


PROGRESSO

Jair Bolsonaro with Luiz Mandetta in March 2020, before the popular health minister was fired by the Brazilian president. (Photo credit: Andre Coelho/Getty Images)

COVID-19: Are Scientists Trapped under Policymakers' Poor Leadership?

July 28, 2020 | Volume 13 | Issue 49
Daouda Cissé

The COVID-19 outbreak has once again revealed the always difficult but too often poor collaboration between scientists and policymakers. Usually, scientists in all sectors of research embrace the public role of informing policymakers and communities at large to take decisions on important matters. Often, breakdowns have been due to a simple lack of coordination between governments and scientists. But in many cases, scientific results based on informed research and evidence do not get implemented at government levels.

The need for clear policy advice to flow from scientists to policymakers takes on increasing urgency to counter the world's most challenging issues like poverty reduction, hunger, environmental protection, climate change, women's empowerment, health, and so on. But the outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan, China and subsequent worldwide pandemic reveal the gap between scientists and governments more glaringly than perhaps ever before in recent times, including countries where public health institutions and infrastructure are generally well developed. Let us look at three cases to illuminate different aspects of this problem as it relates to the coronavirus pandemic response.

In China

At the very beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan, doctors and health specialists fulfilled their role of alerting the public about and anticipating the spread of the virus not just in Hubei province but across China. Yet these alerts were soon

silenced by both provincial and central governments. Doctors and scientists in Wuhan realized at a very early stage that this was going to be a highly infectious disease with epidemic potential. Had it not been for the poor leadership of the Chinese government, its spread could have been contained through close collaboration with specialists and through transparency, informing the Chinese population and the rest of the world. Issues of information transparency, academic freedom, and freedom of speech have haunted modern China, propelled by the central and provincial governments' overriding concern with "national cohesion" and "social harmony." When in late 2019, Dr. Li Wenliang and his colleagues warned about the deadly coronavirus, provincial officials in Wuhan issued a statement saying that "they should not spread rumors"; meanwhile, COVID-19 has affected the entire world and already killed about 602,507 people, including the doctor himself (though there are debates about the exact cause of his death). Many of Li's colleagues who also gave early warnings about the disease have disappeared and are said to be detained by Chinese officials.

This response once again casts a poor light on the already much criticized leadership of China's government, both nationally and globally. But besides muzzling scientists, government reporting of COVID-19 cases and related deaths in China has raised doubts about the credibility of official data. While scientific data collection and analysis may be carried out accurately by researchers and scientists during the pandemic, Chinese officials have insisted that communications about COVID-19 should go through them. Instead of working hand in hand with scientists in order to inform the Chinese population and the world, infection and death figures are tweaked.

An explanation for the Chinese government's behavior lies in the country's political history. During the Cultural Revolution under Mao, provincial officials did not accurately report about actual conditions in their respective provinces in order to cover up poor leadership. This under-reporting led to massive hunger across China and the death of millions of Chinese citizens. When Deng Xiaoping took power, data reporting improved and policies dealing with public criticism loosened. However, under Xi Jinping, laws against criticizing the government have again tightened and transparency has worsened, to the detriment of freedom of speech, academic and scientific freedom, and, in the case of COVID-19, global public health.

In France

Even though the early spread of COVID-19 started from China and has shown the difficult relationship between scientists and China's government, similar problems have also plagued liberal democracies' responses to the pandemic. During the spring of 2020, France was among the world's worst-hit countries, which led the government to form a scientific council to tackle the COVID-19 crisis. For French officials, the idea behind the council was to let competent scientists and researchers communicate with citizens to inform them about the disease because they are considered to be more trusted than politicians.

Nevertheless, at a time when collaboration was much needed between scientists and policymakers, there was division among French scientists themselves on the one hand, and on the other between scientists and the French government. These disputes led some members of the scientific council to abandon it, charging that their voices were not being heard. Prominent among them is Didier Raoult, a specialist in infectious diseases who suggested a treatment that some of his colleagues and French politicians at first resisted implementing even though he had positive results with COVID-19 patients under his care. Dr. Raoult has been known for frequently challenging the medical establishment, and in the case of the coronavirus pandemic, several analysts and commentators reported the possibility of secret pharmaceutical deals being undertaken by the government. In any case, after weeks of debates and consideration, during which cases and deaths steadily increased, France finally approved the treatment for serious COVID-19 cases.



