**Designing Shadows: Decision-Making Symbols and Myths in Public Policy**

**Neta Sher Hadar**

**Abstract**

In his seminal book *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (1964), Murray Edelman argues that politic has a symbolic dimension that results from the ways in which politics are conducted and maintained. Drawing on this idea, this paper discusses the symbolic dimension of decision-making and the myths surrounding the decision-making process that this dimension has given rise to. The main argument is threefold. First, the symbolic dimension of decision-making consists of a triangle of elements: the perception of decision-making, the action of deciding, and the knowledge about the decision-making process. Second, all three of these are incongruent with each other. Third, these three symbolic elements combine to create myths about decision-making processes. Defining preliminary myths of this kind—which may change in different contexts—is the goal of this study. These myths have a profound impact on how governments are perceived, and thus play an important role in the growing public distrust in governments’ capacity to decide. Consequently, better understanding of these myths and how they operate can make a significant contribution to promoting sound civic values.

Key words:

**Designing Shadows: Decision-making Symbols and Myths in Public Policy**

**Neta Sher Hadar**

*Between the idea*

*And the reality  
Between the motion  
And the act  
Falls the Shadow*

*(T.S. Elliot, the Hollow Men)[[1]](#footnote-2)*

Decision-making is a complex subject. While still very much an area of scholarly interest, the peak of interest in decision-making studies was over fifty years ago (XXX). While decision-making appears to be a coherent subject, relating to concrete issues, it also has no defined boundaries. As a result, it includes, or at the very least, touches upon many issues in the field of policy and administration (as well as many other disciplines, such as sociology or psychology). And although few scholars speak of or study decision-makingas a discrete field of inquiry*,* governments are constantly judged by the quality of their “decision-making” (XXX). Indeed, decision-making can be considered a symbol of government activity.

In his seminal book *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (1964), Murray Edelman argues that there is a symbolic dimension of politics that results from the ways in which politics are conducted and maintained. Drawing on this idea, this paper discusses the symbolic dimension of government decision-making, and the myths surrounding the decision-making process that this dimension has given rise to. The main argument presented here is threefold. First, decision-making, as a symbol of government activity, is a product of a triangle of elements—the perception of decision-making, the act of deciding, and the knowledge about the decision-making process. Second, all three of these elements are incongruent with each other. Third, these three symbolic elements combine to create myths about decision-making processes. Defining preliminary myths of this kind—which may change in different contexts—is the goal of this paper. It is important to define these myths, because they have a profound impact on how governments are perceived, and thus play an essential role in the growing public distrust in the capacity of governments to make decisions. Consequently, a better understanding of these myths and how they operate can make a significant contribution to promoting sound civic values.

These arguments will be examined through an interpretive content analysis of reports published between 2020–2023 by Israel’s State Comptroller (tasked with inspecting, reviewing and auditing government policies and operations) on the Israeli government’s handling of the coronavirus pandemic. During this period, the State Comptroller published 26 reports (mostly interim reports, and two special final reports) on the Israeli government’s pandemic response, and one report released during the first days of the pandemic in Israel on the dangers of disease outbreaks.

This paper identifies and analyses a series of ten myths about decision-making that are articulated in these reports, which reveal how the Israeli government is perceived by the Israeli public. According to these myths, the government is being capable of becoming, but ultimately fails to be, a “superhero” in times of crisis, and, as such, play an important role in the growing public distrust in the government. The article begins with a short description of scholarship on decision-making. It then turns to the Israel State Comptroller’s reports and discusses the key issues raised in these regarding the Israeli government’s decision-making processes during the coronavirus pandemic. Specifically, the paper examines how the State Comptroller defined what the government did wrong in terms of its pandemic response, and what he believed needed to be done to address these shortcomings. The discussion aggregates these findings and categorizes them into ten myths that emerge from three main narratives: what the government did, what it ought to have done, and what is known from the literature on it. This theoretical article offers scholars from different contexts a novel prism for examining whether there is a common base for normative, empirical, and scholarly discussions on decision-making.

**Theoretical Background: Decision-Making**

In its basic form, a “decision” is “the choice between alternatives” (Amalia et al., 2020; Dery, 1996; Eilon, 1969; Howlett & Ramesh, 2003). Having to choose between alternatives and doing so in an optimal manner have been paramount concerns since the earliest days of human society. These questions are central to many fields of study, including in sociology, the arts, humanities, and nature (e.g., Frederickson et al. 2018; XXX). The immense scope of this topic makes it impossible to provide a complete overview of the literature on decision-making here. However, it can be argued that four fundamental trends and topics have emerged over time that have received the most attention within the field of public policy and public administration: the decision-making process itself, the decision-maker, the context within which decisions are made, and the nature of the task for which a decision needs to be made. These areas, the pillars of the subject of decision-making, are described briefly below.

