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# **Towards more systemic crisis governance – lessons from the Covid-19 pandemic in Finland**

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Overall, Finland coped well with the Covid-19 pandemic, although challenges grew as the crisis continued. The country's strong institutions, its comprehensive security model, and cooperative structures established in advance primarily explain the successes of pandemic governance. Ensuring the operational capacity of institutions and safeguarding trust proved to be central elements of crisis preparedness, and they need to be maintained in future crises. Societal actors should also work to alleviate the negative effects of structural vulnerabilities, which are often exacerbated during crises. Improving preparedness for future crises requires a more systemic and comprehensive approach to governance, combined with mechanisms that enable flexible and adaptive action.

# The study examined successes, lessons learned, and key areas for improvement in pandemic governance

The project *Lessons from the Covid-19 Pandemic (PAKO)* examined Finland's governance of the Covid-19 pandemic at the system level, including associated successes, challenges, and key areas for improvement. Financed by the Finnish Government, the project was conducted in 2024–25 by the Universities of Turku, Helsinki, and Vaasa, VATT Institute for Economic Research, and Demos Helsinki.

The study focused on epidemiology and protective measures, the legal framework, crisis management and preparedness, economic development, trust and social sustainability, and evidence-informed policymaking. The multidisciplinary analysis draws on extensive literature reviews, complemented by workshops, interviews, surveys, and documentary data. The reviews were thematic and scoping, aiming to identify the relevant research literature on Covid-19 in Finland as comprehensively as possible across the main themes.

In the study, the pandemic was examined as a *systemic* phenomenon, a comprehensive societal whole in which sectors and actors interacted in numerous ways and were mutually dependent. Accordingly, the assessment did not focus on individual measures, but on how different sectors worked together and how governance functioned across sectoral boundaries. In addition to the systemic perspective, various types of decision-making uncertainties and adaptive forms of governance formed cross-cutting and intertwined foci of the analysis.

The project's results have been compiled in a Finnish-language final report (see Further reading), which complements earlier Finnish reviews of the Covid-19 crisis and connects to European debates on crisis governance. This publication summarises the key findings and policy recommendations from the final report. It provides public sector officials and policymakers with guidelines as they enhance Finland's preparedness for future crises and strengthen societal crisis resilience. International readers can draw parallels with their own contexts and hopefully derive valuable lessons from this perspective.

## Results and conclusions: Finland coped well with the pandemic – a prolonged crisis created challenges

For a comparative understanding, the study reviewed a number of key reports on Covid-19 crisis governance published in Finland and across Europe since 2020.

Much like the project's final report, European country-level comprehensive reviews of the Covid-19 pandemic examined crisis management, trust in institutions, inequalities, and epidemiological governance during and after the pandemic. In Sweden, Norway, France, and the United Kingdom, for example, governments commissioned reviews that placed particular emphasis on the overall performance of central government and public administration.

Overall, the reviews highlighted (a) shortcomings in pandemic preparedness; (b) challenges in crisis management and communication; (c) disproportionate negative impacts on vulnerable groups; (d) evidence of declining trust in institutions and in science; and (e) pressures on healthcare systems. These themes also emerged, in one form or another, in the final report, including both identified successes and areas for further development. Finland was by no means an outlier in Europe in terms of governing a health crisis such as Covid-19.

European reviews also suggested that many societal problems associated with the Covid-19 pandemic reflected pre-existing structural challenges. The pandemic's epidemiological and economic impacts exposed governance practices that can undermine both administrative effectiveness and equality among citizens. Accordingly, crisis resilience should be built primarily during times of normalcy through robust administrative and communication practices, including clarifying institutional responsibilities and mapping key communication audiences in advance.

The Finnish case appeared similar: while Finland's relatively successful crisis governance rested on strong institutions and pre-established cooperation structures, these arrangements require further development to become more learning-oriented and flexible so as to strengthen systemic preparedness for future crises.

Several national reviews of the Covid-19 crisis have also been published since 2020, particularly by the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare. While the earliest Finnish reviews emphasised acute disease control, later assessments increasingly focused on the pandemic's long-term societal impacts, structures of crisis management, and preparedness.

