Why we need citizens participation in the time of Corona

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On April 13, 2020, Germany's national academy of sciences Leopoldina published a working paper on how to overcome the Corona crisis and slowly reopen the country.[1] The paper initially received widespread praise and directly affected the political recommendations drafted by the federal government.[2] Despite that, discussions on the viability and effects of the proposed measures emerged quickly on social and traditional media. The debate on reopening child-care is exemplary. The paper proposes to severely restrict the access of children under 5 years to child-care well into the summer. From a scientific perspective the recommendation seems sound; small kids cannot socially distance, yet contract and spread the virus. Despite that, the report is unable to take into consideration the lived reality of the citizens in lockdown. As a result, debates on Twitter for example discussed what effect an extended period of social distancing would have on the development of the social and emotional skills of small children. Some also pointed to the problem of particularly women being overtly affected by the measure. A German academic tweeted:

> "I just hope that the recommendation has been made realizing what closing day-care means. It means that all the people who have fought hard to combine rearing a child well and a career lose. And many won't be in our comfortable situation, where one of our salaries is enough."[3]

Citizens' perceptions and concerns are by definition biased, but they represent a reality which is at least as important as the scenarios perceived by scientists. Based on that, I would like to highlight three arguments in particular that underline the importance of active and effective citizens' participation in the times of Corona.

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[1] https://www.leopoldina.org/uploads/tx_leopublication/2020_Leopoldina-Stellungnahmen_zur_Coronavirus-Pandemie.pdf

[2] https://www.spiegel.de/wissenschaft/leopoldina-forscher-legen-konkreten-fahrplan-fuer-ende-der-kontaktsperren-vor-a-0cfd0aed-cf48-4dd1-a219-241d818d60ae

[3] https://twitter.com/D_Langenmayr/status/1250170281152348169

1. **Citizens are a fundamental source of information and scrutiny to policy makers, particularly in times of crisis**

Informed democratic decision-making depends fundamentally on an awareness of the lived reality of citizens to be able to assess the possible and real effects of policies. Thus, democratic decision-making can never entirely amount to a one-to-one implementation of rational scientific advice, also in times of crisis. Democratic politics, at any time, is rather the informed and empathetic weighting of alternatives and the need of constant correction and recalibration. For this, effective citizens' participation, particularly in times of crisis, is imperative. Scientific rigor depends on the close and controlled exploration of a given problem. The diverse experiences of different parts of the citizenry and the dynamic development of problems in an ever changing social-economic environment are difficult to equate into the framework of most scientific exploration. Furthermore, in the political sciences and microeconomics it has long been established that externalities and unintended consequences are the rule rather than the exception to nearly all policy interventions. Scientific rigor cannot safeguard a policy from unintended consequences, to the contrary, a myopic focus on scientific rigor may blind policy makers from spotting emerging problems.

The best way to prevent such myopia is to employ "good citizens' participation" as much as possible. Good participation means among other things a willingness from political decision-makers to communicate with citizens, clear goals and questions asked, and transparency of the overall process. Decision-makers can only make an informed decision and carefully weight policy options against each other once they have a grasp of both the citizens as well as the scientists' perspectives. That is also to say, citizens' input does not make decisions easier or more straightforward, in most cases decisions will be harder. As shown in the day-care example, the clash of even fundamental values may be exposed. But most importantly, despite making decisions harder, participation can increase the likelihood of the right decisions being made and the wrong decisions being corrected.

2. **Participation can strengthen social bonds and a sense of belonging between citizens in times of social distancing and self-isolation**

Social distancing and self-isolation within the confines of their homes has forced citizens to radically change social ties, to experience new personal and professional challenges and to lose several offline pathways of communication and coping. Public meetings in market places, coffees, malls, main-streets, or public offices have been effectively cut in most places. Those offline meeting and interaction places have been essential for communities to provide citizens a sense of social and public belonging. Online citizens' participation can provide a path towards upholding a sense of public belonging during social distancing. It can enable citizens to interact with one another and with public decision-makers in a given community. It can facilitate the process of sharing experiences among one another and the creation of a collective image of what that crisis and the political, economic and social interventions it triggered mean, for each individual and the community as a whole.

Furthermore, on the state, national and supranational level, citizens' participation can help in establishing vital bonds among citizens and an understanding of how the crisis effects people, communities, regions and states differently. Solutions, interventions and effects of the pandemic differ on all levels and between communities and countries. Citizens participation and dialogue beyond one's community can help in creating empathy and understanding for different measures and different effects. It can help in creating a feeling that despite being affected differently, we are all in this together. In effect it can help legitimize efforts of national, international and transnational cooperation, helping particularly the worst hit regions and ensuring a response that is shared by all.

3. Citizens' perceptions and their experienced wellbeing are one key source of legitimacy for political decisions

It is important, particularly in times of crisis, that citizens feel they are taken seriously by decision-makers and that their expectations and ideas count for something. Without acceptance from the side of the citizenry, political decisions can be at best ineffective, at worst counterproductive. Acceptance and legitimacy in any political system is based on the level of trust citizens have towards political decision-makers and their decisions. In a democratic system particularly, this trust depends on credible and permanent channels of communication and interaction between decision-makers and the citizenry. In times of crisis this is even more important as trust can be lost quickly when decisions are made ad-hoc and in consequence may have adverse effects and lose touch with public realities and demands. Thus, it is vitally important that decision-makers stay actively in contact with citizens, openly listen to and debate their problems and ideas, and provide citizens the necessary channels to make their voice heard. Given the right amount of transparency and a willingness to adjust, citizens' participation can make political decisions more legitimate and allows decision-makers to effectively govern through and beyond the crisis with the public behind them.

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