**The decision-making process**

The need to choose between alternatives has led many to formulate a diverse array of decision-making models (XXX), the most prominent among them being the rational decision-making model (XXX) and the incremental model (XX). Adopted from political science and economics, the rational decision-making model focuses on devising the best process to make the best decision. According to this approach, it is optimal to first clarify the relevant values and desirable outcomes, and then to specify the possible means for achieving these outcomes. Subsequently, a comprehensive analysis of the identified alternatives leads to the best possible decision being made (Battaglio, 2019; Dery, 1996; Dror, 1963; Lindblom, 1959; March, 1994; Simon, 1960). Although this model has been extensively studied and revised over time (XXX), many scholars have taken the original model as their point of reference, although the model itself.

Meanwhile, the incremental model, introduced by Lindblom (1959), seeks to describe how decisions are actually made. According to this model, decisions are being made all the time, and, as such, do not reflect a long and comprehensive process, but rather a situation wherein the means are considered together with the goals. Thus, decisions produce minor changes, and achieving consent is crucial. Beyond serving as an empirical model that describes how decisions are made, the empirical approach has become the normative decision-making model has been widely applied in both heterogeneous and controversial contexts (Dery,1997; ….Lindblom, 1959).

The discussion about the characteristics and consequences of the rational and the incremental models are the foundations of the decision-making field (e.g., see Dror, 1964; Lindblom, 1959), and has led to the understanding that both have a normative value to decision-making—one is best for choosing “the best alternative” and the other for choosing “the most agreed upon decision,” especially in a divided or heterogeneous society (Dery, 1997; XXX). Many additional models have since been articulated (e.g., ), some trying to combine the two (Etzioni, 1967) and others offering a completely different approach to decisions, such as the “garbage can” model positing that decision-making results following the convergence of problems, solutions, participants and choice opportunities (March and Cohen 1986; XXX).

In a network society, the best process for making decisions is putting the relationships between various decision-makers and their impact on the policy at hand at the center of the agenda, (Peters 2015; Pollitt 2009; Shepherd and Rudd 2014; Yates and Oliveira 2016; tufing…. );

**The decision-maker**

In his influential book *Administrative Behavior*, Herbert Simon (1957) defined the limits of rationality that have an impact on making “correct decisions.” Among these are thewell-known triangle of bounded human rationality: limited skills, habits, and reflexes; limited values and conceptions; and limited knowledge. Simon’s work laid the foundations for applying behavioral approaches in public administration and prompted attention to decision-making in many other fields of research, in particular regarding the cognitive and non-cognitive factors that influence decision-making including in psychology, public policy and administration, biology, management, economics, and neuroscience (Battaglio, 2019; Crisofaro, 2017; Etzioni, 2014; Gofen et al., 2021; Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2017; Hong et al., 2020; John, Smith, & Stoker, 2009; Kahneman, 2011; 1994; Selten. 1990). Within this context, considerable attention has been devoted to the limitations of the ability of individuals to be rational and/or cope with complexity. One of the central developments in this area is the emergence and development of behavioral economics (Arieli…; John et al., 2009; Thaler & Sunstein, 2009), connecting theory and practice. While this has become a well-established field of research, many have raised questions about it, especially with regard to its implications (XXX).

**The context of decisions**

One of the factors affecting decision-making is the context in which decisions are made. Some of these factors represent a natural continuum of the emotional and cognitive factors of decision-making in groups(Janis & Mann, 1977) or in organizations (XXX). Research into these contexts has provided interesting insights into the impact of relationships and roles on decision-making processes in many areas, including interpersonal relations (XXX), leadership in decision-making (XXX), and organizational structures (XXX). Prominent ideas that have emerged from this work includes the concept of “groupthink” (Janis, 1991) as well as Game Theory, based mathematical theories (XXX). In addition, Ostrom’s critical observation on the “tragedy of the commons” offered a critical perspective on the critical impact that an accumulation of decisions can have on fundamental social issues, leading to a new field of research connecting social context to the decision-making process from a critical point of view. From a different critical perspective, scholarship on the influence of power relations on the decision-making process also evolved, particularly Fischer and Forester’s development of the “argumentative turn” emphasizing the increased relevance of argumentation, language, and deliberating in policy making (1993). Together, these developments had important implications on deliberative forms of decision-making (XXX).

Currently, two important current trends are strongly influencing the decision-making field. The first involves how the governance era affects the relationship between different stakeholders within the decision-making process (Peters, 2015; Pollitt, 2009; Shepherd & Rudd, 2014; Yates & Oliveira, 2016). This approach has raised different government tools, such as collaborative governance or cross-sectoral partnerships (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Sher-Hadar et al., 2020). The second trend addresses the immense impact of the digital age on decision-making and policy, in particular big data (XXX) and artificial intelligence(XXX).

