**Decision-making in crisis**

Since the State Comptroller’s reports all deal with pandemic preparedness or the government’s pandemic response, they naturally relate to decision-making in times of crisis. However, while the State Comptroller noted the unique situation of the pandemic, and conceded that policymaking during this time had been complex due to the mass disruption and uncertainty (e.g., see State Comptroller’s Report 2023a), his recommendations nevertheless encouraged the establishment of an orderly bureaucratic system in general, including for improved decision-making in normal times. Although he frequently referred to uncertainty (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020d; 2021n; 2021b; 2021e; 2021m; 2023a) and stated that the pandemic had called for a decision-making process that was fast and responsive (State Comptroller’s Report, 2023a; 2021n), this was only the case for a short period at the outset of the crisis:

It is recommended that the Ministry formulate a full and permanent format for distributing procedures during emergencies that will address all the difficulties that arose in this matter; continue to work to reduce and focus the number of circulars, as well as to determine the appropriate timing for distributing guidelines. It is also recommended that the Ministry consider allowing schools and local authorities to act at their discretion on certain issues following the needs of the schools and the characteristics of their students (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021k).

The vaccine campaign is an excellent example of this. While Israel’s health authorities know how to vaccinate the population, the State Comptroller found that they were not prepared for the largescale anti-vaccination response from the public. Nonetheless, he advised that the government “formulate a plan to administrate the [vaccination] process which will include the division of labor, criteria that should be published, regulate, determine priorities, set a target day, and ensure effectiveness” (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020i).

In other cases, it was recommended that the government create a contingency plan for preparing for the ramifications of similar crises (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021d) or planning a multi-year program based on emergency exercises for various scenarios to respond efficiently to emergencies. These should be enhanced through cooperation and the use of technologies (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021k). In addition, the government should examine the situation at a macro level to manage, oversee, and monitor policy (State Comptroller’s Report, 2023b).

**Advance preparation in advance while learning from the pandemic**

As a natural continuation of the findings above, the State Comptroller recommended that the government discuss his findings and draw conclusions for future crises (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021d). These included: establishing mechanisms for future action to draw lessons for acting in a more efficient and effective way (State Comptroller’s Report, 2023b), including with the help of other stakeholders (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021h); mapping data to obtain a clear picture of what is happening (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020a); gathering data in a coordinated way (at the SLB rank) and to report to the responsible ministry to design a solution when needed (as happened in other countries) (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021i); planning and updating future scenarios and examining their impact on all government ministries, and distributing these scenarios to all ministries (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020a; 2020h; 2021n); taking into consideration risk assessments (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021f); preparing additional components that might be needed in times of crisis, such as dedicated budgets, funds, or new criteria (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021f; 2021m; 2020d); and managing policies in an integrative manner while responding to the needs of diverse populations and offering solutions with better services (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021b; 2021g; 2020d). These future plans should incorporate data from different resources, and include advice from relevant stakeholders, using digital platforms, in both crisis and routine times (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021g; 2021h). The rationale for all this was clear: “This will ensure their proper and orderly operation to maintain financial stability, and [the government will be able to adequately cope with the economic challenges created by the state of emergency” (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021f).

Advance preparation would increase efficiency (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021j); facilitate better preparation for the future (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021j); enable the government to perform better in ordinary times as well (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021j); remove barriers for population groups with special needs (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021k); help the government learn lessons on the effectiveness of its actions in order to determine better goals for improving future decision-making (State Comptroller’s Report; 2021l?); and examine outcomes and learn how to better safeguard the rights of specific populations (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021e). Decisions made based on lessons learned from past pandemics should be brought to the government for approval to help cope with “these situations” in the future (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020i?; 2021n). The government should examine what should be duplicated in the future and what should not (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021d). As part of this learning, the government should incorporate these best practices into its operations in ordinary times (such as collaboration) (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020i?).