In summary, previous national studies highlighted four key lessons from the pandemic: (a) the clarity of crisis management and cross-sectoral coordination were insufficient; (b) preparedness, training, and anticipatory situational awareness are centrally important for effective crisis management; (c) the integration of expertise and research-based evidence into decision-making remained inadequate; (d) the legislative framework did not, in all respects, provide a sufficiently clear mandate for action.

In addition, the prior reviews portrayed Finland's governance of the Covid-19 pandemic as ambivalent: early acute responses were often effective, but as the crisis went on, substantial structural, institutional, and social vulnerabilities were also revealed. Strengthening resilience would thus require a shift from operational response towards strategically led, multi-sectoral preparedness with a focus on social justice.

The research conducted in this project did not fundamentally alter the overall picture but rather deepened it. The findings reinforce the view that Finland managed the Covid-19 pandemic relatively well. The legal framework functioned by and large as intended, public administration remained operational, and support measures truly facilitated societal adaptation. Finland also responded rapidly and extensively with policy measures that mitigated the adverse economic impacts on both businesses and individuals. Institutional trust, likewise, remained strong.

As the pandemic continued, additional challenges emerged. The crisis exposed siloed practices when it came to information management, as well as ambiguities in coordination across administrative sectors and levels, and in the distribution of authority between public agencies. Communication shortcomings were also evident, as it was not always clear whether restrictions were legally binding or merely recommendations. The evidence base for the airborne transmission of the virus evolved only gradually. Furthermore, as the situation persisted, the adverse impacts of the crisis fell disproportionately on already vulnerable groups, with vulnerabilities compounding over time.

Overall, pandemic governance appeared in the analysis as part of Finland's long-standing tradition of crisis preparedness, in which robust legislation, administrative capacity, and trust form a central foundation. Finland's relatively strong performance was explained in particular by strong institutions, a preparedness model based on comprehensive security, and pre-established structures for cooperation. High institutional trust supported crisis governance by enabling acceptance of restrictive measures, promoting vaccine uptake, and fostering responsible behaviour among citizens.

## Main findings by theme

The project comprised six sub-studies examining epidemiology; the legal framework; crisis management and preparedness; economic development; social sustainability and trust; and evidence-informed policymaking and the use of research knowledge in policymaking during crises.

The study on **epidemiology** found that research findings regarding transmission routes – particularly the significance of airborne transmission – became clearer only over time, which influenced the emphasis placed on different protective measures. In future pandemics, it is imperative to consider the airborne transmission infections present in the respiratory tract. The focus should shift toward long-term, multi-layered risk management, in which technical and organisational protective measures, as well as vaccines, reduce the need for widespread societal lockdowns and help target restrictions at high-risk areas. The Covid-19 pandemic also highlighted the long-term nature of infection risks and the long-term effects of such infections. A clear success was keeping infection rates low before widespread vaccine coverage. Effective collaboration among multiple parties in sample collection and processing was a clear strength that enabled a rapid increase in screening capacity. Wastewater monitoring and genome sequencing proved to be important early warning tools for the emergence of new variants.

**The legal assessment** found that gaps in legislation and a lack of flexibility hindered pandemic governance. However, the national emergency legislation proved effective. The division of responsibilities and competences between public bodies was at times unclear, and legislative drafting capacity was strained. Nevertheless, the legal system provided instruments for response measures, and the public administration remained operational. Restrictions on fundamental rights required continuous assessment of necessity and proportionality, but this assessment was not always consistent. In some situations, the boundary between government recommendations and binding legal norms became blurred. The Parliament's Constitutional Law Committee offered a functional forum for assessing the restrictions. The courts largely maintained normal operating procedures. Moreover, the supreme legal oversight authorities (Chancellor of Justice, Parliamentary Ombudsman) acted swiftly during the pandemic. Areas for further development include, inter alia, strengthening ex ante preparedness by enhancing the flexibility of the legislative framework; focusing legislative drafting on what is strictly necessary on the basis of a sufficiently robust situational assessment; and systematically scrutinising how fundamental rights are safeguarded across different restrictive measures.

