

THE SERVANT OF TWO MASTERS SCIENTIFIC POLICY ADVICE: THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A NATIONAL SCIENTIFIC ADVISORY NETWORK IN SWITZERLAND – A FIELD REPORT

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the establishment of the National Science Advice Network (NSAN) in Switzerland as a response to the challenges revealed during the crisis management of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ The approach of institutionalising scientific expertise in a network managed by Switzerland's six central education, research and innovation (ERI) actors aims to overcome the fragmentation and insufficiently formalised integration of scientific expertise into crisis management, which was identified after the pandemic. Switzerland's political system – marked by direct democracy, federalism, and concordance – creates structural conditions that complicate the systematic use of scientific knowledge in policymaking. Unlike countries with more centralised advisory structures, Switzerland relies on a decentralised and often informal system of consultation, which increases coordination costs and lack of transparency. While evidence-based instruments such as policy evaluation and regulatory impact assessments have been steadily developed within public administration alongside a growing and increasingly professional consulting market since the late 1990s, the incorporation of scientific expertise remains often informal, based on personal and organisational networks and influenced by political interests.

1 I would like to thank Dr Joël Graf, scientific advisor at the Secretariat of the SSC, who provided critical feedback on this article and thereby helped to make the argument clearer and more coherent.

At the heart of the considerations outlined here is the question of how scientific knowledge can be more formalised and institutionalised so that it can be made available to decision-makers in an appropriate, comprehensible, accepted and rapid manner in the event of an acute crisis (science for policy). To do that, the political and administrative framework conditions and the specific knowledge required in acute crises must be considered. This article is intended as a “field report”, as the solutions are currently only just being institutionalised as part of a pilot project and the author is involved in the field in question as part of the Swiss Science Council SSC. Methodologically, the report draws on conceptual considerations regarding expert knowledge, on the results of an in-depth analysis by the SSC carried out immediately after the COVID-19 pandemic and on participant observations as an established method of qualitative social research (Flick, 2018) of the institutionalisation process by the head of the secretariat of the SSC.

Keywords: *Scientific Policy Advice, Institutionalisation, COVID-19 Pandemic, Expertise, Evidence-Based Policy.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Swiss Science Council SSC is an extraparlimentary commission and advisory body to the Federal Council of Switzerland in the field of policy for science. After overcoming the acute phase of the COVID-19 pandemic and still under the impression of an initially poorly coordinated approach to incorporating scientific expertise into crisis management, the SSC has conducted an in-depth examination of the instruments and organisational forms that can be used to systematically harness and apply existing scientific expertise in the political decision-making process in a targeted manner. Based on an expert report it commissioned, the SSC has formulated recommendations for the Federal Council and the various actors in Switzerland’s education, research and innovation system. An essential insight was that the incorporation of scientific expertise was insufficiently formalised and that mutual understanding and trust between government and scientific actors should be improved through appropriate institutional frameworks while taking into account

the organisational and political framework conditions of Switzerland (Schweizerischer Wissenschaftsrat, 2022).

This article first examines the political system and the structural framework conditions for incorporating scientific knowledge into the political decision-making process. It draws a conceptional distinction between different types of scientific knowledge – evidence and expertise – and considers the fact that acute crises call for a specific type of knowledge. Against this conceptual backdrop, the article analyses existing policy advice instruments and the measures taken by the Federal Council in response to various reports and evaluations of crisis management during the Covid-19 pandemic, including a report by the SSC. The article then discusses the solution in form of a national network of scientific expertise, which exhibits characteristics typical of neo-corporatist ad-hoc-ism in Switzerland. Due to its loose institutionalisation, the chosen approach gives rise to specific challenges which are discussed at the end of this article. On the one hand, this approach is challenging, as the network may be either overused or underused, and its rather weak institutionalisation increases the risk that one of the existing institutions with sufficient resources and strategic vision will eventually take over the network's tasks. On the other hand, the network's character enables situation-appropriate and dynamic solutions for the provision of scientific expertise in a complex crisis without establishing a costly administrative structure.

2. THE SWISS POLITICAL SYSTEM AS A DETERMINING FACTOR FOR THE USE OF SCIENTIFIC EXPERTISE

The Swiss political system is characterised by direct democracy, concordance and federalism. Accordingly, deliberative elements play an important role in the decision-making process, considering the needs of multilevel government² and the influence of various interest