**The task**

During the first half of the twentieth century, the subject of decision-making was at its height, due to two important trends—the development of the independent field of public administration, and the subject’s strong connection to the concept of rationality (XXX). In 1945, Simon framed decision-making as the essence of administrative work, arguing that studying administration means studying decision-making, and that a decision is a combination of value premises and factual premises (Dery, 1997; Simon, 1947…,). Based on this line of study, Thompson and Tuden (1957) identified four administrative tasks that call for different types of decisions: administrative, political, experimental, and leadership (Dery, 2023). Their insights and those of Lasswell’s policy cycle (1956) were followed by a shift from public administration to public policy, and decision-making became part of policy work. More advanced policy theories, such as policy streams (Sabatier… ), the advocacy coalition framework, or punctuated equilibrium (XXX), all involve decisions that these processes create, and thus relate to decision-making as one issue that arises in the study of complex systems.

All these developments reflect the enduring importance and centrality of the subject of decision-making in the field of public policy. Indeed, decision-making has become a symbol, albeit perhaps indirect, of public policy-making. This study seeks to examine the meaning of this symbol and gain an understanding of its impact on decision-making, particularly on the perceptions of public policy decision-makers.

**Methodology**

This study is based on an interpretive narrative analysis conducted on audit reports published between 2020 and 2023 by Israel’s State Comptroller’s Office on how the Israeli government responded to the coronavirus pandemic. Since 2020, the State Comptroller has published two special reports (which comprise compilations of several reports that were previously published in their interim and final versions) and three reports covering issues related to the pandemic response that are contained within larger annual reports (a total of 26 interim and annual reports). All the reports covered a variety of topics, with the exception of one that was specifically devoted to the government’s decision-making process during the pandemic. The reports reflect a combination of several narratives presented by the State Comptroller, from which many insights can be gained about public administration, public policy, the audit process itself, and the public. This study focuses on two main areas raised in the reports: the areas of the government’s pandemic response that the State Comptroller found to be deficient, and his recommendations for what the government needs to do to address these areas

The methodology chosen for this study assumes that a comparative interpretive reading of these reports can reveal meta-narratives about how the State Comptroller understands “decision-making” as a symbol. To that end, the study does not seek to describe the narrative sequence of the events described in the reports, or to learn about the State Comptroller’s findings on the Israeli government’s handling of the coronavirus pandemic, but to interpret the reports as texts that tell a certain story about decision-making.

Since the State Comptroller’s audit criteria are grounded in context and reflect an interpretation of public norms, it can be assumed that these metanarratives will also reflect the context and culture of the Israeli public (for… see: Baker & Bettner, 1997; Dodge, Ospina, & Foldy, 2005; Evans et al., 2015; Singleton-Green, 2016). It can also be assumed that these meta-narratives can show how “decision-making” as a symbol is generally perceived by the public. Hence, this study views the State Comptroller’s reports as a window into how Israeli society applies meaning that is tied to the context and culture of government decision-making (Baker & Bettner, 1997; Evans et al., 2015; Dodge, Ospina, & Foldy, 2005; Singleton-Green, 2016). The reports reflect what the State Comptroller and his office believe should be done to establish a better administration.

The study focused on summaries of each report, since these directly address the two questions at the heart of this paper: what the Israeli government did wrong during the coronavirus pandemic, and what it needs to do to address these failings, according to the State Comptroller. The 26 summaries examined were broken down into individual sentences and then organized into categories according to their relevance to decision-making. Grouping the sentences into categories created new narratives, in which the topic of the actual audit was irrelevant, thereby enabling an analysis of what decision-making is and of what it ought to be through these new narratives. These categories were then grouped into a metanarrative, in line with Roe (1998), to allow for an examination of their implications by categorizing them into “myths” on decision-making.

**Findings**: **The Coronavirus Story According to Israel’s State Comptroller**

The State Comptroller’s reports into the Israeli government’s handling of the coronavirus pandemic involve a number of narratives. As detailed above, this analysis will focus on two main questions addressed by the reports: what the State Comptroller believes went wrong in terms of the government’s response to the pandemic, and what he believes the government needs to do to address these failures.

**Direct “Decision-making”**

The word “decision” (*hachlata* in Hebrew) is mentioned a total of 52 times across all of the reports that are part of this study. These mentions can be grouped into four general areas:

1. References to previous decisions that have no bearing to this study. These were part of the historical narrative of the issue under audit (e.g., see State Comptroller’s Report, 2021n; 2020a; 2021b; 2023b; 2021).

2. The importance of data for the quality of decision-making (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020b; 2020g; 2021k; 2021d; 2021j; 2023b; 2021n; 2020a; 2021l; 2023b).

