

Policy Brief

Governance in Times of Crisis: Lessons From the European Union

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This brief is an output of the Global Governance Innovation Platform initiative. The views and opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the United Nations University.

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Key recommendations

- **Embed early-stage informal coordination within crisis-response and decision-making processes to align positions, facilitate implementation and build consensus before formal decisions are made.**

Early informal coordination, through technical meetings and regular communication channels, allows actors to identify common interests and mutually beneficial courses of action. This helps clarify constraints, reduce misunderstandings and prepare the ground for a prompt formal agreement when urgent decisions are required. Above all it can facilitate seamless and timely implementation.

- **Develop flexible informal mechanisms to enable experimentation and rapid adjustment.**

Crises often require rapid response and adaptation, but formal negotiations are not well suited for experimentation, as governments may be reluctant to openly discuss uncertain or politically sensitive options. Informal mechanisms, such as working groups, expert networks and temporary task forces provide a safer space to explore alternatives, identify risks, anticipate implementation problems, test emerging solutions and refine proposals in real time. Developing such mechanisms does not mean replacing formal procedures or creating rigid decision-making structures; rather, it involves establishing stable channels for informal cooperation that can be activated quickly to enhance coordination, speed and adaptability.

- **Institutionalize socialization processes to build trust and shared understanding over time.**

Effective crisis management relies on shared understanding, expectations and experiences; features that are difficult to build during times of crisis or emergency. Investing in regular socialization and knowledge-sharing activities among officials and practitioners involved in crisis response and implementation – such as workshops, simulation exercises, communities of practice, peer learning and joint problem-solving – helps foster ongoing engagement and mutual trust among actors. These processes enable actors to develop shared interpretations, align expectations and establish coordinated ways of working outside crisis moments.

- **Strengthen lesson-sharing mechanisms across crises to reinforce inter-crisis learning.**

International organizations often develop useful informal practices and acquire significant learning during one crisis but struggle to ‘recall’ or apply this knowledge in future emergencies. This reflects broader challenges of knowledge management, institutional memory and learning from both successes and failures. More systematic lesson drawing and, subsequently, lesson-sharing mechanisms, for instance through dedicated workshops and shared databases, can help preserve practical experience and spread successful practices within and among organizations, across countries and policy sectors.

Introduction

Contemporary crises, ranging from pandemics, sudden refugee inflows and financial shocks to climate emergencies and geopolitical disruptions, are characterized by high uncertainty, strong cross-border interdependence and rapid escalation. In such conditions, traditional intergovernmental decision-making processes often struggle to respond effectively, as they tend to be slow, rigid and heavily dependent on consensus among Member States. A central challenge, therefore, is how to enable rapid collective action while respecting national preferences and maintaining institutional legitimacy.

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This challenge brings up three persistent tensions in crisis governance: (i) rapid response versus procedural requirements, (ii) collective action versus national preferences and (iii) policy flexibility versus institutional accountability. Crises require rapid responses, yet formal decision-making processes are usually slow and rigid. At the same time, while collective action is essential, Member States continue to safeguard core national preferences. Last but not least, although informal practices can enhance adaptability, they may also raise concerns regarding transparency and democratic legitimacy.

To illustrate these dynamics empirically, this policy brief draws from two case studies within the European Union (EU) context. The EU, a *sui generis* political system that combines intergovernmental and supranational features, is in a privileged position to tackle such tensions. The EU is more integrated than a typical international organization but not a federal State.

