



## The Swiss National COVID-19 Science Task Force

# Legacy and lessons learned

On 16 February 2022 the Swiss Federal Department of Home Affairs (FDHA) announced the early dissolution of the Swiss National COVID-19 Science Task Force (SN-STF), effective as per 31 March.

### CHRISTIAN PAULETTO<sup>1</sup>

The SN-STF was established shortly after the Swiss Federal Council (government) declared that Switzerland was in a state of emergency (“situation extraordinaire”). This was the first time that such a scientific body was set up in Switzerland. Normally, the Federal Council gathers scientific expertise via extra-parliamentary commissions, which would include scientists among other representatives. One factor that prompted this shift may be that another special body had just been instituted, the “Coronavirus Crisis Unit” (EMCC). The mandate of the Science Task Force was given by this Crisis Unit together with the Federal Office of Public Health (FOPH) and the State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI). The Task Force’s mandate consisted in providing independent advice to the whole Federal Council, the Head of the FDHA (Mr. Alain Berset), and other federal and cantonal competent authorities. Also in that respect, the SN-STF deviated from Switzerland’s administrative practice. However, similar

to normal extra-parliamentary commissions, its members were not remunerated and acted as independent experts. It is noteworthy that the Federal Commission for preparedness and management in case of pandemics did not hold any meetings during the COVID-19 crisis.

The members of the SN-STF were drawn from Swiss public higher education institutions, and its first chairman was Prof. Matthias Egger, president of the National Research Council of the Swiss National Science Foundation. The SN-STF worked from 1 May to the end of July 2020, i.e. the duration of the state of emergency. As stated in the government’s press release, “with the end of the extraordinary situation and the dissolution of the Crisis Unit, the SN-STF no longer had the original official foundation for its continued existence”.

After this period, Switzerland was in a state of “particular situation” pursuant to the Federal Epidemics Act. Related activities such as inter-ministerial coordination

and drawing on scientific expertise were implemented at the level of the DFAH and its FOPH. Under their competence, they also adapted the mandate of the SN-STF so that its experts could continue to provide their advice to them. The new mandate took effect on 1 August 2020.

The SN-STF was composed of experts from various scientific disciplines, including economics, ethics, and psychology. Its mandate encompassed three missions:

- to provide advice to authorities and political decision-makers;
- to identify possible fields of research that can contribute to a better understanding of the pandemic;
- to assess opportunities of innovation in the supply of services and products related to COVID-19.

With approximately 60-70 experts, the SN-STF Task Force published over 40 “policy briefs” under the first mandate (three months). Under the adapted mandate, the Task Force was



significantly reduced to 25 experts, and regularly produced “Overviews and evaluations of the situation” and “Scientific updates”. On the eve of the announcement of its dissolution, it published a long-term oriented action and research agenda, entitled “Scientific update with aspects on the management of SARS-CoV-2 in the coming 12 months”. On the eve of its actual dissolution it published its final report.

During the first mandate, i.e. during the extremely difficult circumstances of the “extraordinary situation”, there was an overwhelming satisfaction with the Task Force. To some extent, the successful management of the pandemic in Switzerland during that period could be attributed to the SN-STF. And in any case, it was recognised that the scientific advice it gave to policy-makers could not have been found elsewhere in the Swiss administration or in extra-parliamentary commissions. Broadly speaking, it is fair to say that for the remaining of 2020, the Task Force was

well perceived in public opinion, though some criticism started to surface.

In 2021 however, and especially from mid-2021 on, critical views became increasingly vocal. The crux of the criticism revolved around the Task Force’s democratic legitimacy or lack thereof. With its unique system of direct democracy, Switzerland is considered as the world’s highest standard of democracy, and issues regarding “democratic legitimacy” can quickly become viral in this country. Lately, during the past six months or so, the Task Force happened to make blatant errors in judgement and forecasts, coupled with proactive public statements, which obviously did not help. If any lessons should be drawn from this experience for possible future task forces, it is thus that, within each political system and culture, the careful balance between powers, public communication and democratic legitimacy should be found. As a “scientific” body, the Task Force’s mandate was limited to science, leaving it up to the

authorities to make the arbitrage between scientific evidence and other national interests. Traditional extra-parliamentary commissions do communicate on their proposals and reports, but such commissions have a broad mix of representatives, which are appointed through an open procedure. The latter aspect strengthens their legitimacy and acceptance in public opinion, even more so because the broader composition results in more balanced conclusions.

The initial concept was simple and clear: “science should advise, policy should decide”. With time however, the lines became blurred. When individual SN-STF representatives entered into the public debate with alarming statements towards the end of 2021, it was an easy game for their opponents to question their legitimacy and to stress that they were sort of bypassing the Federal Council. One argument was that they were pre-empting the political arbitrage of interests, and thus they were biased. Unlike traditional commissions, the SN-STF

did not have among its members some personalities experienced in politics. That was normal given their strictly scientific mandate. But as a result, when the SN-STF attempted to enter into the political public debate this lack of political skills became obvious, especially when some STF members publicly criticised government measures.

Their way to manoeuvre in a political surrounding, and to undertake what was perceived as political communication, made them an easy target for their opponents. When it turned out that the SN-STF never took written records of its meetings, had unclear or at least untransparent internal procedures, and failed to publish some of its “Briefs” in any one of the national languages, criticism spread. However, if it strictly behaved as just an advisory body, such flaws would have gone unnoticed.

To conclude, it may be said that the establishment of a special scientific body, such as a task force, is probably a necessity during a pandemic of the magnitude of COVID-19. The right balance should be found though, especially in a country such as Switzerland, which is used to the highest standards of democratic procedures. If the body is of a strictly scientific nature, it should be cautious and risk-averse in terms of political exposure and public communication. Conversely, if the body is meant to also contribute to the public political debate, its composition should be more representative and, crucially, it should include political expertise and communication skills, and it should also have a sort of assurance that it can count on political backing in case it becomes necessary. ■

1. Member of the Board and lecturer on Swiss political institutions at Université Populaire du Canton de Genève