3. The type of decision-making process that should be used as a model for how good decisions are made. These narratives were all connected to the rational decision-making model and included reference to evidence-based decision-making, the learning process, how data was gathered, and how the decision in question was made (e.g., see State Comptroller’s Report, 2021d; 2021j; 2023a; 2021n; 2020e; 202a). In this context, the State Comptroller also referred to the link between the division of labor and better decision-making, to “foot-dragging” over decisions regarding the organizational structure needed in the pandemic, or the involvement of different actors at key decision-making points (e.g., see State Comptroller’s Report, 2021b; 2021n; 2020a).

In addition to helping to improve the decision-making process in general, the State Comptroller emphasized that his observations and recommendations would help the government better prepare for future emergency scenarios, and would improve the lesson-learning process (e.g., see State Comptroller’s Report, 2020b; 2020g; 2021k; 2021d; 2021d; 2021j; 2021l; 2–21n; 2020e). As the State Comptroller noted in one report:

[As] of August 2021, a fourth wave of morbidity began to hit Israel, and therefore it is important that the prime minister, government ministers, and professional bodies […] act to correct the deficiencies detailed in this report and examine the adoption of the recommendations. This is to improve decision-making processes when dealing with the continuation of the coronavirus crisis, to improve coping, at a national level, with a future crisis of similar magnitude, and to improve preparation for [such a crisis] (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021n).

This statement frames the connection between the State Comptroller’s reports and the decision-making processes, whether that connection is made directly or indirectly. The following focuses on the indirect connection to decision-making.

**Decision-making as a symbol: What went wrong?**

The two volumes of special State Comptroller’s reports into the government’s handling of the coronavirus crisis (23 of the 26 reports studied) open with a historical narrative of the pandemic. These both mostly present facts about the virus, its economic consequences, and a list of selected decisions taken by the Israeli government to address the crisis. Given this background, it is difficult to determine whether the government did anything wrong. The pandemic surprised Israel in the same way it did every other country, and Israel suffered as a result of it in the same way as the rest of the world. The Comptroller’s two historical narratives of the pandemic do not reveal any policy mishaps in either the process or their outcomes (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020 introduction; 2021a). The remainder of the reports detail the State Comptroller’s views on what the government did wrong, and what it should do to address these failings. These are presented below in categories relating to decision-making.

**The decision-making process**

In the State Comptroller’s audits of various aspects of the government’s pandemic response, and in his descriptions of what the government did wrong, he highlights different areas of the government’s rational decision-making processes. At various points in the reports, and in different contexts, the State Comptroller includes different items of information. Overall, these show that the State Comptroller used the rational decision-making model to explore what the government did wrong. As noted above, this model calls for setting goals, creating alternatives, examining them, and then deciding on the best decision:

1. **Setting goals**: The State Comptroller noted that certain government decisions did not take into consideration various public values. This was expressed in a number of areas of the government’s pandemic response, including in its failure to articulate or prioritize specific goals, especially from an overall systemic perspective (e.g., see State Comptroller’s Report, 2021d; 2023a; 2021k). Moreover, the State Comptroller occasionally referred to instances where the government failed to treat different populations fairly (such as the lack of equal accessibility of certain publics to online medical information due to infrastructure and/or literacy problems (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021i; 2021n).
2. **Creating alternatives by thorough learning:** Most of thereports addressed the need to create alternatives. Several issues were raised in this context:
   1. Insufficient data. This was the most prominent issue raised by the State Comptroller. Several times, the State Comptroller claimed that the learning process prior to making a decision had been incomplete, and the proper work did not always take place, which resulted in a lack of sufficient data for decision-making (see for example State Comptroller’s Report, 2023a; 2021m, 2021n). In one instance, the State Comptroller noted that the “lack of available and ongoing data may lead to an insufficiently substantiated analysis … and lead to decisions that are not optimal” (State Comptroller’s Report, 202b, p.4).
   2. Insufficient attention paid to data. The State Comptroller observed that attention was not always paid to every item of information, which resulted in an incomplete picture of the situation (e.g., see State Comptroller’s Report, 2023a).
   3. Poor learning processes. The State Comptroller found that learning processes were not diverse enough in terms of methodology, e.g., in some cases there was a lack of diverse voices or insufficient attention was paid to changes that had occurred, which had not been regularly monitored (e.g., State Comptroller’s Report, 2023a; 2021n; 2021d).
3. Exploring alternatives. The State Comptroller noted that, at times, there was a lack of clear criteria for choosing between alternative options, or of including required criteria such as risk management processes (e.g., State Comptroller’s Report, 2021d; 2023a; 2021k).
4. Choosing the best decisions. The State Comptroller referred several times to instances where the best option was not chosen. In such cases, the State Comptroller showed how the choice that had been made failed to produce the desired results, and at times even produced the opposite (e.g., State Comptroller’s Report, 2020g; 2023a; 2021b; 2021n; 2020e; 2021g). This was extremely important when the State Comptroller presented data on “excess mortality” (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021i).