The two cases that we analyse are:

- The **EU COVID-19 vaccine strategy**, which demonstrates how the European Commission and EU Member States engaged in extensive informal coordination during COVID-19 for the joint procurement of vaccines. This strengthened their bargaining power and allowed for quick distribution in all EU Member States.¹
- The **Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF)**, established as the central financial instrument of the EU's COVID-19 recovery response, demonstrates how the EU combined joint planning with national responsibility, using financial incentives and monitoring to support investments and reforms.²

The brief builds on published research and on the early findings of a three-year competitive research project funded by the Hellenic Foundation for Research and Innovation, entitled 'Together with caveats: Assessing the function of multilateralism in crises'. The project examines the conditions under which States succeed in addressing emerging crises via collective solutions developed within multilateral institutional settings. Responding to the objectives of the Global Governance Innovation Platform, hosted by United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, the focus of this brief is on how crisis responses are shaped through informal, flexible and coordinated actions between supranational and national actors operating alongside formal decision-making procedures and institutional channels. These informal and flexible coordination practices and tools are crucial in bridging differences between national preferences, thus enabling consensus-building and collective action in times of crisis.

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¹ Sarah Wolff and Stella Ladi, "The EU's vaccine strategy: a glimpse of protean power?", *Comparative European Politics*, vol. 23 (May 2025).

² Stella Ladi and Dimitris Tsarouhas, "EU economic governance and COVID 19: policy learning and windows of opportunity", *Journal of European Integration*, vol. 42, No. 8 (December 2020), pp. 1041–1056; Stella Ladi and others, "Negotiating the recovery and resilience facility: the emergence of coordinative conditionality", *Comparative European Politics*, vol. 23 (2025), pp. 18–39; Angelos Angelou, "Linking crises: inter-crisis learning and the European Commission's approach to the National Recovery and Resilience Plans", *Comparative European Politics*, vol. 23 (2025) pp. 40–56.

Section 1 ●●●●

European Union Crisis Governance: A Theoretical Lens

Decision-making in the EU is grounded in its treaties and shaped by a balance between supranational institutions and Member States. Competences are distributed across policy areas, with exclusive EU authority applying to areas such as customs union and competition policy, shared competences between the EU and Member States covering the majority of areas (for example, the common agricultural policy, cohesion policy and environmental policy), and primarily national competences remaining in areas such as health, education and social policy. Legislative decisions typically involve several institutions, in particular the European Commission, which proposes legislation, the Council of the European Union, which represents national governments, and the European Parliament, which represents EU citizens. Depending on the policy area and the level of EU competence, decisions may require qualified majority voting or unanimity, especially in sensitive areas such as security and defence policy. This institutional structure was designed to promote gradual integration and democratic accountability through negotiation and compromise rather than centralized executive authority. The fact, however, that EU governance relies on consensus-building between institutions and Member States can make decision-making more complex and time-consuming, especially during times of crisis.

Crises and emergencies require fast coordination and flexible responses, yet decision-making can be slowed

down by veto points and rigid institutional rules, leading to delays and fragmented action across Member States.³ In response to these constraints, EU institutions and Member States have often complemented formal decision-making procedures with informal and flexible coordination mechanisms, as well as institutional and policy innovation, to facilitate more effective responses. A growing body of literature shows that this shift is not exceptional but increasingly systematic: crises tend to push organizations to supplement formal procedures with more flexible and coordinative forms of governance.

In the EU, research on new modes of governance highlights the role of expert networks, working groups and *ad hoc* crisis task forces in speeding up coordination.⁴ Empirical studies of major crises (Eurozone crisis, migration crisis, Brexit and COVID-19) show how leaders' summits, *ad hoc* task forces and transgovernmental networks have often been central to breaking deadlock and enabling rapid joint responses.⁵ Related work also demonstrates how early-stage coordination, informal interaction, joint problem-solving, policy ownership and implementation orientation have facilitated rapid and effective decision-making in times of uncertainty.⁶ Overall, this literature suggests that informal, flexible and coordinative governance has become a recurrent feature of EU crisis management rather than a marginal or exceptional practice. These arrangements typically complement the EU's formal decision-making architecture

³ Arjen Boin and others, *The politics of crisis management: public leadership under pressure*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013); Diane Stone, *Policy paradox: the art of political decision making*, 3rd ed. (New York, W.W. Norton, 2013).