The study on **crisis management and preparedness** found that Finland's preparedness system is institutionally strong but systemically vulnerable. The comprehensive security model – where the public sector, business, and civil society form a cooperation-based network – provided a functional basis for a coordinated crisis response. Networks and exercises developed in advance supported information exchange, particularly at the regional and local levels. The pandemic nevertheless exposed siloed information management, deficiencies in crisis communication structures, and ambiguities in coordination between administrative branches and levels. The security of the supply system functioned well in information sharing and supply chains, but shortcomings were revealed in material preparedness and procurement processes.

The assessment of **economic policy** found that changes to social security as well as business support measures helped households and firms weather the pandemic. In the early phase of the pandemic, these measures protected the foundation of the economy and mitigated the crisis's immediate adverse effects, such as rising unemployment and an increase in bankruptcies. However, both the targeting of the business support and the strategy for phasing it out proved problematic. Poorly targeted and prolonged schemes increased public debt and heightened future adjustment needs. The Covid-19 crisis showed that adequate public-finance buffers are essential to weather exceptional shocks, and a clear, anticipatory strategy is needed for withdrawing extraordinary measures after the crisis.

The study on **social sustainability and institutional trust** found that trust in society's main institutions remained relatively high overall during the Covid-19 pandemic, positively contributing to the successes in governance. In particular, trust in health authorities remained high. At the same time, the Covid-19 crisis further deepened structural inequalities in society. Identifying the compounding of vulnerabilities and ensuring adequate resources for the institutions addressing them are prerequisites for social sustainability and trust in (any future) crisis conditions. Crises also require recognition of the complementary role that non-governmental organisations and other third-sector actors can play in supporting those in vulnerable positions and overall efforts to cope with the crisis.

According to the assessment of **evidence-informed policymaking**, the traditional ideal of policymaking based on the best available information was strongly present in Finnish crisis governance. Substantial efforts were made to ensure access and to expand the scope of available evidence and knowledge both within public administration and more broadly across society. However, the implementation of evidence-informed policymaking was not consistent throughout the Covid-19 crisis; rather, the approach evolved through identifiable phases and shifts. In a crisis, policymaking takes place under uncertainty, time pressure, and competing values.

Uncertainty cannot be entirely eliminated in such circumstances, but resilience towards uncertainty can be strengthened both in policymaking and, more broadly, in society. Research evidence plays a central role in reducing uncertainty, but interpreting the available scientific evidence and reconciling it with different sources of knowledge requires well-functioning interfaces between knowledge producers and policymakers.

## Summary of recommendations and proposed measures: future crises require more systemic and learning-oriented governance

The project's final report presents 18 general recommendations, together with concrete proposed measures, to improve Finland's crisis preparedness. The recommendations are clustered – according to the research design – under the cross-cutting themes of systemic thinking, uncertainty, and flexibility. Below, however, the recommendations are summarised and reorganised thematically following the main research focuses of health, the legal framework, management, the economy, and social sustainability.

The recommendations are indicative. Their purpose is not to challenge the successes of Finland's pandemic governance, but to create conditions for improved performance in future health-related and other crises. Sufficient resources should be allocated to actors responsible for crisis preparedness to enable further development and implementation of these proposals.

Overall, the recommendations emphasise building preparedness before crises occur. Strengthening resilience to future crises requires more comprehensive systemic thinking, enhanced administrative capacity for flexible and adaptive governance under uncertainty, improved coordination, and adequate resourcing of institutions.

### Health

- Shift the focus towards long-term management of infectious disease risks, thereby reducing the burden caused by epidemics and pandemics. Adopt a comprehensive approach to health security that encompasses infection-resilient buildings, technical solutions, and a systematic consideration of various transmission routes. At the same time, preparedness must include the

capacity to implement additional measures in a severe pandemic when necessary.