2 "Multilevel governance involves intergovernmental relations within general-purpose jurisdictions, characterized by non-intersecting memberships. The number of jurisdictions is limited to a few levels, such as the national, subnational, and local levels. Additionally, there is a system-wide architecture in place. This type of governance is essentially akin to federalism, understood as a power-sharing arrangement between central and subnational governments. In this context, governance focuses on authority relations. The non-intersecting memberships mean that memberships are usually territorial, such as nation-states, with the boundaries of

groups (political, economic, regional; Armingeon & Sager, 2022). This is achieved through formal consultation procedures, in which draft legislation with significant political, financial, economic, environmental, social or cultural implications is examined for its factual accuracy, feasibility and acceptability. To this end, draft legislation is submitted to the cantons, the parties represented in the Federal Assembly (i.e. Swiss Parliament), the umbrella organisations of the municipalities, cities and mountain regions, the umbrella organisations of the business community and other interested parties in individual cases.³ In addition to these deliberative elements, the concordance of a multi-party government, in which all seven Federal Councillors are formally equal (in contrast to a presidential system), has a decisive influence on the decision-making process and the structural implication of scientific policy advice. The principle of decentralisation and departmentalisation, i.e. the fact that each of the seven Federal Councillors heads a department and bears political responsibility for it,⁴ generally means that cross-cutting and interdisciplinary issues are difficult to implement. Finally, the federal system of government with its principle of subsidiarity results in a relatively lean federal administration, with Switzerland ranking in the bottom third of all OECD countries in international comparisons (OECD, 2025).

These institutional and structural conditions mean that expertise of the scientific community plays a comparatively minor role in the political decision-making process in Switzerland – it is in fact only one of many voices and does not enjoy a particularly prominent position compared with the influence of civil society and economic considerations. The existing institutional arrangement for scientific expertise is on the national level much less formalised in the Swiss political-administrative system than it is in a more centralized system with a strong Prime Minister

these jurisdictions typically being stable and durable (Hooghe and Marks 2003, 236–37).” (Trein, 2025, p. 7)

3 Federal Act on the Consultation Procedure (Consultation Act, VIG), <https://www.fedlex.admin.ch/eli/cc/2005/542/de>

4 Art. 27 para. 1 RVOG: “The head of the department manages the department and bears political responsibility for it.”

like the United Kingdom of Finland, in which scientists can advise the Prime Minister directly or in similar federal systems like Germany and the Netherlands with other institutional approaches.⁵

3. TYPOLOGY OF SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE: EVIDENCE VS. EXPERTISE

As mentioned at the outset, political and administrative actors require different knowledge in acute crises than in normal situations. In her analysis of scientific knowledge transfer in the political decision-making process, Ledermann (2014) distinguishes two distinct types of scientific knowledge, which, in practice have a variety of hybrid manifestations: evidence and expertise. Expertise encompasses “knowledge that is person-bound, meaning that individuals provide policymakers with their professional expertise acquired through their long-term and in-depth involvement with a topic” (Ledermann quoted from Hadorn et al., 2022, p. 362). Evidence, in contrast, is defined as “independently observable and verifiable.” In other words, evidence is defined by its adherence to established standards of scientific methods and procedures. For instance, the results of scientific research are regarded as intersubjectively comprehensible, reliable, and valid (Ledermann, 2014, p. 456).

Hadorn et al. (2022) referring to Veit et al. (2017) develop an analytical model that makes it possible to examine the relationship between different types of scientific knowledge and the requirements of scientific situation assessment in crisis management. Accordingly, three general elements in the logic of scientific knowledge can be distinguished: salience, credibility and representativeness. Salience denotes “the relevance and timeliness of advisory knowledge for policymakers, [...] credibility refers to whether the production of knowledge follows established epistemological standards, i.e. whether it is scientifically robust [, and] representativeness denotes

5 It should not be overlooked that this form of institutionalisation did not protect the UK from considerable systemic disruption in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, as evidenced by the creation of the Independent SAGE (Marres & Valderrama Barragán, 2025).

whether knowledge is produced in an unbiased way by considering all relevant interests” (Veit et al., 2017, 87).

<i>Type of scientific knowledge</i>	<i>Logic of scientific knowledge</i>		
	<i>Salience</i>	<i>Credibility</i>	<i>Representativeness</i>
Expertise	High	Low	Low–high
Evidence	Low	High	High
Demand in times of crisis	High	Low–moderate	Low–moderate

Table 1: Contrasting logics of scientific knowledge for different types of scientific knowledge and in times of crisis (in Hadorn et al., 2022, p. 367)

Table 1 illustrates the potential tension between scientific policy advice and crisis situations. Due to the complexity and dynamics of the subject matter, as well as political decision-making constraints and time pressure, expertise becomes increasingly important in crises. Unlike evidence, expertise has the advantage of being able to offer knowledge that is timely and specific to the situation. Accordingly, the aspect of salience outweighs all other aspects of scientific knowledge. If expert committees are close to the decision-making process, they can respond flexibly to the demands of policymakers. At the same time, credibility can suffer because the production of knowledge cannot follow the established, generally accepted scientific procedures. The aspect of representativeness is closely linked with the selection of disciplines and individuals that provide policy advice. Therefore, and as experience in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic has shown, particular attention should be paid to representativeness, because it can be ensured by transparent and formalised selection processes and is not attributable to the specific aspects of any crisis. Another aspect concerns the individual challenge for every scientific actor involved in crisis management to be able to personally justify its approach to switching between different types of scientific knowledge and to communicate transparently about the limitations involved.