⁴ Adrienne Héritier, "New modes of governance in Europe: increasing political capacity and policy effectiveness?", in *The state of the European Union: Law, politics and society*, vol. 6, Tanja Börzel and Rachel Cichowski, eds. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003); Thomas Christiansen and others (eds) *Informal governance in the European Union*, (Cheltenham, Edward Elgar, 2003).

⁵ Stella Ladi and Dimitris Tsarouhas, "EU economic governance and COVID 19: policy learning and windows of opportunity".

⁶ Stella Ladi and Sarah Wolff, "The EU institutional architecture in the COVID-19 response: coordinative Europeanisation in times of permanent emergency", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 59, No. S1 (2021), pp. 32–43; Stella Ladi and Laura Polverari "Reconceptualising the EU–member states relationship in the age of permanent emergency", *Comparative European Politics*, vol. 23 (2025), pp. 1–17.

by helping overcome coordination challenges and facilitating more timely collective responses during crises. The recurring patterns identified across recent crises are

reflected in a set of common features observed in EU crisis responses, as summarized (and adapted in the table below) by Ladi and Polverari.⁷

Key Features in European Union Crisis Response

Early coordination: EU institutions and Member States coordinate from the outset.

Informal interaction: Informal meetings and flexible negotiations complement formal procedures.

Joint problem-solving: Policies are collectively designed and negotiated.

Coordinating role of the Commission: The Commission acts as facilitator and mediator.

Rapid decision-making: Governance arrangements speed up collective responses.

Policy ownership: Member States are actively involved in shaping measures.

Flexible governance: Responses adapt to evolving crisis conditions.

Implementation orientation: Early coordination supports effective national implementation.

These features, however, also entail challenges and trade-offs that are worth noting. For instance, while the EU COVID-19 vaccine strategy demonstrated the value of coordination and joint procurement, the EU's efforts to secure sufficient vaccine doses and to make them equitably available to its Member States had significant external implications as they may have contributed to global supply pressures and more uneven access to vaccines across countries.⁸ Fast coordination can leave some actors out of the discussions, as happened with local and regional authorities during the RRF negotiations.⁹ In a nutshell, these dynamics highlight the need to balance internal solidarity at all levels of governance with global

responsibility, as well as the challenges of centralized decision-making in rapidly evolving crisis contexts. Learning from these lessons can help policy actors design more inclusive and globally responsible crisis responses in the future.

Overall, this literature suggests that informal, flexible and coordinative governance has become a recurrent feature of EU crisis management rather than a marginal or exceptional practice.

⁷ Stella Ladi and Laura Polverari, "Reconceptualising the EU–member states relationship in the age of permanent emergency".

⁸ Stella Ladi and Sarah Wolff, "The EU institutional architecture in the COVID-19 response: coordinative Europeanisation in times of permanent emergency".

⁹ Stella Ladi and Laura Polverari, "Reconceptualising the EU–member states relationship in the age of permanent emergency".

Section 2 ●●●●

Crisis Governance in Practice: Insights From the European Union's COVID-19 Vaccine Strategy and the Recovery and Resilience Facility

The cases of the EU COVID-19 vaccine strategy and the RRF demonstrate how informal and flexible governance mechanisms and tools can facilitate coordination across institutions and Member States, facilitate policy implementation and sustain crisis response capacity. While rooted in the EU context, these cases offer broader insights into the role of informal, flexible and coordinative governance in crisis management, as well as inter-crisis learning, which refers to how lessons learned from one crisis can inform responses to future crises across international organizations.