French president Emmanuel Macron (center) meets with health experts in the office of Dr. Didier Raoult (right) in April 2020. (Photo credit: Office of the President of the Republic)

Another heated controversy arose with respect to testing protocols. In March 2020, French scientists already advised France's president to undertake a massive testing program in order to detect and isolate possible COVID-19 cases. Such a measure could have helped counter the risks of spreading the disease in France. However, the president took this advice very lightly and even stated that massive testing would not happen. On the subject of easing lockdown measures, once again tensions have erupted between French scientists and policymakers. Social and economic pressure on the government has made it difficult for officials to seriously consider scientific advice regarding a number of safety guidelines, and the French government has been criticized for acting unilaterally when easing lockdown measures.

In the United States

The United States is the country worst hit by COVID-19, with the highest number of reported cases and deaths so far (though reported numbers by country will come under scrutiny after the pandemic). Being an advisor to President Trump may be

hard, but it seems even harder during these challenging times. Renowned scientists and researchers surround U.S. officials and provide them with scientific advice, and while these researchers may do outstanding work in their respective fields, primary communication to the U.S. public has centered on Trump himself or his delegated COVID-19 task force leader, Vice President Mike Pence.



Dr. Andrew Fauci and Dr. Deborah Birx with President Donald Trump at a COVID-19 press conference on March 20, 2020. (Photo credit: Getty Images)

Trump never considered the coronavirus to be a threat to the U.S. and its citizens, as he clearly stated in early February. While scientists and some state governors put in place precautionary measures to counter the spread of the disease, Trump has consistently put economic interests first, risking the lives of millions of citizens. He contradicts his advisors both during press briefings and behind closed White House doors. Researchers in the COVID-19 task force, fearing Trump's behavior, are put in the position of either contradicting him or remaining silent. While they often do not agree with the president, they are disincentivized to say anything publicly even though some eventually began to use social media to offer evidence-based information. Their credibility before the scientific world and U.S. citizens is being tested as they tacitly accept the president's politics over their own scientific

knowledge. As a result of this dysfunction, more and more people in the U.S. are being infected and dying.

Science and Politics

As these cases demonstrate—and far from being isolated, they are instead representative of a widespread pattern of which Jair Bolsonaro's firing of the popular Brazilian health minister Luis Mandetta is one more tragic example—informed scientific policy advice and politics do not always go hand in hand. It is true that during press briefings and conferences since the beginning of the pandemic, scientists and researchers have answered technical questions on behalf of policymakers. Therefore, why would the latter not consider the advice of the former to inform specific policies in the fight against COVID-19?

[T]he outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan, China and subsequent worldwide pandemic reveal the gap between scientists and governments more glaringly than perhaps ever before in recent times.

First, these cases indicate that policymakers may have other agendas, often indeed their own political agendas. These may go so far as to result in constraints on scientific freedom and information transparency, as politics overruns science. But beyond revealing individual governments' poor crisis management, COVID-19 has brought into focus how the tensions among competing interests of national public health, social and economic pressure, as well as lack of preparedness and the quest for national political legitimacy among governments across the globe have contributed significantly to the continuing worldwide spread of the pandemic. Such narrowly nationalistic responses once again prove the fragility of the multilateral frameworks that could play a key role in fostering and enhancing a global response to fighting the pandemic and mitigating its worst consequences. The lack of coordinated global approaches to countering the spread of the disease is a problem of politics, not science. For while a global synergy does in fact brings together researchers and scientists to share data and produce new findings and solutions, politicians seem bent on 'fighting' for national recognition among their citizens—while sometimes making alarmingly bad policy decisions against scientists' informed recommendations.

Tags

epidemic

public health

politics



Daouda Cissé is an independent researcher based in Montreal, Canada. He was a postdoctoral research fellow at the China Institute, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada and at the Centre for Chinese Studies, University of Stellenbosch, South Africa.

View PDF