4. EXISTING INSTRUMENTS OF POLICY ADVICE IN SWITZERLAND

Switzerland has a large, highly developed and differentiated education, research and innovation system (ERI-system) with international outreach and appeal. Accordingly, it also has a differentiated set of instruments for scientific policy advice at the federal level (Balthasar et al., 2022; Hirschi et al., 2022). In the following, these instruments are discussed in more detail, considering the contrasting types of scientific knowledge – evidence and expertise – just established.

4.1. EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY MAKING

4.1.1. EVALUATION SYSTEM

In Switzerland there is a well-developed and institutionalised policy evaluation system which is aimed for policymaking based on evidence. With the revised Federal Constitution of 2000, Article 170 came into force, which explicitly states that the Federal Assembly (i.e. Federal Parliament) must ensure “that the effectiveness of federal measures is reviewed” (BV, 2000; translated by the author). The legal effect is not limited to the Federal Assembly – it directly influences the inclusion of scientific evidence at the level of the Federal Council and the Federal Administration. In 2004, the Federal Council called for an even stronger focus on the effectiveness of federal measures. It demanded the formalisation of quality assurance and improved coordination within the Federal Administration. The latter was achieved by creating a *network for evaluation* within the Federal Administration and by setting binding standards for policy evaluation with the Swiss Evaluation Society (SEVAL), which was founded in 1996. In addition, an instrument for ex-ante evaluation was created in 2000 which, in contrast to the ex-post evaluation described above, provides for regulatory impact assessments (RIA) for federal projects (Sager & Rissi, 2011). According to the Federal Council’s guidelines from 2024, the RIA is “an instrument for analysing and presenting the economic impact of federal projects. This also includes the impact on environment and society. The impacts must be analysed and presented in economic terms

(in particular costs, benefits and distributional effects)” (RFA-Richtlinien, 2019; translated by the author). The RIA is aimed at contributing to sound, evidence-based decision-making and thus to good legislation. This professionalisation of evaluation practice in Switzerland has been accompanied by the development of a network of evaluation expertise with numerous public and private enterprises specialising in this field. This is because the federal administration’s demand for policy advice is mainly met by “short-term mandates with external contractors” (Himmelsbach, 2019, p. 465; quoted in Hadorn et al., 2022). The network for evaluation (SEVAL) mentioned above is closely linked to the federal government’s departmental research.

4.1.2. DEPARTMENTAL RESEARCH: RESEARCH WITHIN THE FEDERAL ADMINISTRATION

Departmental research (“Ressortforschung”) is a frequently underestimated and not sufficiently recognised instrument of evidence-based policy advice, as it is strongly integrated into the federal administration.⁶ Based on Article 16 of the Federal Act on the Promotion of Research and Innovation (2014), federal offices may launch their own research projects “if the results are necessary for the fulfilment of their tasks.” To this end, they may operate their own research institutes (Art. 16 para. 2 lit. a), contribute to research programmes at universities (Art. 16 para. 2 lit. b and c) or award individual research contracts (in the sense of contract research) (Art. 15 para. 2 lit. d; Himmelsbach, 2019; Sager & Stadelmann-Steffen, 2008). As permanent institutions, research institutes are particularly important for policy advice, as they can establish and maintain networks between science and administration. They may be part of the administration (such as the Spiez Laboratory, the Institute for NBC Protection; Agroscope, the Federal Institute for Agricultural Research; or MeteoSwiss, the Federal Office of Meteorology and Climatology) or be integrated into the ETH Domain (such as the Swiss Federal Institute for Forest, Snow and

6 In 2023, the federal government spent around 355 million Swiss francs on departmental research (<https://www.ressortforschung.admin.ch/rsf/de/home/dokumentation/zahlen-und-fakten.html>; accessed on 20 November 2025).

Landscape Research or the Swiss Seismological Service; Balthasar et al., 2022). There are also research institutions of national importance (Art. 15 of the Federal Act on the Promotion of Research and Innovation RIPA) that advise the authorities on specific risks (one example is the Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute). As Hirschi et al. (2022, p. 6) rightly point out, these instruments are suitable for policy advice on certain risks, but they are limited in scope and cannot be applied to all threats or crises.

4.2. EXPERTISE INTEGRATION IN POLITICAL DECISION-MAKING

Compared to the evidence-based policy advice, the formalised incorporation of expertise is comparatively weak in Switzerland. Although there is expertise involved in the legislative process through political advisory bodies that advise the authorities and policymakers – for example, in hearings in parliamentary committees, which play an important role in the preliminary discussion of matters before Parliament. However, these forms of involvement are largely informal and barely institutionalised. The selection of experts often depends on the personal networks of parliamentarians and parliamentary secretariat staff, which is not unusual in a neo-corporatist militia system such as Switzerland (Vatter, 2024). Therefore, from the perspective of political decision-makers, the line between lobbying and scientific expertise threatens to become blurred.