European Union COVID-19 Vaccine Strategy: Flexible Governance Beyond Formal Competences

The EU COVID-19 vaccine strategy constitutes a particularly illustrative example of flexible crisis governance as the EU took decisive action in a policy area where its formal competences are, in principle, limited. In fact, public health remains primarily a national competence, with EU treaties assigning only a supporting role for the Union. However, confronted with the urgency and the severity of the issue, the European Commission assumed an unprecedented coordinating role in the joint procurement and distribution of vaccines, effectively expanding EU action beyond its traditional competences through highly flexible and informal governance arrangements.¹⁰

This strategy did not emerge in isolation. Following an initial joint procurement for personal protective equipment in March 2020, the EU launched its vaccine strategy in June 2020. This enabled the European Commission to negotiate, support and allocate vaccine doses on behalf of the Member States. Through joint procurement and Advance Purchase Agreements with pharmaceutical companies, the Commission secured vaccine development using the Emergency Support Instrument, while Member States retained responsibility for financing the doses and organizing their domestic distribution. More broadly, the EU response built on earlier experiences from past health crises, including coordination practices developed within the Health Security Committee following the 2001 anthrax attacks and the H1N1 outbreak. In this sense, the COVID-19 vaccine strategy can be understood as an instance of inter-crisis learning, building on existing mechanisms and past experiences.

Rather than being driven exclusively by formal legal authority, this strategy was developed through continuous coordination and informal negotiations between the Commission, Member States, regulatory authorities and pharmaceutical companies. Extensive consultations between national governments and Commission officials, that took place prior to the formal adoption of the joint procurement framework, helped secure political agreement, identify national constraints and shape a commonly acceptable strategy.¹¹ These interactions reflect a coordinative mode of governance in which Member States were heavily involved in the early stages

¹⁰ Stella Ladi and Sarah Wolff, "The EU institutional architecture in the COVID-19 response: coordinative Europeanisation in times of permanent emergency"; Sarah Wolff and Stella Ladi, "The EU's vaccine strategy: a glimpse of protean power?".

¹¹ Stella Ladi and Sarah Wolff, "The EU institutional architecture in the COVID-19 response: coordinative Europeanisation in times of permanent emergency".

of policy formulation together with Commission officials, with the goal to guarantee efficient implementation.

Built around joint procurement and coordinated distribution, the strategy strengthened the EU's collective bargaining power, ensured an equitable allocation of vaccines across Member States and prevented direct competition among them. Yet, it also revealed challenges such as the complexities inherent in centralized decision-making and broader implications for global vaccine access.

The novelty of the EU COVID-19 vaccine strategy also laid in the creation of new crisis-management mechanisms that operated alongside formal institutional procedures. *Ad hoc* steering groups, technical working groups and continuous exchanges between health officials enabled rapid information-sharing and collective problem-solving under conditions of high uncertainty. While information-sharing improved situational awareness, effective crisis management also depended on the ability of actors to build shared understandings and translate information into collective action. Informal coordination became essential, not only for accelerating decision-making but also compensating for the absence of a strong formal EU competence in the area of public health.¹² In this sense, informality was not simply complementary to formal governance; it was a necessary condition for collective EU action.

The experience of joint procurement also highlights its relevance beyond the immediate crisis. Within the EU, it has already informed subsequent initiatives, such as the European Defence Industrial Programme, indicating that crisis-driven mechanisms can be institutionalized and adapted to other policy domains. However, its broader transferability remains limited, as the strategy relied on the EU's specific features, most notably a highly integrated internal market and strong political and economic interdependence among Member States, conditions that are difficult to replicate in other international organizations.

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Recovery and Resilience Facility: Bridging Formal Accountability and Informal Governance Practices

The RRF illustrates a novel combination of formal and flexible governance in the EU's post-pandemic response. Established in 2020 to address the economic downturn caused by COVID-19, and in order to safeguard the functioning of the Single Market, the RRF mobilized €750 billion (€390 billion in grants and €360 billion in loans) to support Member States' recovery. What was very new was that the European Commission backed by Member States raised funds on capital markets to support the RRF.¹³

The RRF was embedded in a highly formalized legal and financial framework, with funding tied to priorities such as the green and digital transitions, and reforms identified through the European Semester, the EU's annual framework for coordinating economic and fiscal policies.¹⁴ However, the design and successful implementation of the RRF also relied on informal and iterative coordination between the European Commission and Member States. This involved frequent consultations, continuous exchanges between national and EU officials and ongoing feedback during the drafting and revision of National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs). In this sense, the RRF exemplifies how, even strongly structured EU instruments, operate through flexible governance practices, combining legal authority with continuous negotiation and adaptation. The innovation lies, therefore, not only in the instrument itself but also in the way it is governed.

