



PRESS RELEASE

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Building resilience to COVID-19 and future pandemics

An international team of scientists has drawn up a report on the resilience capacity needed by our societies to prevent, react to and recover from the COVID-19 crisis. The authors propose a path forward to shape resilient, inclusive, and sustainable societies.

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered a global systemic crisis. Political decisions were taken quickly to stop the spread of the virus, but what about the side effects on society? Have the decisions taken been sufficiently cross-cutting or has the resilience of countries remained fragmented across health, social, economic, environmental, and institutional systems? Under the impulse of the Geneva Science-Policy Interface (GSPI) at the University of Geneva (UNIGE), Switzerland, an international team of researchers has developed an interdisciplinary approach to shed light on the management of the current crisis. Designed for decision-makers, the resulting policy brief proposes tangible recommendations and derives five principles of governance.

The GSPI aims to bring the worlds of science and politics closer together so that decision-makers are better equipped to tackle complex problems, such as the current crisis. “Against this background”, begins Nicolas Seidler, GSPI director, “we commissioned a team from UNIGE, quickly supported by scientists worldwide, to draw up a comprehensive report on the resilience capacity of societies in the face of the coronavirus pandemic”.

Over 600 references summarised in one report

The goals were to define resilience, identify its various forms, and transpose it to the health, social, economic, environmental, and institutional sectors that society is made up of. The team reviewed the scientific literature on resilience to systemic crises, including COVID-19, consisting of over 600 references across the natural and social sciences. “The strength of the study is its interdisciplinarity”, explains Dr Didier Wernli, director of UNIGE’s Geneva Transformative Governance Lab (GTGLab) and the study’s main author. As a key feature of the production process, several consultations were carried out with professionals from UN organisations to refine the applicability of the recommendations featured in the report.

Colossus with feet of clay

The team’s first observation was that governments are not prepared to deal with systemic shocks, such as the one caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. “Even though there have been other health crises since the 2000s, including Ebola in West Africa in 2014-2015, Western societies did not fully understand the scale of the threat”, argues Karl Blanchet, a professor in UNIGE’s Faculty of Medicine and director of the Geneva Centre of Humanitarian Studies. The research highlights that many factors influenced the impact of the pandemic on society, such as the speed a government moves at, whether there is a social safety net, and the fragility of population health. “In the end, it shows how great inequalities are and that they are reinforced during the crisis”, says Professor Nikola Biller-Andorno, Director of the Institute of Biomedical Ethics and History of Medicine of the University of Zurich, Switzerland.



Didier Wernli, Director of the Geneva Transformative Governance Lab of UNIGE.

High resolution pictures

contact

Didier Wernli

Senior Lecturer and Research Fellow, Director of the Geneva Transformative Governance Lab Global Studies Institute (GSI)

+41 22 379 37 46

Didier.Wernli@unige.ch

The second point raised by the report concerns the inability of governments to think about and deal with systemic crises. The challenge is to build preventive, reactive and recovery resilience before, during and after the crisis. The resilience capacity of societies is strengthened prior to the onset of a crisis by investing (for example) in the integration of human-animal-environmental health to prevent disease spillovers from animals to humans. This is followed by 'reactive' resilience, during the crisis such as accommodating surge capacity in health systems and strengthening safety nets. Finally, "recovery" resilience post-crisis which involves setting up mechanisms to foster societal recovery such as reinforcing inter-generational solidarity. "This is also an opportunity to promote societal changes, such as soft mobility, which may meet more resistance in normal times", explains Mia Clausin, a researcher at GTGLab.

Seventy recommendations and five principles of governance

The authors of the policy brief derived 70 recommendations to build societal resilience. In addition, five governance principles can guide societies during systemic crises. First, the involvement of all actors in society will promote inclusion, ownership, and responsibility. Second, improving our understanding of the COVID-19 as a systemic crisis will help communicate transparently about societal trade-offs. As Dr Wernli explains: "if schools are closed, it has an impact on the parents, and – by extension – on the world of work, not to mention school dropout and the resulting psychological distress". Third, strengthening cross-sectoral collaboration will promote coherence in decision-making. Fourth, improving learning mechanisms will enable the rapid adoption and adaptation of measures grounded in scientific evidence. The international research team calls for scientists to work together to factor in the short, medium, and long-term effects, and bridge sectoral systems to support political decision-making. Finally, the last principle notes the risk of falling into an authoritarian system. "In a crisis like the present one, the executive overrides the legislative and legal systems. Although this might be justified in the short term, the situation should not last if democracies want to function", states Nicolas Levrat, Professor of law and director of UNIGE's Global Studies Institute.

The authors of the policy brief conclude that an integrated approach to resilience is required to strengthen our capacities to prevent, react to, and recover from systemic crises. Dr Wernli has the final word: "This crisis is an opportunity to reflect on the world of tomorrow. It underlines the importance of multilateral efforts and International Geneva for shaping resilient, inclusive, and sustainable societies."

*You are welcome to attend the launch event **on Thursday 25 March 2021 at 15:00.***

This event convenes policy practitioners, diplomats and experts to learn about how to govern future pandemics in the light of COVID-19. More information [here](#).

UNIVERSITÉ DE GENÈVE
Communication Department

24 rue du Général-Dufour
CH-1211 Geneva 4

Tel. +41 22 379 77 17

media@unige.ch

www.unige.ch