4.2.1. EXTRA-PARLIAMENTARY COMMISSIONS

Furthermore, the federal administration may draw on external expertise if specialised knowledge is required which is not available within the federal administration (Art. 57 lit. b GAOA, 1997). These so-called Extra-parliamentary commissions (EPC) advise the Federal Council and Administration on an ongoing basis in the performance of their duties. EPCs are volunteer bodies (*Milizgremien*) in which members make their knowledge available free of charge.⁷ A distinction can be made between administrative commissions, which have a purely advisory role, and official commis-

7 There are currently 80 administrative commissions and 21 public commissions (as of July 2025).

sions, which have decision-making powers. The degree of organisational development of the administrative commissions varies greatly: some have no secretariat specifically assigned to them and meet only irregularly, while others are supported in their work by a well-developed secretariat and can draw on additional expertise through advisory mandates. These volunteer organisations should prevent the administrative apparatus from growing and costly mandates from being awarded to experts. The members of the administrative commissions perform their duties as a service to the state. In their work, these bodies can rely on evidence, for example by awarding external mandates to experts for specific issues or carrying out this task themselves with the support of their secretariats, and on expertise available within the commissions. It can generally be said of the EPCs that they “primarily draw on the experience of their members when preparing reports. External analysis or in-depth investigation by commission members are rare.” However, the importance of extra-parliamentary commissions “has gradually decreased over time, both numerically and in terms of their inclusion in policy formulation” (Hadorn et al., 2022, p. 364, referring to Himmelsbach, 2019). This development is also the result of the fact that the necessity of EPCs is regularly questioned by Parliament against the backdrop of general criticism of bureaucracy in recent decades. The critical political assessment has found particular resonance in Switzerland’s strongly republican-liberal understanding of the state (Beetschen & Rebmann, 2016).⁸

8 Just very recently a motion was only rejected by a narrow majority, which demanded that a quarter of all EPCs be dissolved (Motion 25.3018, 2025). The main argument in each case is that the overall use of external expertise has continued to increase despite the existence of the EPCs and that, instead of advising the Federal Council and the Federal Administration, the EPCs have a tendency to lobby members of parliament and thus exert direct influence on the political decision-making process. In addition to the EPCs, which are legally grounded in the Government and Administrative Organization Act (GAOA), Switzerland’s scientific advisory system may also encompass expert committees. These committees can be appointed ad hoc by the federal government, for instance, to facilitate the development of legislative reforms. The Federal Council rejected such a blanket dissolution of the EPCs and advocated a case-by-case assessment. As part of this assessment, the Federal Council proposed to Parliament that the SSC, amongst others, should be dissolved, arguing that the changed framework conditions for advisory services now require rapid ad hoc expertise and that a permanent body such as the EPCs no longer meets these requirements. At the time of writing, the public consultation is currently underway. The Federal Assembly will decide on the future of the SSC in spring 2027. In the public consultation, the SSC strongly opposed against this decision: Statement by the Swiss Science Council (SSC) on its planned dissolution”: https://files.wissenschaftsrat.ch/swr_2026_stellungnahme-auflosung-swr_version-d.pdf | SWR (website accessed on 29 March 2026).

4.2.2. HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS, ACADEMIES AND FUNDING AGENCIES

Higher education institutions, including the two Federal Institutes of Technology (ETH), contribute to scientific policy advice in a variety of ways, either through representation in the aforementioned committees or directly through research mandates and expert opinions (Hirschi et al. 2022, p. 49). Just in 2025 ETH Zurich has opened the Albert Einstein School of Public Policy as an interdisciplinary centre that combines public policy, science and technology to address “the greatest societal challenges of our time”. Its mission is based on teaching and further training, research and policy dialogue. With this step, ETH Zurich pooled its resources and institutionalised the science-policy interface. Additionally, there are long-established institutions with similar but slightly different profiles at the Universities of St. Gallen (Research Centre Public Management and Governance), Bern (Competence Centre for Public Management), Lausanne (Institut de hautes études en administration publique, IDHEAP) and Geneva (Geneva Science-Policy Interface), as well as doctoral programmes at the Universities of Zurich and Basel (Doctoral Programme in Science and Policy) that are more strongly focused on science communication. In addition to these advisory services at universities, it is part of the core mission of universities of applied sciences to contribute their expertise to regional economic and political-administrative ecosystems. Finally, it is the statutory mission of the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences to provide scientific expertise to policymakers (science for policy). The Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), the Swiss funding agency for science, is also involved at the interface between politics and science, for example with the National Research Programmes (NRP), the National Centres of Competence in Research (NCCR) or the Agora funding programme, which offers consulting services and further training in the field of science communication.

5. THE EXPERIENCE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AS LITMUS TEST FOR THE USE OF EXPERTISE TYPE OF SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE

The coronavirus crisis was a turning point in global science advice (Pearson, 2024). Within a short period of time, and in all countries with the appropriate academic and private-sector infrastructure, there was an urgent demand from political decision-makers for scientific interpretation and expertise on the epidemiological situation. Globalised mass media coverage made it possible to identify different approaches to solving the problem in real time and to compare their effectiveness. Concurrently, following an introductory period of astonishment and of rallying around the flag, a vocal political opposition emerged against the interpretive authority of the expertise provided chiefly by epidemiologists. In Switzerland, the absence of formalised procedures for providing scientific advice during political crises promptly became evident. Not only was scientific advice relatively poorly institutionalised, much worse, crisis management had to be developed in practice, even though the Federal Council had issued new directives on crisis management in the federal administration just two years before the outbreak of the pandemic (Weisungen über das Krisenmanagement in der Bundesverwaltung, 2019). Ultimately, Switzerland has not been accustomed to crises. The nation's political system is oriented towards stability and the predictability of outcomes. In periods of crisis, the government tends to respond in a reactive, opportunistic, and improvisational manner. In this regard, Switzerland is characterised by a pronounced manifestation of pragmatic neo-corporatist ad-hoc-ism. Furthermore, input legitimacy is of paramount importance, ensuring that even in times of crisis, the conventional legitimisation processes and democratic participation procedures are upheld.