According to the State Comptroller these points were important for preserving and studying the systems and services that were established during the pandemic (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020d; 2020i; 2021h; 2021j), to obtain information about failures or rejections in the decision-making process (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020e; 2020g), and for learning lessons regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the various ministries (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021b).

The State Comptroller also advised learning from the pandemic to address larger questions, such as understanding what had damaged public trust and what needed to be done to avoid this in the future (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021b), and to understand what investment in infrastructure was needed (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021c). He advised conducting surveys of public opinion as one way to learn for the future, or to help establish procedures for using knowledge for future emergencies (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021b; 2021m).

**What should be learned from the coronavirus pandemic?**

The State Comptroller specified several areas where the government could learn from the pandemic. These included remote working (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021c) and its regulation (State Comptroller’s Report, 2021c), the use of digital media to preserve social relationships (State Comptroller’s Report 2021h), different categories and types of medical treatment (State Comptroller’s Report 2021i), addressing inequalities and equipping the education system for the twenty-first century (State Comptroller’s Report 2021k), changing ways of working in future pandemics (State Comptroller’s Report 2021l?), changing the nature of relations between central and local authorities (State Comptroller’s Report 2021m), rethinking employment (State Comptroller’s Report 2021m),changing medical procedures due to changing relationships between local government and healthcare systems (State Comptroller’s Report 2021m), and developing inter-ministerial reporting interfaces while maintaining privacy, including via technological means or a designated computerized system (State Comptroller’s Report, 2020a; 2020d). The government also needed to have a better understanding of what each ministry could do and what it could not (State Comptroller’s Report 2020e; 2023a)

**Discussion**

As noted at the outset of this paper, decision-making is a tricky field of study. It has no clear boundaries, and many disciplines incorporate decision-making. Governments are often referred to as decision-makers, and publics judge them by the quality of their decisions. Hence, decision-making can be seen as a symbol of government activity.

As a symbol and in line with Edelman’s (1984) discussion on politics, decision-making is interesting due to the meaning attributed to it. This study sought to identify and analyze the meanings attached to decision-making as a symbolic act by studying the interpretations given by Israel’s State Comptroller to the government’s decision-making processes during the coronavirus pandemic. Based on this interpretive narrative analysis of 26 reports on Israel’s pandemic response published by the State Comptroller, three arguments emere. First, the reports demonstrated that the State Comptroller had a clear opinion as to what the normative meaning of decision-making should be. Second, there is a discrepancy between what happened, what the State Comptroller believed should have happened, and what the literature says about it. Last, this discrepancy is one of the reasons for the growing distrust in government.

To explain these arguments, we have categorized the above findings into various myths. The Encyclopedia Britannica defines a myth as:

[A] symbolic narrative, usually of unknown origin and at least partly traditional, that ostensibly relates actual events and that is especially associated with religious belief […] Myths are specific accounts of gods or superhuman beings involved in extraordinary events or circumstances in a time that is unspecified but which is understood as existing apart from ordinary human experience.

We can view the State Comptroller’s interpretations of what the government’s decision-making process during the pandemic should have looked like as “myths.” While they relate to the “actual events” of the pandemic, his suggestions for what the government should have done, or what it should do in future pandemics, are idealized and therefore largely unachievable compared to what occurred in reality. In some cases, it is not clear that the Comptroller’s recommendations are desirable at all. Hence, we can view his interpretations and recommendations as essentially fictionalized—or at least idealized—descriptions of situations and events that are accepted as realistic or following an agreed heuristic or convention, while actually being hypothetical and, while in some cases desirable, largely impossible to achieve in real life and real time.

