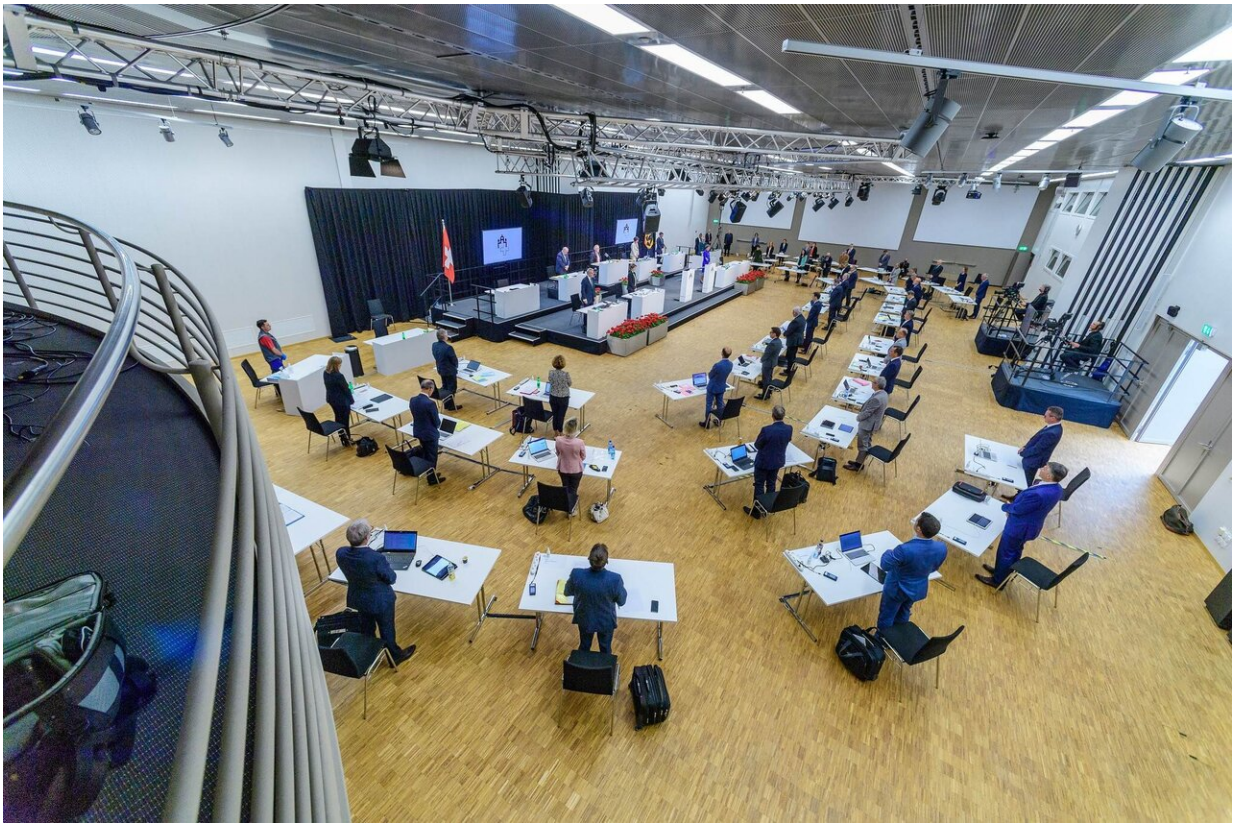# How Switzerland has responded to the pandemic

July 2 2020



Extraordinary session of the National Council and Council of States held from 4 to 7 May 2020 at BERNEXPO. Credit: Parliamentary Services 3003 Bern, Beatrice Devènes

At the beginning of the pandemic, Switzerland declared a four-month-

long state of emergency, the country's longest since the Second World War. Pursuant to the Epidemics Act, from 16 March to 19 June 2020 the Federal Council was allowed to make any decision it deemed necessary to contain the pandemic without consulting the parliament or the general public. It issued around two dozen emergency ordinances in this extraordinary period.