***Gathering data for improved decisions***

Many of the reports referred to the importance of data and data quality in improving decision-making. In the State Comptroller’s recommendations on the correct way to study and gather data, he referred to the data-collection process itself, the barriers to this process, and why it was important.

***What does the data-gathering process include?***

First, data needs to be gathered. Then, a proper documentation process is required (State Comptroller’s Report, 2023a; 2020g; 2021d), as is collation of complete, reliable data (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021g; 2021h; 2021k; 2023b; 2021m;). There should be a regular process of connecting and sharing of databases and knowledge from various types and fields using comparative techniques (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020g; 2021m; 2021h; 2021d; 2023a; 2023b). Second, data needs to be analyzed rigorously and systematically, and cross-checked (e.g. see State Comptroller’s Report, 2020g; 2021f) including through mapping the field (e.g. see State Comptroller’s Report 2023a; 2021h; 2021k; 2020j), classifying data into categories (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021e), and using different methodologies e.g., quantitative, qualitative, comparative (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020g; 2023a). Finally, a sound method needs to be established for applying the lessons learned e.g., sharing lessons efficiently, not delaying knowledge transfer (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021m), and establishing a “red team” to challenge assumptions (State Comptroller's Report, 2021n).

***What are the impediments to this kind of decision-making process?***

According to the State Comptroller, the success of a decision-making process is contingent on removing a number of organizational or functional impediments. On an organizational level, the State Comptroller elaborated on the lack of appropriate authorities (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021n), and of teams or officials responsible for making decisions (State Comptroller’s Report, 2023a; 2021h). On the functional level, the State Comptroller identified the procedures that were lacking, such as a single body to concentrate all information about a target population (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021h), a regulated mechanism for collecting data (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021h), an automated interface for knowledge transfer (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021j), and a procedure to learn about and identify unanticipated developments (such as mutations in the coronavirus) (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021j). This absence of adequate procedures made certain tasks impossible, such as obtaining information (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021k), consulting with the field on the policy (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021k), creating data transparency (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021l), organizing cooperation between various ministries (State Comptroller’s Report, 2023b), or creating an organized system for the decision-making process (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021n; 2021m). Without these, it was difficult to generate discussion on challenging issues (State Comptroller’s Report, 2023a; 2021m).

The State Comptroller presented a number of explanations for this state of affairs, including staff shortages (State Comptroller’s Report, 202g), disagreements between ministries (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021h), a lack of procedures for sharing knowledge (State Comptroller’s Report 2021h), lack of training (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021k), lack of cooperation (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021l), inefficiency of the app (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020e), different knowledge formats that could not be combined (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021m), contextual goals (such as protecting the privacy of students and teaching staff at the expense of spreading the virus (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020g?), and consistency with the context or budget (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021n; 2023a).

***What were the outcomes of this process?***

The lack of data contributed to inadequate decision-making processes, as the State Comptroller described in detail.

1. First, the State Comptroller identified the advantages of obtaining sufficient data, listing the following as aspects that needed improvement: appropriate information (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021i); knowledge about the target population (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021h; 202j); the ability to improve data quality (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021g); addressing knowledge gaps between different sources of information (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021h); building a knowledge infrastructure (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021h);mapping the needs for designing policy (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021j; 2021k); and addressing and countering fake news and contradictory or unreliable information and misinformation (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021b; 2021h).

2. Second, the Comptroller identifed the following ways to improve work processes: making the knowledge production process more efficient (State Comptroller’s Report, 202d); changing the government’s inconsistent policy (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021j); removing barriers to policy implementation (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021k); understanding the limits of capacity (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020g); and accelerating the decision-making process (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021n).

3. Improving the decision-making process: setting standards and milestones for a correct decision process (State Comptroller’s Report, 2023a); creating evidence-based or knowledge-based decisions (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021e; 2023b); cost estimation (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021d); criteria for policy (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021e); defining and treating the target population (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021h); locating needs and prioritizing them (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021h); drawing conclusions (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021k); comparing local to global events (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021k; 2021i; 2021n; 2021g); presenting a full and reliable picture for decision-making (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021d); developing a strategic plan (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021g); formulating protocols for other situations; and having a more coordinated approach (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021m).

4. Proving policy quality by supporting the criteria chosen (State Comptroller’s Report, 2023b); checking reliability and functionality (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020d; 2021g; 2021j); adopting out-reach abilities (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021i); writing guidelines (State Comptroller’s Report, 2023b); and recognizing the changing conditions adapt (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021d).