5.1. RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE SWISS SCIENCE COUNCIL (SSC)

As early as in the end of 2021, that is, whilst the international public health emergency declared by the WHO was still in force, the SSC

commissioned experts from different Swiss universities to conduct a study on scientific policy advice in Switzerland. The researchers took a comparative approach to reconstruct the different forms of policy advice, their strengths and weaknesses, and the institutional framework used in three crises that differed in nature and severity. These were the financial crisis of 2008-2009, the nuclear accident in Fukushima in 2011 and the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-2022. What all these crises have in common, is that the administration was able to draw on existing expertise, as this is already embedded in the federal administration's risk assessment structures. This risk-based and backward-looking form of institutionalised knowledge in crises highlights however a general fact, namely that "[states] are perfectly prepared for the last crisis, but not necessarily for the next one" (Hirschi et al., 2022, p. 46). The crises examined can be distinguished in terms of their temporal, spatial and social dimensions.⁹ The varying characteristics of these dimensions mean that "there can be no uniform science-for-policy mechanism" (ibid.), there is no "cure for all ills" but rather a plurality of mechanisms that exist in parallel and follow a "fit-for-purpose approach" (Mavrot et al., 2024). This insight into the complexity of institutionalised approaches prompted the SSC to address the recommendations summarised below to the Federal Council and the ERI institutions.

- First, the human aspect and trust in the field of scientific expertise must not be underestimated. Trust between scientists, administrative collaborators and policymakers is essential. Therefore, the exchange

9 In terms of time dimension, Hirschi et al. (2022, 46) distinguish between the pre-crisis, acute, and post-crisis phases of the process; in the spatial dimension between spatially concentrated and spatially distributed crises; and in the social dimension between the degree of social impact, the consensus or dissent on norms, and the goal of crisis management, which is to bring about behavioural continuity or behavioural correction. Unsurprisingly, the social dimension is the most complex, as it has a cumulative potential, "i.e. the possible spread from one social subsystem to another". Thus, "supply crises can escalate into economic crises, natural disasters into health crises, and pandemics into political crises" (ibid.). The conclusion is that expertise in complex crises must be organised in a multidisciplinary and dynamic manner. In terms of the spatial dimension, Fukushima stands out as a crisis with far-reaching effects but no Swiss epicentre, in contrast to the other two crisis, which directly affected Switzerland – although the Covid-19 pandemic presented its own unique complexities due to its federal, multi-level nature. In terms of the social dimension, the financial crisis and the pandemic present the sharpest contrast: maximum secrecy and enforced continuity of behaviour on the one hand, maximum public visibility and urgently needed behavioural change on the other. Here too, Fukushima occupies a middle ground – indirect impact, but highly charged with normative significance due to the nuclear energy debate in Switzerland.

between government (i.e. administration and executive power) and sciences should be established to strengthen mutual understanding and trust.

- Secondly, at universities, ETHs and research institutions of national importance, capacities for scientific policy advice should be developed and maintained. This should be part of their “third mission”. Examples include the specialised higher education institutes such as the Competence Centre for Public Management at the University of Bern, the IDHEAP at the University of Lausanne and the Albert Einstein School of Public Policy, as mentioned above. However, this aspect should be emphasised more strongly in all higher education institutions, including universities of applied sciences. Academic incentive and reputation structures should be adjusted accordingly, so that outstanding scientific policy advice is taken into consideration when awarding teaching and research positions and funding (SNSF, Innosuisse, cantonal and private funding agencies).
- Thirdly, federal departmental research (“Ressortforschung des Bundes”, see 5.1.2) should build bridges between government and science to identify risks, knowledge gaps and the need for additional expertise in specific areas. Since departmental research pursues a strongly impact-oriented, transdisciplinary approach, it is an inherent and natural fit for this type of research to incorporate scientific expertise in order to solve specific problems of a political and social nature. This orientation should be further concretised in the future, and exchanges with external research groups should be intensified. Extra-parliamentary commissions can also make an important contribution here, but only if their role in crisis preparation and management is clarified, the volunteer committees are supported by a professional administrative office, and their importance is not further diminished.
- Fourthly, the procedure for setting up an ad hoc task force should be formalised and the rules for cooperation, ethical conduct and communication should be set out in a binding agreement.