- Strengthen cooperation across health-sector actors and provide sufficient resources to keep the evidence base up to date. Effective information exchange requires channels established before a crisis emerges, well-designed mechanisms for gathering new information under changing conditions, and systematic use of multidisciplinary expertise.
- Take the long-term health impacts of pandemics into account more systematically. In future pandemics, assess long-term effects and their health and economic consequences from the outset.
- Establish a designated national responsibility to develop the monitoring, treatment, and research of the long-term effects of viral infections in Finland. In addition, create a permanent cross-sector expert network bringing together the key authorities and other actors involved in response measures (the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, the Finnish Supervisory Agency, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, the Finnish Safety and Chemicals Agency, universities, and Finland's wellbeing services counties). The network's role should be to build a broad, long-term evidence base and improve the use of knowledge in both policy and practice.

#### **Legal Framework**

- Where possible, embed graduated crisis and emergency procedures in ordinary legislation so that the competent authorities can make narrowly tailored exemptions from the applicable regulatory requirements during a crisis.
- Ensure that legislative drafting during crises is based on early and sufficiently comprehensive situational awareness.
- In a crisis, state explicitly when official guidance is non-binding.
- Assess the overall coherence of restrictive measures.
- Focus on transparency in the criteria used to assess necessity and proportionality.
- When restrictions are introduced, legislative drafting should explicitly provide reasons for the regulatory technique used (for example, whether the measure is based on a government decree or an administrative decision) in order to avoid unnecessary differences in individuals' legal protection and in their ability to judicially challenge the restrictions.

### **Management and evidence-informed policymaking**

- Complement institution-based crisis management with a systemic model that supports adaptation to changing circumstances. Unlike the traditional institution-based approach, systemic crisis management relies not only on predetermined rules and responsibilities but also on continuous interaction and learning.
- Advance evidence-informed crisis governance as a systemic model that promotes shared situational understanding, open information exchange, and rapid responsiveness to change.
- Develop evidence-informed policymaking so that different dimensions of uncertainty are identified, and the resulting lock-ins in crisis governance can be addressed. A key aim is to strengthen resilience in the face of uncertainty, for example, by communicating more openly about the uncertainties surrounding the evidence used in policymaking.
- Treat scientific expertise as a factor that strengthens trust in public administration, not merely as an instrument of governance in central government preparedness planning.
- Move towards a model in which decisions are adopted in stages and for limited periods, with any extension, modification, or removal linked to pre-agreed review points.

### **Economy**

- Devise a public finance adjustment plan as soon as the acute phase of the crisis has eased. The plan should include anticipated expenditure cuts and/or revenue increases to counteract the imbalance in public finances caused by the crisis.
- Highlight the temporary nature of support measures and establish a clear strategy for phasing them out.
- Invest in statistical capacity and information systems so that up-to-date data are available for policymaking. For example, authorities should have access to more timely and accurate information on fixed costs, wage costs, and business turnover.

**Social sustainability and trust**

- Build crisis resilience systematically in partnership with communities and organisations.
- Address structural problems affecting social sustainability – especially structural and compounding inequality – before an acute crisis, and identify specific vulnerabilities as part of preparedness planning.
- Allocate dedicated resources during crises to actors working with people in vulnerable situations.
- Integrate a social policy perspective into the systemic approach of the administration so that social sustainability is already built into crisis preparedness structures and resource allocation.

## Further reading:

Vogt, H., Oksanen, L., Pettersson, J., Sironen, T., Aivelo, T., Zöldi, V., Jalonen, H., Uusikylä, P., Niskanen, V., Rantamäki, A., Heino, M., Ahonen, P., Pohjankoski, P., Brunila, T., Hakola-Uusitalo, T., Tuomala, J., Immonen, W., Värttö, M., Vastapuu, L., Hekkala, M., Mäkelä, E., Helske, S., Hakoniemi, E., Jalonen, K., Hokkanen, L., Rainio-Niemi, J., Taskinen, M., Salminen, J., Rajavuori, M. (2026) Koronapandemian hallinta ja saadut opit Suomessa. Koronapandemian opetukset -tutkimushankkeen loppuraportti. Valtioneuvoston selvitys- ja tutkimustoiminnan julkaisusarja 2026:2. <https://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-287-974-5>

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