5. Improving performance by enabling actions such as: supervision and inspection (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021g; 2021h); checking and informing citizens (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021g; 2021h); preparing for future emergencies (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021h); improving services to target populations (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021h; 2021k); improving the ability to manage the policy (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021h); meeting policy goals (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021j; 2020g); connecting policy to the needs of the target population (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021k); increasing policy effectiveness (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021k; 2020g; 2023b; 2021m); meeting policy goals (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020g); identifying mutations of the virus (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021j); and reducing social inequalities (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021k).

**Learning from experience**

The reports suggest that the government’s failure to properly detect problems hampered its ability to learn from its mistakes. This could be attributed to several factors, the major one being a lack of proper infrastructure that would enable the government to do so. Without such an infrastructure, it was difficult to understand the advantages, disadvantages, and barriers involved in decision-making during the pandemic (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021d) and had implications on what lessons the government should draw from the situation (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021n).

The State Comptroller noted that missing from the processes were documentation (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021m), knowledge about whether services were satisfactory or effective (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021k; 2023b), and a proper understanding of what needed to be done due to contradicting guidelines (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021m). These issues were not always unique to the coronavirus pandemic. The State Comptroller suggested that had the underlying issues been addressed prior to the pandemic, the government’s pandemic response could have been improved(State Comptroller’s Report, 2023b).

In a report that addressed the dangers of potential epidemic diseases that was issued at the beginning of 2020, before the coronavirus had reached Israel (ADD REF), the State Comptroller stated that Israel’s health system, and all those involved in it, needed to be prepared for a pandemic influenza outbreak that could affect a large percentage of the population. In particular, the Ministry of Health needed to prepare for such a scenario by stockpiling drugs, vaccines, and developing hospitalization solutions (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020a; 2020i).

***The type of decision and organizational task***

The State Comptroller’s reports referred on numerous occasions to the organizational task that government decision-makers faced, and what the government must do to improve decision-making. The State Comptroller pointed to a lack of prior planning (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021d) or prior guidelines (such as a disease list) (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020a). In addition, the State Comptroller stated that issues had arisen due to a lack of guidelines for professional conduct (State Comptroller’s Report, 202a), for innovation (State Comptroller’s Report 2023a), for service criteria, and for the distribution of guidelines (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021m; 2020d; 2021m; 2023b; 2021i; 2021k; 2021n; 2021m). Finally, the State Comptroller noted that even when guidelines existed, they were difficult to follow (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021m, 2021c).

***The actors***

To improve decision-making and implementation, the reports determined that there had been insufficient collaboration and that there was a need to institutionalize a collaborative process (State Comptroller’s Report 2020a; 202f), and for a clear division of labor between the various actors involved in the decision-making process (State Comptroller’s Report 2021n).

The State Comptroller described how, in his audit process, he had canvassed public opinion regarding how various government bodies had functioned during the pandemic, including local authorities (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021m), the health services (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021j), and about the information the public had received (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021b; 2021g) and the way workers felt about the restrictions (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021c). The State Comptroller specified that he had used several methods, including surveys, public participation, and content analysis of Facebook (see: State Comptroller’s Report, 2021b; 2021c; 2021g; 2021j; 2021m).

***The gap between intention and implementation***

The State Comptroller noted that there had been many instances of “implementation gaps,” i.e., discrepancies between what a decision had intended and how it worked in practice. These were a result of several factors, including poor services, service delays, a lack of time or capacity, inefficiency, or poor management (State Comptroller’s Report 2020g; 2021f; 2023b; 2020f; 2021m; 2020h; 2021n). During a pandemic, this phenomenon could be dangerous and result in increased excess deaths (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020h; 2020e; 2020i). The implementation gaps were also connected to the lack of coordination between ministries, which resulted in confusing services and time, discrepancies between what the ministry decided (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021j) and how it acted, and to the lack of an administrative protocol, all eventually leading to policy failure (State Comptroller’s Report, 2023a). One important observation of the Comptroller related to the affects of these implementation discrepancies on public trust in the government (State Comptroller’s Report 2021b).

In summary, the State Comptroller presented a clear vision of what he believed the Israeli government did poorly in its pandemic response. These shortcomings related to the government’s decision-making processes. The State Comptroller particularly emphasized the need to learn from these errors and from experience (both of which are central to the rational decision-making process), and from the “implementation gaps”—i.e., the discrepancies that exist between what a decision intended to achieve and the reality of its implementation. These issues refer back not only to the planning process, but also to the content of decisions, for which guidelines and regulations are needed to ensure a better implementation process and strengthen the government’s ability to coordinate between various bodies and organizations.

