LONDON AND COVID-19:
TOO COMPLEX FOR ONE GOVERNMENT?

Addressing the COVID-19 crisis involves a level of complexity that is overwhelming governments around the world. Nowhere is this more evident than in cities that are at the centre of the current outbreak. The handling of the corona emergency in London is an example of central governments aiming for national consistency rather than enabling city-specific leadership. It is becoming increasingly clear, that a successful recovery and post-crisis phase will have to rely on more elaborate and effective forms of multi-level governance.

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London's response to COVID-19 has so far mostly been determined by the actions of the UK's central government. Emergency measures taken by national governments are currently paramount in most of the world's cities, but the UK's governance system is particularly centralised. Almost completely aligned emergency measures were implemented across England (which has a population of 55 million) unlike, for example, in Italy, the United States or Germany, where more regional and state-specific approaches were taken.

At the same time, it was London that reported the UK's first concentrations of cases and where COVID-19 infections rapidly took hold throughout March. At that point, Greater London, which covers an area of 1,570 square kilometres and is home to 8.9 million inhabitants, was seen as particularly vulnerable, given its international links and vibrant urban economy supported by one of the world's most extensive public transport systems. London also features some of the UK's worst air quality, considerable health inequalities and numerous overcrowded homes with unhealthy living conditions – all additional determinants of a more serious impact of the current pandemic. On the plus side, London offers its residents access to many parks and open spaces

and its population includes a high proportion of children and young professionals.

By now, the following facts have been confirmed about London's exposure to the pandemic: As of May 10th, almost 5,600 deaths of hospital patients who tested positive for COVID-19 have been documented in the city. Death rates of up to 144 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants in some lowerincome communities in east London are almost three times higher than those in more affluent south-western areas. In terms of the economic impact, the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) has estimated that the national economy will shrink by 25% in the second quarter of this year, and by 13% over the whole year.[1] Following the OBR's methodological assumptions, the Greater London Authority (GLA) forecasts a similar impact on the London economy.[2] Preliminary evidence from a YouGov survey suggests that unemployment may have doubled in the city in the past few weeks. International travel to and from the city has virtually collapsed with Heathrow recording a passenger drop of 97% in April.

As concerns are beginning to shift from an almost exclusively public health perspective to addressing larger social and economic impacts, London is recognising the enormous challenge ahead. Most of its competitive advantage is built around precisely those characteristics that seem to enable the spread of infectious diseases: global connectivity, employment densities of up to 140,000 persons per square kilometre, a public transport share of more than 40%, big cultural and sports events, prime sites for tourism and an extensive restaurant, café, bar and club culture.

So how are the above health and broader challenges addressed by different tiers of government in London's case? At the national level, the UK was relatively late to apply more stringent measures and initially seemed to have been embracing a more liberal approach. National leadership on the most relevant actions in London included the "soft lockdown" which began on March 23rd (after pleas for voluntary action failed to produce the desired social distancing over a sunny weekend just before). From then on people were allowed only to leave their homes for one of the following four reasons: shopping for basic necessities, one form of exercise per day, any medical need, and designated key workers were permitted to travel to and from work. Education moved online after all schools were closed

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1. https://obr.uk/coronavirus-analysis/

2. https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/london-economy-today

(except for some partial capacity for the children of key workers). National health emergency measures included the postponing of all non-urgent operations and the building of a new temporary Nightingale Hospital with 4,000 beds at east London's ExCeL exhibition centre. The National Health Service (NHS) also implemented a volunteer scheme, which attracted an initial 750,000 applications across the country by March 29th 2020. On May 13th, some relaxations of lockdown rules were implemented, allowing more workers to return to their workplace and expanding outdoor exercise and leisure activities.

By contrast, city and borough-level government principally operated as the implementation agencies of national decisions. When it comes to the Greater London Authority and the directly elected mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, his prominence in leading decisions was compromised by the forces of centralisation but slowly increased over the first phase of the emergency response. On March 12th, he was finally invited to join the national government's emergency response COBRA committee after having been sidelined until then. A major concern for the mayor is providing public transport – one of the exclusive remits of his office – without putting Transport for London (TfL) staff at risk (28 bus drivers have died in London so far). Securing national government support to help with the enormous financial deficit currently building up as a result of the dramatic decline in ridership (potentially a £2bn hole in TfL's finances) is a further priority for the mayor. The mayor also launched a £2.3m Culture at Risk emergency fund to protect the city's creative and night-time businesses: grassroots music and LGTBQ+ venues, creative workspaces and independent cinemas.