Ten myths emerge from this study:

1. **The myth of the “rational decision-maker”**

As at the beginning of the twentieth century, the most prominent myth about decision-makers is that they should be rational, and their choices should therefore be made from a purely rational basis and according to a predefined, rational heuristic. The lens through which the State Comptroller described what the government had done wrong in its pandemic response, and the lens through which he advised what should have been done instead, reveal that he believes that a similar rational decision-making model should be used for decision-making. However, these perspectives conflict with the way the Israeli government actually made its decisions during the pandemic. The rational decision-making model can only be considered a normative process in certain circumstances (XXX). In times of great uncertainty or when there is a great deal of dispute, other models of decision-making are known to be better (XXX). These are absent from the State Comptroller’s scope of possibilities for how the Israeli government could improve its decision-making.

1. **The myth of “evidence-based decision-making”**

There is no question of the importance that the State Comptroller assigns to data and information in decision-making. That he raised this point in light of the pandemic is logically understandable, but mostly symbolic and unrealistic. One of the most striking features of the pandemic was its sudden and surprising nature, from its first emergence, through its development. While acquiring knowledge about the virus was a focal point for obvious reasons—not least to reduce excess morbidity and mortality and undertake vaccine research—the real day-to-day challenge for most of the government was different, and involved decision-making even if there was insufficient information (XXX). Establishing systems to collect data that might turn out to be irrelevant to the immediate need to improvise was not something that was ever considered. Moreover, the literature on decision-making has taught that evidence-based decisions can have blind spots that at times can harm decision-making (e.g., in cases where it is not possible to obtain quantifiable evidence) (XXX).

1. **The myth of “administrative mission decision-making”**

As noted, Simon (1947) defined decisions as conclusions reached using both factual and values-based judgments (Dery, 1996, 2005). Thompson and Tuden (1959) offered a sociological model for organizational decision-making strategies based on the idea that different types of decisions call for different strategies, thereby determining their structure and circumstances. According to them, there are at least four well-defined administration processes: computation, judgment, compromise, and inspiration (for more, see Dery. 1996, 2023; Thompson & Tuden, 1959). However, in his reports, the State Comptroller treated all situations as if they were computations (see also Dery, 2005).

According to the literature, the pandemic was an opportunity for new administrative styles and for thinking differently (e.g., see Dery, 2023). However, at least in Israel, this did not happen. Instead, the myth of the power of government bureaucratic structures being applicable and efficient in all types of situations was maintained. The ostensibly flawed bureaucracy criticized by external actors is actually a an internally normative organization that creates a sense of confidence that it can manage processes best.

1. **The myth of “preparation for decision-making”**

The coronavirus pandemic reminded us that, as humans, we are subject to uncertainty. We can never know what will happen and thus every decision is speculative (Dror… ). That this condition is recognized and accepted is reflected in the fact that the State Comptroller’s reports repeatedly refer to the uncertainty in Israel as a result of the pandemic. Uncertainty is a core topic in the literature. While it is not refuted that we must try to avoid catastrophes, there are several approaches to this issue. What does it mean to be prepared? And for what are we preparing? The same type of emergency? (e.g., see Douglas & Wildavsky, 1980; Dryhurst et.al., 2020; ….) Being aware of, and waiting for, emergencies as opposed to coping with emergencies as they unfold are two different strategies, the first of which is tied to the traditional rational bureaucratic myth.

1. **The myth of “implementation”**

The problem of the “implementation gap”—the missing links in the process between setting up a program for working flexibly and making it work (Lewis & Haas, 2005) is not a new phenomenon. However, the State Comptroller, along with many scholars, still find this surprising. Preserving the idea that there can and should be no discrepancies between the intention and implementation of decisions merely serves to also confirm our sense of disappointment when government decisions do not achieve all their intended aims. Majone and Wildavsky (1984) first elaborated on the evolutionary nature of implementation, and this has not changed. The myth that the gap between intention and implementation is undesirable, rather than simply a fact of life, preserves public frustration with government decision-making.