**What needs to be done?**

In audit reports such as the State Comptroller’s Reports it is common for the auditing body to make recommendations about what should be done differently in the future. Surprisingly, in the reports under study, the recommendations correspond directly with what was claimed to be wrong. Accordingly, the State Comptroller made recommendations for improvements to the government’s decision-making process, including how it should learn lessons from past mistakes, and the roles of the various actors in this process.

**The decision-making process**

The State Comptroller expressed the view that, even in times of crisis, the government’s decision-making process should be conducted according to valid procedures and necessary control processes **(**State Comptroller’s Report, 2023a). Taken together, the State Comptroller’s recommendations follow the rational decision-making model, as detailed above. For example, the State Comptroller recommended:

[C]onsidering remote working after mapping the existing situation, analyzing needs, and defining the desired situation, while identifying challenges and opportunities in the near and long term. This will be an infrastructure for long-term policy and an infrastructure for examining the feasibility of implementing a broader policy (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021c).

His recommendations included the need to develop strategic plans (e.g., State Comptroller’s Report, 2021b) for several areas, including for dealing with fake news, which “should also include experts that can explain [the facts] to the public and cooperate with the media” (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021b). Accordingly, the decision-making process should include:

1*. Setting policy goals:* The State Comptroller advised specifying policy goals when these were not clear, For example, he advised that the Ministry of Health should explore more environmentally friendly alternatives to the Styrofoam packaging used to transport coronavirus tests (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020f). To reduce social and educational inequalities, he recommended that schoolchildren be urgently provided with computers, “either by borrowing them, issuing vouchers for the purchase of computers, or [implementing] another high-quality and complete response” (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020j). The Ministry of Education should “promote actions aimed at turning the coronavirus crisis into an opportunity and work to create a basis for changing the education system and adapting it to the twenty-first century, particularly with regard to distance learning in ordinary times and in times of emergency” (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021k).

2. *Learning lessons for how to create alternatives*: Gathering data ahead of making decisions would produce a more complete picture and help the government make better decisions (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021k). Therefore, the State Comptroller emphasized the need to learn quickly (from local and global sources): to help develop alternative options (State Comptroller’s Report, 2023a; 2021h); to understand implementation barriers and inform about them to prevent frustration (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021f; 2021i); to analyze the reasons behind “implementation gaps,” including what worked (or did not work) and why, what the barriers and resources were; and to try to seek different solutions to help achieve the policy goals (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021k).

3. *Comparing alternative* *solutions*: The State Comptroller argued that decisions should be made in response to data, i.e., after examining several alternatives and through collaboration with other stakeholders (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021m), and after a number of analyses, including of demand, especially regarding populations with special needs (State Comptroller’s Report 2021m), cost-benefit analyses (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020f; 2020e), performance norms, current and future needs, and lessons learned (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021n). Government ministries should develop a methodology for presenting solutions to the government, based on sharing data, understanding implications, and advising on the optimal means for action. This should be the basis for understanding the implications of the emergency (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021d).

4. *Choosing the best alternative:* The State Comptroller specified that decisions should be based on the available data, and made following an appraisal of several alternatives and in collaboration with others, while assuring mistakes were not repeated (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020e). The decision-making process should be transparent (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020e). The government must explain how the alternative chosen was the most efficient and beneficial (State Comptroller’s Report, 2023b; 2020g), what the legal limitations were (e.g., privacy rights, budget constraints, technological capabilities, and impact on the best process) (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020e). This improved decision-making process would create a more effective policy process so that, where possible, decisions could be taken in advance and more tools taken into consideration (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021m). The government’s messaging around decisions should be clear to create an effective process (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020e).

**Data**

The State Comptroller’s recommendations mostly related to data collection (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020g) and its benefits, which include achieving a fuller picture of what was required (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020j; 2021g; 2021h), creating certainties (e.g., regulating the coronavirus and its mutations) to better understand the role of each ministry (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021l), performing better in the future (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020f; 2020g; 2023b), designing an equal national policy rather than different local policies, monitoring discrepancies (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021m; 2021k; 2021h), understanding the needs of target populations and their opinions about policies, and improving compliance (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021j; 2021k; 2021h). Methods for documenting and reporting data should be improved, and systems created for collecting and updating data to help improve the decision-making process (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020g; 2021m; 2021h). A system should be developed for quantitative and qualitative data collection, the production and analysis of data, and to take into account changes in circumstances (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020g?; 2021k).

The State Comptroller also recommended that the government research various data collection and analysis tools to improve the efficacy of data and help prevent knowledge gaps between organizations. He recommended combining data sources (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020d; 2020g; 2021k; 2021h; 2021l?) and appointing a consultant to oversee data collection in certain populations (State Comptroller’s Report, 2023a; 2021h), as well as regulating the transfer of data from central government to local authorities to help policy and safeguard privacy rights (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021m). Finally, the State Comptroller recommended that the government cooperate to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of various actions, and to formulate an outline plan for other crises. The government should draw conclusions and examine the use of it again in times of crisis and in ordinary times (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021d; 2020e, 2021h).