More specifically, unlike earlier crisis responses grounded on top-down conditionality, the RRF was co-constructed by the Commission and Member States, hence leading to NRRPs that enjoyed stronger domestic ownership of reforms and investments.¹⁵ The design of NRRPs involved iterative drafting processes in a tight time framework, characterized by multiple rounds of informal exchanges between the Commission and national governments.¹⁶ These exchanges ensured that the plans were continuously refined to align both with EU and domestic priorities, while maintaining flexibility regarding how objectives would be achieved. Rather than relying primarily on traditional top-down conditionality,

¹² Sarah Wolff and Stella Ladi, "The EU's vaccine strategy: a glimpse of protean power?".

¹³ Stella Ladi and Dimitris Tsarouhas, "EU economic governance and COVID 19: policy learning and windows of opportunity".

¹⁴ Federico Fabbrini, "The recovery and resilience facility as a new legal technology of European governance", *Journal of European Integration*, vol. 47, No.1 (2025), pp. 85–103.

¹⁵ Stella Ladi and Dimitris Tsarouhas, "EU economic governance and COVID 19: policy learning and windows of opportunity".

¹⁶ Angelos Angelou, "Linking crises: inter-crisis learning and the European Commission's approach to the National Recovery and Resilience Plans"; Stella Ladi and others, "Negotiating the recovery and resilience facility: the emergence of coordinative conditionality".

the Commission exerted influence through ongoing guidance, needs assessments, technical expertise and iterative feedback during the drafting process. The Commission, therefore, provided guidance and technical support through the process but the Member States had the responsibility of designing their NRRPs.

Despite the fact that Member States were primarily responsible for implementing these plans, the flexible governance logic was also extended to that phase. Although milestones and targets were formally embedded in the RRF regulation and linked to disbursement conditions, their interpretation and operationalization relied on continuous dialogue and monitoring between Commission services and national authorities. As a result, implementation evolved through continuous interaction and problem-solving. This created a more adaptive mode of governance than in previous EU crises, combining formal accountability mechanisms with informal coordination practices.

The RRF's design and operation offers a potential blueprint for other international organizations, particularly international financial institutions, seeking to improve the effectiveness of funding-for-reforms programmes. Within the EU, its features are already informing subsequent policy debates about the Multiannual Financial Framework. However, the RRF remains rooted in the EU's unique institutional context, raising questions about how effective this model would be in other settings.

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A Path Forward

Taken together, these cases illustrate how informal coordination mechanisms can complement formal governance structures in managing complex crises. Practices such as early consultation, iterative negotiation, continuous information exchange and flexible coordination help institutions enhance institutional responsiveness, facilitate collective action and sustain operational capacity under conditions of uncertainty and pressure. While rooted in the EU context, these mechanisms point to broader lessons for international and intergovernmental organizations operating across multiple actors and levels of authority.

A key insight is that effective crisis governance depends not only on formal mandates and legal competences, but also on trusted coordination channels that enable rapid information-sharing, anticipation of political constraints and real-time adaptation of implementation strategies.

Informal practices can reduce bottlenecks in decision-making, support consensus-building and enable more pragmatic and innovative problem-solving when formal procedures do not exist or are too slow or rigid. Formal and informal encounters of policymakers from all levels of governance can have socialization effects, hence leading to the creation of policymaking communities that enjoy a high level of trust and credibility both among their members and with respect to other stakeholders.

Looking ahead, both the EU and other international organizations can benefit from systematically integrating flexible mechanisms alongside formal structures. At the same time, greater reliance on informal governance must be balanced with safeguards for transparency and accountability. The central challenge is therefore to preserve responsiveness and flexibility without undermining legitimacy and institutional trust.

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