- Finally, the EPCs as typical organisations of expertise, such as the Federal Commission for Pandemic Preparedness (FCPP) and the Federal Vaccination Commission (FVC), did not play a role in the early stages of the pandemic. As for the FCPP, the Federal Office of Public Health (FOPH), which was in charge of managing the crisis, considered that its services were not required. Furthermore, the FCPP was not specifically intended to provide its expertise in the event of acute crises. Thus, the FOPH limited itself at the beginning of the pandemic to occasional contact with experts in Swiss research institutions and refrained from activating the FCPP (Hirschi et al., 2022, p. 58ff.). In addition, the majority of FCPP members were medical practitioners, who were heavily involved in their practical work during the acute phase of the pandemic and therefore did not have the resources to additionally advise the government on the management of the crisis. The composition of the FCPP together with the obstructive attitude of the FOPH – which led to a certain lack of understanding among policymakers and the public – were among the reasons why representatives of basic research concluded that there was insufficient scientific expertise in the federal government's crisis management. In the SSC's view, the EPCs continue to be an important source of scientific and civil society expertise; this may also apply in the event of a crisis, but only if targeted reforms are implemented. The SSC therefore recommends in its report that the role of the EPCs in the event of a crisis be explicitly set out in the relevant mandate. To date, this task has not been explicitly laid down in the EPCs' legal framework. Consequently, the FCPP lacks an optimal composition and has only limited capacity.

5.2. MEASURES TAKEN BY THE FEDERAL COUNCIL: AD-HOCISM, WEAK INSTITUTIONALISATION AND NETWORK

After the acute crisis had been overcome, the federal government's (and cantonal) crisis management organisation enjoyed considerable attention in the political arena. Numerous political initiatives called on the Federal Council to critically review the situation and take

measures to improve federal crisis management.¹⁰ The Federal Council's report (Bundesrat, 2023) provided the starting point for revising the principles of the federal government's crisis management organisation in its Ordinance on Crisis Management in the Federal Administration (Verordnung über die Krisenorganisation der Bundesverwaltung, KOBV, 2025). The most important conclusion from the perspective of scientific policy advice is the Federal Council's recognition that, in future, science should also be systematically involved in the federal government's crisis management. In this matter the Federal Council has taken up some of the recommendations by the SSC. Considering the scientific advisory body the revised Ordinance states that "clear roles and responsibilities should ensure coherent and holistic crisis management". Standards are therefore required to delineate the methodology for identifying, notifying, and engaging such actors. With this approach, the Federal Council is addressing the challenge described above of ensuring representativeness when drawing on expert advice in the event of a crisis (see chapter 4). Article 16 of the KOBV now stipulates that the Federal Council may establish such a body "if necessary", and that this appointment shall be made by means of an order. The order must regulate the following points: the members, the organisation, the affiliation with the crisis organisation of the Federal Administration, the services and remuneration, communication with the public, and confidentiality and information protection. The Federal Chancellery is designated as the contact point for scientific advice in crises and takes the "preparatory measures for the involvement of the scientific community" (ibid.). Under this regulation, the Federal Council or the department in charge of the crisis management has the decisive role in setting up an advisory body.

It is worth noting at this point that in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Federal Council formally involved the external expertise of epidemiologists in crisis management only after much hesitation and

10 21.3205 FDP-Liberal Group "Role of the Federal Civil Protection Task Force in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic" of 17 March 2021, 21.3449 Security Policy Committee of the Council of States "Strategic crisis management" of 25 March 2021 and 22.3343 Green Liberal Party "Finally ensuring the institutional crisis resilience of the Federal Council" of 18 March 2022. Similarly, numerous motions were also submitted at cantonal level, which led to further external evaluations (e.g. Schwenkel et al., 2024).

considerable pressure. In other words, there can be significant differences in interpretation between the scientific community and the political actors when it comes to the need for additional scientific expertise from outside the administration in a crisis. The legal basis establishes that the authority of interpretation remains with policymakers, a position that is fundamentally understandable from a democratic point of view and the separation of powers. However, this mechanism can also result in the instrumentalisation of science by policymakers, which poses a risk of scientific expertise's autonomy being questioned.

The KOBV provides for a basic organisation for crisis management (Basisorganisation Krisenmanagement, BOK) in preparation for crises (and in dealing with them), with a division of labour between the Federal Office for Civil Protection (FOCP), responsible for risk management at federal level, and the Federal Chancellery (FC). When preparing for a crisis, Article 12 and the designated role of the Chancellery is of particular interest. It is tasked with "assessing developments that could lead to a crisis within the framework of crisis anticipation, involving the departments, cantons and third parties" (KOBV, 2025). In other words, in future there should be better links between early crisis detection and the federal government's analysis of the situation and environment, taking into account scientific assessment and the federal government's risk management – as potential risks can lead to acute crises. With the KOBV, the Federal Council now intends to institutionalise scientific expertise more firmly within the framework of situation and environment analysis and risk management, and thus outside of acute crises. The formalised involvement of the scientific actors is to be conducted via the National Science Advice Network, which will subsequently be discussed in the following chapter.