**Organization**

Continuing the State Comptroller’s stand on the best decision-making process withing the implementing organization, one report noted:

It is recommended that the NSC [Israel’s National Security Council], the staff of the Deputy Minister of Defense, and the Institute ensure that decision-making processes, even when if they are carried out under extraordinary circumstances, as they were at the beginning of 2020 with the coronavirus outbreak, be based on a solid database and, insofar as possible, on coordinated and orderly staff work under these circumstances. The staff of the Deputy Minister of Defense and the Institute must ensure that projects are managed in an orderly manner and in accordance with procedures, as required by the complexity of the project, the uncertainty involved, and its cost. (State Comptroller’s Report, 2023a).

Among the recommendations is that there should be a clear division of responsibility (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021h; 2020j), but also that responsibility should be flexible in times of crisis (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021n; 2020d; 2021f). The government should review the organizational structure created in ongoing crises, especially in relation to other tasks (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021n).

The State Comptroller argued that an improved organization structure would help the government learn lessons in the future and be better prepared (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021b; 2021e);; create better unity and coordination (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021b); help establish a multi-level governance structure, and ensure that various bodies were best placed for communication (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021m); enable guidelines to be written, directives to be merged for efficiency; and for these to be disseminated in a timely fashion (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021m). Further, it would help create an efficient process (by shortening processes that are unnecessary, removing unnecessary barriers, defining how to deal with exceptional cases, identifying bottlenecks, and establishing processes that were less rigid or outdated) (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021e; 2021i; 2020d; 2020f; 2020h). Enhancing monitoring and control mechanisms would enable the government to monitor policies as they were implemented, ascertain if they needed to be amended, or if priorities should be reset, and to create new instructions, with the aim of improving the efficacy of policies (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020h; 2021m; 2021d; 2020i; 2021c). Accordingly, when projects were being developed, an improved organizational structure would enable the government to present the fullest possible picture of costs, project stages, expected timetables, and established means of control. Decision-makers should assess alternatives in an orderly way, using experts when needed (State Comptroller’s Report, 2023a). All changes should be made without exceeding the fiscal policy, even in times of crisis (State Comptroller’s Report 2021d).

**Guidelines**

One of the repeating recommendations relates to the need for guidelines or regulations to establish an orderly and sound method of action (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020f). This would enable better coordination when decisions were implemented, as learned from other countries (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020g). At times, the State Comptroller was attempting to strike a balance between order and flexibility, e.g., by recommending different policies for different areas or populations (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021k), balancing pandemic needs with other goals such as privacy rights (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021m), or suggesting changes to authorities in order to meet the needs of the pandemic response (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021m).

**Actors**

The pandemic raised the necessity of collaborating, and while the need for various government bodies to work better together had been on the agenda for some time, the idea of cooperation was central to the State Comptroller’s recommendations (e.g., see State Comptroller’s Report, 2020a; 2023a). Common to these recommendations was the assumption that cooperation would improve the decision-making process (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020l) by enriching opinions and viewpoints (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021k); increasing efficiency (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021h); enabling data sharing (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020g; 2021h); enhancing professionalism (e.g., State Comptroller’s Report, 2020e, 2020f; 2021f); boosting creativity (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020j); helping monitor capabilities (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021j; 2021m); helping the government to understand the situation (State Comptroller’s Report, 2921d), including what worked (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021k), and planning effectively (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020i). This would improve implementation and therefore help achieve better results and lay the foundations for performance assessment (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020g; 2021m; 2021c; 2021f; 2021h; 2023b); improve understanding of the needs of different actors to help ; improve compliance with rights; correct past shortcomings; and help determine future guidelines to assist those in need (State Comptroller’s Report 2021e).

According to the State Comptroller, this would help the government understand the role of each actor involved in policy implementation (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020e) and increase the strength of each participant (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021m). Further, these collaborations would improve outcomes, by helping establish a national program with a single place to find answers (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021b); to provide a means of regulating new policies for public administration based on lessons learned during the pandemic (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021c); to help decision-makers agree on criteria to simplify the decision-making process, prevent uncertainty, misclassifications, and contribute to a just, uniform, and transparent policy (State Comptroller’s Report 2021e); to help prepare for future events (State Comptroller’s Report 2021e); to improve responsibility in all areas, help develop alternatives and implement decisions efficiently and effectively (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020e); and to increase routine consultations with different stakeholders who would act, in their own fields, to implement government decisions, especially when crucial for target populations (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020e).

1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)