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Urban Democracy in An Era of Complex, Global Crises

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The COVID-19 pandemic, the 2022 Ukraine-war and the (more creeping) climate crisis – are examples of recent, complex global crises.¹ Although these crises differ in many respects, they also have things in common:

- These are truly *global crises* as their impact is felt across the globe. Because of globalisation events in Wuhan or the Eastern-Ukraine affected people on all continents.
- Their impact is *multifaceted*, triggering cascading effects in many life-domains. COVID-19 was far more than a crisis in public health! And, likewise, the Russian invasion had impacts well beyond the direct consequences of the hostilities. In the Netherlands, e.g., the influx of Ukrainian refugees intensifies shortages on urban housing markets. Moreover, the war's effect on energy prizes will have drastic consequences in the economic (stagflation), social (energy-poverty) and ecological domain (changing patterns of energy-consumption).
- These *crises are obstinate*; the pandemic's consequences proved far more persistent than most of us initially thought possible. And likewise, if hopefully soon, the atrocities in Ukraine will end, many of the war's consequences will be around for months/years to come.

In this contribution I ask: what role – if any – there might be for democratic governance at the city level in facing complex, global crises?

First, it is appropriate to observe that – especially in the early stages of crisis-management – there is a general tendency to shift to quick, efficient decision-making procedures. Initially, the priority is to take quick, decisive action to minimise the disastrous immediate effects and contain the crisis

¹ If acuteness is a defining characteristic of crises, the climate transition issue does not qualify as crisis.

(Peters 2011). During these early days, the decision-making costs of inclusive decision-making procedures (because of the risks of disagreement and deadlocks), are likely to be so high that any crisis management decision made, is likely to be better than indecision (Buchanan and Tullock 1965). Against this backdrop, it is understandable that most constitutions provide for special decision-making procedures in times of crisis ('Notstandsgesetze'), making crisis-management 'Chefsache'. The democratic legitimation of decisions at this stage is provided a. ex-ante by the legal basis for centralised executive leadership, and b. ex-post accountability.

But subsequently, the obstinacy and broad impact of these crises create pressures to return to more inclusive (democratic) and decentralised decision-making procedures, for dealing with the broad range of disruptive consequences of such crises.

- Barber (2013: 4) is very outspoken. He argues disdainfully that nation-states are 'too inclined by their nature to rivalry and mutual exclusion' and he puts more trust in the capacity of city governments to resort to a collaborative, pragmatic mode of governance to temper the impacts of climate change and to provide shelter for refugees.
- Careful, decentralised decision-making with ample room for community participation is important to reduce resistance and mobilise community support for NIMBY-facilities, like windmill parks or refugee camps (e.g., O'Neil 2021; Schreurs and Ohlhorst 2015).
- Decentralised governments may be well-equipped for such a role because of their 'genius of place' allowing them to gear crisis-measures to local needs (Beetham, 1996). Moreover, an integrated approach of the various crisis-impacts is better feasible because of lower risks of departmentalisation and silo-mentality (Fleurke and Hulst 2006: 40).
- Moreover, in many countries people's trust in subnational governments is (considerably) higher than their trust in the national government and the EU (Muñoz 2017; Proszowska 2021). For this

reason, local government's measures may be effective, not only for previously stated reasons, but also because the compliance and cooperativeness of the locals with local actions may be higher.

- Finally, Jacobs (1961) and Crenson (1983) have argued, that at in many local communities (at the level of streets and neighbourhoods), there is also considerable potential for self-governance and neighbourly solidarity that may boost the resilience of communities in times of crisis. Local governments are well-placed to mobilise this potential and facilitating these forms of informal self-governance, that can help to prevent demand overload of the governmental system in times of crisis.

Notwithstanding, many examples of city-governments and communities taking the lead in providing local answers to the consequences of such complex global crisis for residents (e.g., see Hambleton 2021), the COVID-19 experiences also demonstrate that caution is required not to revel in an overly romantic view of the benefits of decentralised, democratic governance arrangements Limited Dutch during the COVID-19 crisis suggests that:

- At the subnational level – just like at the national level – local policy-making powers were (even further) concentrated in the local executive branch. In the Netherlands, especially the 25 big-city mayors chairing the boards of the country's 25 *Safety & Security Regions* enjoyed considerable powers, and the roles of municipal councils (in the 25 big cities, and even less in the 300+ smaller municipalities) to hold these big-city mayors to account were limited.
- This problem was exacerbated by the lockdown, forcing municipalities to experiment with digital council meetings (Peters et al. 2021). For similar reasons consultation/participation of citizens and community organisations were largely suspended (Dymanus et al. 2021). All these reduced options for inclusive local decision-making and broadening the political/societal support for local COVID-19 measures and the regional energy-deals (on the local political agenda at the same time).

- During the obstinate COVID-19 crisis people's trust in *Dutch national government* waned substantially. Trust in *local governments and regional (intermunicipal) health services* – although declining too – proved to be more resilient (Engbersen et al. 2021). Evidence also suggests that people's trust in the helpfulness of others (social trust) and their willingness to help others (solidarity) remained as high as at the crisis-outset (Engbersen et al. 2021). This suggests that there is a local potential for bottom-up initiated resilience in facing complex, global challenges (cf. Proszowska 2021 on the resilience of local political trust during the Great Recession). But, at the same time, local governments – especially in big cities – during crises, may not always prioritise the facilitation of community-initiatives (Spit et al. 2021).
- Finally, it should also be realized that, even when local governments use their potential for responsive localized crisis management their responses may reflect preferences and needs of local “insiders” at the expense of minority groups in the local community or “outsiders” seeking refuge. This may be cause for conflicts both within local communities and between central and local governments.

Conclusion

- During crises there is an understandable initial tendency to concentrate powers in the executive branches of national governments. But subsequently as a result of the obstinacy and broad impact of most crises there are also pressures to return to more inclusive (democratic) and decentralised decision-making procedures. During these later stages of crises the problem-solving capacity of our states and governments critically depends on inclusive community governance at the local level and on adequate institutional and cultural mechanisms for intergovernmental cooperation and conflict resolution.

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