



Putting people first: how do we care for each other, build resilience and solidarity in a world in crisis?

INTRODUCTION

Current crises like the war in Ukraine, the cost-of-living and energy, the pandemic and climate change are affecting the lives of millions of people in Europe and around the world. Yet, individuals and communities are affected differently by crises. Whilst so many are negatively affected, particularly the disadvantaged in society, there are others who are able to benefit.

What is a crisis, and how do we ensure we provide adequate support – social, economic, health and wellbeing – to those in need? How can societies distribute the burdens, as well as the benefits, fairly and equitably? How can a sense of solidarity help as a guiding principle? And how do we build resilience and resilient communities?

Chaired by Professor Ole Petersen, Vice-President Academia Europaea, this webinar, held on 31st January 2023, brought together a panel of experts to discuss these critical issues, where we considered both current crises and what is needed for the future.

You can watch a recording of the webinar on [SAPEA's YouTube channel](#).

Key themes

Values guide decision-making in policy, particularly at times of crisis.

Values can often be dismissed during crises, when factors such as time and pressure hasten policy decisions. Yet, policy decisions cannot be based exclusively on information and data; values ultimately guide most of the decisions made. Science can tell us what the potential consequences are of different policy options, including a characterisation of the uncertainties remaining. However, only values can provide an orientation as to which of these consequences are tolerable, acceptable or even desirable. Without values, there will be no decisions or recommendations, there is no yardstick as to what options should be preferred. These values need to be made explicit, so that they are open to public debate and scrutiny. In strong democracies, such public scrutiny is a value in itself – and it can also help to create public support for crisis management measures.

An additional level of complexity is added by the fact that crises cascade, as we see with the current Ukraine conflict. This implies that their repercussions are not limited to one sphere of public life, but go much wider.

The process of policymaking has to be clear and transparent about the values that guide it and what scientific data is used to support it.

The transparent communication of decisions, as well as the values and rationales underpinning them, is key at every level of policymaking. Transparency is essential for society to understand the thought and value processes behind policy decisions and how a crisis is managed, even when there may be disagreements over particular positions.

Resilience as a key value that has to be applied on a societal level to prevent discrimination against individuals.

A resilient system can weather a crisis successfully, and it can recover more easily from the inevitable disruption. Such a system cannot be overly focused on maintaining or returning to a status quo that predates the crisis; it is a system in continuous change that adapts to the changing circumstances and accompanies necessary transformations. It should safeguard those most exposed in society and distribute fairly the burden of such changes. At the same time, while resilience is an important concept at the societal level, it should be used with caution when referring to individuals. A myopic focus on individual resilience can lead to victim-blaming, suggesting that it is the responsibility of individual people and families to be resilient enough to withstand hardship. Resilient societies require both structural measures and individual practices.

Solidarity is one of the main criteria in strategic management, yet in recent crises it has been perceived as a punishment by some sectors of the population.

The COVID crisis has shown demands being made on the population and a lack of international solidarity on topics such as vaccine distribution. Empirical data demonstrates the need for institutionalised solidarity, and systems of support for those with psychological, medical, and socio-economic needs. Those at the lower end of the income and wealth pyramid are hit first and hardest in virtually any crisis. A fair system has efficient policies that distribute equitably the burdens of societal strife and change, or at the very least has systems of compensation in place.

Values have been influenced by economic perspectives of efficiency and effectiveness.

We have organised our economy and our welfare institutions based on criteria of efficiency and effectiveness. Both values are important, and need to be considered. However, they have been taken as the only, or at least the only relevant criteria for assessing and evaluation policies. Yet, they need to be supplemented by the criteria of resilience and social justice (fairness and solidarity). The recent crises have demonstrated the need for personal and financial reserve capacities in our institutions, as well as critical infrastructure. This can be at odds with the economic approach of efficiency; in complex systems, resilience and efficiency can play antagonistic roles. We need to make a political decision, as opposed to placing the focus on economic criteria only, to commit to less efficiency in order to achieve greater resilience. A perfectly efficient system from an economic perspective may often be a very fragile one that cannot weather crises, as maximisation on one dimension implies accepting unproportionally high losses on another. Maximising short-term efficiency may hurt solidarity, but it could also hurt resilience or even effectiveness.

Values and their interpretations have to be re-assessed to address properly current crises and developments.

It is ethically problematic, and empirically wrong, to pitch individual rights and collective goods against each other. Individual rights and freedoms cannot be meaningfully exercised without societal goods – such as public health or security – being in place. Similarly, without respect for individual rights, a focus on societal goods is oppressive. Although they can be in a position of tension in specific instances, overall, individual rights and collective goods require and complement each other. Portraying individual rights and collective goods as a zero-sum game where one has to give for the other to gain, in a crisis situation can be outright dangerous – as could be seen by the hijacking of the term 'freedom' by certain political forces in the most recent pandemic.

Many societal problems come from a lack of reflection on what the underlying assumptions and values are that underpin certain policies, specially economic ones.

How can there be a society-wide conversation about values that is not affected by the utilitarian interests of special stakeholders in society? Public/political discourse cannot become a philosophy seminar, but still it is absolutely necessary to revisit the role of economic factors in society, the values that underpin the current labour market and are, among other factors, impacting the climate crisis.

PANELLISTS



- Professor Barbara Prainsack MAE, Professor for Comparative Policy Analysis, University of Vienna; Chair of the European Group on Ethics
- Professor Ortwin Renn, Member of the SAPEA Working Group on *Strategic Crisis Management in the EU*
- Professor Nils-Eric Sahlin MAE, Professor and Chair of Medical Ethics, Lund University, Vice-Chair of the European Group on Ethics
- Professor Sigrid Graumann, Professor of Ethics and Rector of Protestant University of Applied Sciences Rhineland-Westphalia-Lippe, Member of the German Ethics Council and Chair of the Council's working group on 'Normative Issues of Dealing with a Pandemic'

This was a joint event between the European Group on Ethics, SAPEA and Academia Europaea.



CC BY: This license allows reusers to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format, so long as attribution is given to the creator. The license allows for commercial use.

The information and opinions expressed in this briefing document do not represent the views and opinions of Academia Europaea and its board of trustees. This document is a summary of ideas discussed at the webinar.