5.3. THE NATIONAL SCIENCE ADVICE NETWORK (NSAN) – BETWEEN INSTITUTIONALISM AND "AD-HOC-ISM"

The Federal Chancellery did not intend to designate the Extra-parliamentary commissions as existing advisory body for use in a crisis and to clarify their role in such a scenario. Instead, it decided to establish an informal network, the operation of which is the responsibility of

the BFI stakeholders. However, based on the experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was clear that the reform of crisis management must also aim to formalise scientific advice in acute crisis situations, to define processes and to clarify public communication.¹¹ This resulted in a Cooperation Agreement (Zusammenarbeitsvereinbarung, 2023) and a Code of Practice, both of which were signed by the parties involved on 8 December 2023.¹² The Code of Practice (2023) regulates the responsibilities between the Federal Council, the Federal Administration, the ERI actors and the ad hoc advisory groups. It defines the principles of science-based policy advice, the role of experts in advising and their accountability, and in particular communication in normal times and during acute crises. After all, it was primarily the poorly coordinated communication between political authorities and representatives of the scientific community that gave rise to criticism during the coronavirus pandemic. In times of crises and in their role as advisors to the Federal Council, experts within the Network “should avoid public political commentary” (ibid.). They should maintain their scientific integrity, act as “honest brokers” (Pielke, 2014), disclose conflicts of interests, and provide balanced assessments.

The NSAN, designed as a pilot project running until 2027, is made up of clusters of scientific experts on crisis-related topics, each led by three to four coordinators, with a chair and a deputy. Their secretariat is provided by one of the six ERI actors. The clusters are defined on a risk basis by the Conference of Secretaries General of the Departments (CSG, “Generalsekretärenkonferenz”), the highest coordinating body of the federal administration. According to the Government and Administration Organisation Act (GAOA, Art. 53), the CSG contributes to “forward-looking, effective and coherent administrative activity.” To date, clusters

11 See also the Federal Council report of 23 November 2022 in response to postulate 20.3280 Michel (www.parlament.ch > 20.3280 > Report in response to the parliamentary motion “Harnessing scientific potential in times of crisis”) and the background report “Options for scientific policy advice in relation to crises” (<https://www.news.admin.ch/news/message/attachments/74010.pdf>, translation by the author)

12 The Federal Chancellery, as the Federal Council’s administrative office, is responsible for coordinating the process. The agreement was signed by the State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation and the presidencies of swissuniversities, the ETH Board, the SNSF, the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences, the Swiss Science Council and Innosuisse.

have been organised for “cybersecurity”, “disinformation”, “international challenges” and “public health”. Clusters for “natural hazards” and “economic crises” are to be set up in 2026. An evaluation at the end of the pilot phase will provide information on the appropriateness of the network. The aim of the NSAN is to build trust and institutionalise exchange between science, administration and politics in normal circumstances, so that in the event of a crisis, scientific expertise can be better and timelier incorporated into political decision-making.

6. CHALLENGES FOR SCIENTIFIC POLICY ADVICE

As discussed before, the NSAN is designed as a neo-corporatist network. It considers hereby the institutional framework of Switzerland’s political and administrative preferences. At the same time, it has retained its ad hoc character and thus considers a “fit-for-purpose approach”. However, this form of organisation also means that its degree of institutionalisation and resource allocation remains somewhat unclear: its form is a compromise between institutionalism known from EPCs and other standing expert panels – which have a legal base and dedicated resources – and more ad hoc arrangements. It appears that the Federal Council favours the latter form of expertise, having only just approved fundamental reforms to the EPCs, under which around a quarter are to be abolished. This contributes to the steady decline in the importance of neo-corporatism in the Swiss political system, a trend that was already observable ten years ago (Beetschen & Rebmann, 2015). The lack of resources without a dedicated budget and the lack of an explicit legal base on the one hand and the fluid form of organisation on the other may raise fundamental problems for this type of organisation.

Firstly, the lack of formally defined tasks can hinder operational efficiency, as it is challenging to establish a basis of trust for close cooperation without purpose-specific personal exchanges within the network and with policymakers. Secondly, and in reference to the “tragedy of the commons” (Hardin, 1968), free goods such as scientific policy advice in this form are either undervalued and/or overused. Thirdly, there is a growing risk that due to the lack of resources the network is perceived

as biased and therefore vulnerable to political questioning. An argument commonly used during the COVID-19 pandemic was that scientists would hardly provide policy advice at their own expense and without compensation unless they were pursuing a personal agenda, even if only with the intention of securing follow-up contracts. Finally, there are challenges regarding the political legitimacy of the thematic clusters selected. Currently, thematic clusters for potential crises are being defined by the Conference of Secretaries General, an administrative body with no political legitimacy. This raises the question whether it would not be more appropriate for the Federal Council (and Parliament) to define and approve these clusters.

