etzioni D, Gehman J (2015) Tackling grand challenges pragmatically: Robust action revisited. *Organization Studies* 36: 363-390.

13. Neilson P, Tracey P (2007) Opportunity recognition, entrepreneurial capabilities and bricolage: Connecting institutional theory and entrepreneurship in strategic organization. *Strategic Organization* 5: 313-320.
14. Yanto C, Paras A (2020) Social entrepreneurship in the context of disaster recovery: Organizing for public value creation. *Manag. Rev* pp:1-22.
15. Padgett JF, Ansell C (1993) Robust action and the rise of the medici, 1400-1434. *Am J Sociol* 98: 1259-1319.
16. Sietse O, Klievink B, Janssen M (2009) A flexible, event-driven, service-oriented architecture for orchestrating service delivery. *IEEE Intell Syst* 24: 31-41.
17. Hanks SH (2014) Joseph mccann and john w. selsky mastering turbulence: the essential capabilities of agile and resilient individuals, teams and organizations. new york: john wiley & sons. *Pers. Psychol* 67: 301-302
18. Ospina SM (2017) Collective leadership and context in public administration: bridging public leadership research and leadership studies. *Public Adm Rev* 77: 275-287.
19. Thomas S (2013) Moving beyond the clash of interests: On stewardship theory and the relationships between central government departments and public agencies. *Public ManaG Rev* 15: 541-562.
20. Robert B, Lajtha C (2002) A new approach to crisis management. *J Contingencies and Crisis Manag* 10:181-191.
21. Moynihan DP (2008) Learning under uncertainty: networks in crisis management. *Public Admin Rev* 68:350-365.
22. Boyne GA, Kenneth J, Meier (2009) Environmental turbulence, organizational stability, public service performance. *Adm & Soc* 40:799-824.
23. Elgar CE (2011) Complexity, Institutions and Public Policy: Agile Decision-Making in a Turbulent World, Graham Room. *Crit. Policy Stud* 6:482-485.