How did the Federal Council handle this unparalleled range of powers? Did it listen to all those potentially affected by the measures it enacted, even though there were no official consultations? Did this crisis highlight how the system needs to change if we are to overcome other challenges such as climate change or mobility bottlenecks? In an analysis published in the journal 'Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie', WSL researchers studied the decision-making processes implemented by the government and administration during this extraordinary time.

They noticed one thing in particular: "It's clear how robust Switzerland's federalist structures are," explains Yasmine Willi, lead author of the analysis and postdoctoral researcher in the WSL Regional Economics and Development research group. For example, the canton of Ticino, which was hit particularly hard by COVID-19, decided to close its construction sites, going far beyond the measures required by the corresponding federal ordinance. Although this was technically in violation of the law, the Federal Council allowed the canton to go ahead and legitimised its action retrospectively by amending the ordinance. "Switzerland's usual federalist processes endured," says Willi. "Even though a state of emergency had been declared, the cantons were ultimately responsible for enacting the political measures devised by the Federal Council." Federalism's endurance is all the more remarkable given that democratic processes were temporarily suspended, with the elected parliament disempowering itself and postponing sessions and referendums.

# Political Decisions in Fast-Changing Times

In a crisis, the situation changes rapidly and decisions have to be made without a clear picture of their consequences. This forces governments and administrations to constantly review and adapt their decisions in line with scientific findings, for example. Such continuous modification of policy by governments and administrations in the face of far-reaching societal changes is referred to as 'transformative governance'.

According to the authors of the analysis, the handling of the coronavirus crisis has the typical features of such governance: decisions made in a context of uncertainty, different perspectives taken into account, decision-making processes underpinned by reflexive learning and experimentation with solutions. "Policy-making relies more on scientific findings in times of acute crisis than it does normally," explains Willi. During the coronavirus pandemic, the Federal Council's legislation was guided by the case numbers calculated by virologists and epidemiologists.

Another characteristic feature of such transformative governance is the gradual tightening of measures that paralysed public life. Borders, businesses and schools were closed, significantly curtailing the fundamental rights of Swiss residents, while at the same time the federal government was unable to say which measures would work or how effective they might be. It therefore set clear deadlines for each step, including for the subsequent easing of restrictions, which were then lengthened or shortened depending on the development of the infection rate.

# Change Even Without Extensive Knowledge

Yasmine Willi and her colleagues are particularly interested in what will

happen after the coronavirus crisis has passed: will there be a long-term change in certain environmentally harmful practices, such as air travel and overconsumption, that the virus had halted in the short term? Will society continue to shift towards more digital meetings and less consumption? "The current crisis can only stimulate sustainable societal change if we successfully modify consumer behaviour, goods production and resource use in the long term," explains Willi. For example, the subsidies granted to companies to support them during the pandemic could be linked to climate protection criteria, or the financial relief offered to families affected by the crisis could reduce social inequalities.

The coronavirus crisis has shown that societal change can be swift, even in times of great uncertainty. Far-reaching decisions were taken quickly and implemented consistently, even though their impact on the economy and society was unclear. "We know much more about environmental crises such as climate change or biodiversity loss than we did about the coronavirus pandemic, but we still act less decisively," stresses Willi.

However, the coronavirus crisis has made it clear that acting decisively is more important than acting 'perfectly'. This is also the case for [climate change](), as a flexible, experimental approach would be possible here too. Long-term climate targets, such as net zero emissions by 2050, could be supplemented by annual reduction targets and the required measures could be reviewed each year and adjusted if necessary. This could ensure that the climate crisis was managed more effectively, despite the uncertainties.

Provided by Swiss Federal Institute for Forest, Snow and Landscape Research WSL

Citation: How Switzerland has responded to the pandemic (2020, July 2) retrieved 3 May 2024 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-07-switzerland-pandemic.html