These challenges for the transparency, legitimacy and operability of scientific policy advice must be further clarified in the future, including in relation to ad hoc committees of a scientific nature which offer “politicised policy advice” (Weingart, 2006) in the decision-making process and whose representatives are recruited directly by the government involved. Such a politicisation has the potential to compromise the credibility of the involved experts and, by extension, the credibility of academia as an institution. This was the case, for example, in one of Switzerland’s largest reform projects of the last years to fundamentally review tasks and subsidies of the federal state (Gaillard et al., 2024), in which a mixed group of representatives from academia and politics was commissioned by the Finance Minister to develop recommendations for structurally relieving the federal budget. The analysis, which was carried out under considerable time pressure, identified potential savings of between four and five billion Swiss francs. As with evaluations in general, the crux of the matter often lies in the formulation of the initial situation, the framework conditions and the objectives of research and consulting assignments. This framing influences the collection of empirical data and evidence and ultimately the result of the scientific assessment of a political problem.¹³

13 The mandate was as follows: “The expert group is tasked with proposing expenditure measures to the Federal Council that could reduce the budget by at least CHF 3 billion from 2027 and by at least CHF 4 billion from 2030. It is prioritising the measures in case the need for adjustments turns out to be less than currently expected.” The basic assumption here was, as the finance minister said, that Switzerland had a spending problem, not a revenue problem (Schäfer & Neuhaus, 2023).

The risk of political control of expertise continues to increase with the growing polarisation of the political discourse because of the increasing success of populist movements globally and the modus operandi of social media (“self-reinforcing feedback systems”; Sunstein, 2018) and disinformation. There are finally two distinct positions that shape public discourse, each presenting its own challenge for scientific knowledge in general. Hirschi, referring to Jasanoff, characterises these positions as the “elitist” and “relativist” models (Hirschi, 2021): The elitist model attributes to experts “a privileged influence on decision-makers based on their superior expertise, which extends to the right to have their recommendations implemented in a binding manner” (Hirschi, 2021, p. 164). The relativist model refutes the notion of their influence “precisely because of the limitations and provisional nature of their expertise and reduces their recommendations to one relevant opinion among many” (ibid.). Whereas policymakers used to employ the two models mentioned above in an instrumental and situational manner, they are now ideologically charged and repurposed in a trench war between opposites, “which one camp wages in the name of science and the other in the name of the people” (ibid., translation by the author).

7. CONCLUSION

This article is intended as a field report against the backdrop of an analysis of scientific policy advice in Switzerland. The catalyst for this in-depth analysis was the experience gained during the COVID-19 pandemic. The management of this highly complex crisis posed a significant challenge to Switzerland’s crisis management – scientific expertise had to be incorporated into crisis management quickly and had to be adapted on an ongoing basis. The Swiss political system assigns a rather subordinate role to scientific policy advice, even though the formal institutionalisation of evidence is well advanced. As discussed, evidence-based policy is required by the constitution and aims to provide good governance.

However, as has been shown, the management of an acute crisis requires a specific form of scientific knowledge, which has been referred to as

expertise. It is characterised by person-bound knowledge. Compared to other countries, however, the use of scientific *expertise* is poorly developed and often opaque. Traditionally, expertise type of knowledge has found expression in the Swiss political system in the form of EPCs, to which the Federal Council appoints experts *ad personam* for a term of four years. EPCs tend to take a long-term, evidence-based often systemic view of their subject area and are therefore not designed for the management of acute crises or the support of crisis management. Furthermore, there are currently political efforts to weaken the EPCs with the argument that they are not fit-for-purpose anymore. Thus, rather than clarifying the role of EPCs in crisis management, the Federal Council opted for incorporating scientific expertise through a newly established network, formed by the ERI actors and with support of the Federal Chancellery. The network continues to have a certain *ad hoc* character, therefore considers the unpredictability of crisis and the scientific knowledge required to overcome them. Yet, although a degree of formalisation has been achieved through a Cooperation Agreement and a Code of Practice, its institutionalisation remains relatively weak. For this reason, and due to its lack of dedicated resources, the role of this network remains to be determined, both in acute crises and, especially, in so-called normal times. It is precisely in times like these that the low degree of institutionalisation and lack of a clear legal basis becomes particularly apparent.

Finally, on the one hand, the structural challenge lies in the fact that it remains the Federal Council's decision, at the request of the department in charge, to determine when a given situation should be defined as crisis. According to the Crisis Ordinance, a situation must be defined as a crisis "if it can no longer be managed within the usual structures." For political and reputational reasons, and to avoid the "blame-game" (Hinterleitner 2026, 16ff), government is very cautious and reluctant to admit that the established structures are no longer sufficient to handle a political problem requiring action – and thus define a situation as a crisis. This reservation was recently demonstrated in a striking example during the negotiations between the US government and Switzerland in the wake of the unilateral imposition of tariffs by the US, when the

Federal Council chose not to involve to the existing cluster “International Challenges”, fearing that labelling the situation as a crisis might jeopardise the negotiations. On the other hand, the role of “honest broker” must be accepted and practised by the scientific actors themselves. When they are tasked with contributing domain-specific knowledge to the government, they must acknowledge the inherent constraints of the validity and scope of their advice. They have to act under conditions of high complexity and a significant degree of interdependence in “poly-crises” (Tooze, 2021), incomplete information and considerable time pressure, where empirical evidence may not be available yet and the need for their expertise therefore all the more important.

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