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Most recently, Mr Khan has become a vocal advocate for the wearing of protective equipment, above all face masks, in all public spaces and transport in London. However, he does not have the power to instruct the public to do so. The mayor also clashed with the national government when he demanded that all construction sites should be closed down during the lockdown. This has not consistently happened in London and only certain larger construction companies decided to completely shut down their sites.

At the local scale, London's 33 boroughs are the main social services providers and state school operators and are responsible for a range of other public services such as waste, cleaning, local transport (above all parking)

and public spaces. Their response focusses primarily on maintaining critical services, dealing with the partial closure of schools and assisting with new crisis-related community needs. The boroughs also actively got involved in managing public space, at times even restricting access to some parks and spreading information about social distancing and other health measures. Another major concern for London's local authorities has been the impact of the lockdown restrictions on the future of the city's independent businesses. The London Growth Hub, which was established by the mayor in partnership with local boroughs, has been providing one-to-one support to businesses and employers, offering financial, legal and practical advice to help them manage the crisis.

At the community level, mutual aid groups at all levels started appearing throughout March. Some of these were organised ad-hoc by a few local residents, others made use of chat groups or neighbourhood apps and were then often consolidated by larger and more experienced community help organisations. The London Community Response Fund was established by the GLA and the City Bridge Trust to support community and voluntary organisations to provide food and other essential services to those in need (Mayor of London, 2020). It has since received donations in excess of £16m. Similarly, many councils such as Hackney have increased their own funding to local organisations that provide essential support to residents.[3]

The response of London's citizens to government measures was overwhelmingly positive and accepting. Potentially as a result of avoiding draconian lockdown measures and opting for softer messaging of "saving lives", attitudes across the UK are the least supportive of re-opening businesses of 14 countries recently surveyed (Skinner, 2020). According to UK government statistics, public transport in London declined by about 90% to 95% up to mid-April (Department for Transport, 2020). Mobility trends included in Google's COVID-19 Community Mobility Report suggest an 80% reduction in mobility linked to retail and recreation (Google, 2020). This drop occurred late March and levels remained as low throughout April. Similarly, grocery shopping trips dropped by 40% and have remained at low levels since. By contrast, an initial drop in park visits by around 50% in early March has entirely been reversed and a 5% increase was recorded late April. Workplace mobility is also slowly recovering from a decline of 65% back to a 50% reduction. Throughout lockdown, residential mobility within communities is up by around 15%.

3. https://hackney.gov.uk/coronavirus-volunteering

As the attention now shifts to lockdown exit strategies, there are concerns about how the city's transport networks will accommodate social distancing measures as people begin to return to work. Seeking to avoid overcrowding and infection transmissions on densely packed buses and tubes, City Hall and TfL have been working on the Mayor's Streetspace Plan to fast track the transformation of the city's streets and expand cycle networks and pedestrian walkways (Groves, 2020). Pavements in the London Borough of Lambeth are already being widened, a shopping street in Hackney has been closed to cars, and residential streets in Croydon have been made access only. In the coming months as people continue to work from home, there are likely to be fewer longer journeys, and an increase in shorter local journeys. The plan is to transform local town centres on the TfL road network to ensure that these journeys can be walked or cycled where possible.

AS LONDON MOVES TOWARDS AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE AS PART OF A RECOVERY AND ULTIMATELY POST-CRISIS PHASE, ITS MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE SYSTEM WILL HAVE TO RESPOND FLEXIBLY TO DIFFERENT SCENARIOS.

As London moves towards an uncertain future as part of a recovery and ultimately post-crisis phase, its multi-level governance system will have to respond flexibly to different scenarios. To develop these scenarios, evidence will be needed about the following critical questions that are not unique to London: Will population growth and international immigration pick up again? Can overcrowding be reduced while continuing to promote a desirable increase in urban densities? Can homelessness and uncertain tenure be substantially reduced in the long run? Is there an opportunity to redesign London's streets with a considerable increase in space for walking, cycling and place functions such as gathering, seating and playing? How and with what space requirements will business and financial services recover? Will the tech industry continue to urbanise? Will co-working spaces continue to offer premium rents? At what point and with what level of technology and/or protection can public transport ridership, visits to restaurants, bars and cultural institutions and tourism recover? Is the future of retail small neighbourhood shops plus online deliveries? And, what will the future of education look like, including university education?

Every single of these questions is massively complex and overwhelming in their own right. London will only be successful in accessing the relevant insights across this almost absurd range of uncertainties if it engages in an extensive dialogue and exchange with other cities, key stakeholders and information providers. Addressing these as part of a coherent government strategy will require unprecedented levels of coordination between national, city-wide and local government.

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