1. **The myth of the “strategist”**

The tendency of the State Comptroller to favor a rational decision-making model is tied to another assumption made in his reports, which centers on forming strategic or national plans, working with scenarios, and building references to work with. While this is an understandable and a responsible suggestion for coping with emergencies, it runs counter to what happens in real life and does not allow for the possibility of being creative in a changing environment. Improvisation is a skill that needs to be nurtured (Shakansky & Zalmanivitch, DATE; Sher-Hadar, 2020) and is not compatible with the “strategist” myth.

1. **The myth of the “problem-solver”**

The State Comptroller’s reports have been constructed in the same manner for many years. What is surprising is the assumption that the solutions proposed are not at all congruent with what is described as being wrong. This concept is accepted in real life. However, policy analysis teaches us that there needs to be a process between these two extremes of assuming that identified problems can be solved and suggesting incompatible solutions, one does not seek solutions but instead looks for levers to implement change (Dery 1984, …). Thus, whatever the government chooses to do, it will never solve problems. This myth will thus always situate governments as incompetent.

1. **The myth of “visionary decision-making”**

Public policy decisions are designed to promote shared values and goals. The State Comptroller referred several times to the importance of such values. However, the values he highlighted were general and therefore vague: better service, achieving goals, sustainability, and equality. One of the outstanding characteristics of the expression of social values during the pandemic was the need for people to be creative in setting and describing goals, especially the central goal of preventing the spread of the virus or reducing its harms through vaccination. What was missing was the answer to the fundamental question that every decision-maker should ask themselves, and that is for what end is the decision being made? What do we want to advance, and what will the outcomes be? That is, what will society look like after the pandemic?

The findings showed that while public values such as the ones described above are vital and recognized, in practice, they play a very small role in decision-making, which, at a normative level, duplicates the narrow approach to values. Nurturing this myth will eventually reduce the ability to be rational, thereby creating a lose-lose situation for decision-makers.

1. **The myth of “cooperation in decision-making”**

Many of the State Comptroller’s recommendations speak of the ministry’s need to cooperate with other ministries, other parts of government, and/or other stakeholders. While cooperation is currently a very fashionable aspect of decision-making, its precise meaning depends on one’s perspective. The State Comptroller’s reports imply that the term refers to improved and increased coordination between various government bodies and other stakeholders, whereas in practice, it looks like cooperation, and in the literature, this can refer to several different levels, beginning with coordination and ending with collaboration (or co-creation, or co-production) (XXX).

Nonetheless, each type of cooperation has different features that are not all measurable simply in terms of “what happened and what should have happened.” Since the success or depth of these various types of cooperation is not obviously reflected in outcomes, attempting to evaluate them through this lens serves to produce constant disappointment, with the individual not knowing what was lacking, and not understanding that cooperation comes at a price and that this price should be a transparent one. Moreover, the literature shows that maximal cooperation does not always suit each situation. Thus, “cooperation” is not always the optimal benchmark for decisions. In terms of seeking the best solution, cooperation can prove the opposite of rationality, resulting once again in disappointment, no matter the results.

1. **The myth of “non-human decision-makers”**

Much of the literature on decision-making deals with the psychology of decision-making. This element is entirely absent from the State Comptroller’s reports, or from view of the normative dimension of the decision-maker. Even if the decision-maker is also a policy-maker, they are also still only human, with all the good and bad that entails.

These ten myths have become “common knowledge,” but they are not consistent with knowledge of reality, no with what happens in real life; and neither are they mutually consistent.

**Conclusion**

This paper argues that decision-making is a symbol that is nourished by myths. Eventually, to repurpose T.S. Eliot’s words, the reality of the implementation of an idea—a decision—“happens in the shadows,” not because the idea or decision is flawed per se, but because the myths that surround and idealize “decision-making” affect our expectations of how government decisions should work in real life. The myths that support the notion of an ideal, purely rational decision-making process did not emerge *ex nihilo*. They are a product of the apparently promising solutions of the twentieth century, which ostensibly guaranteed that decision-making models based on rationalism could guide irrational humans through messy reality. These models are not entirely misguided in their aspirations. However, humans must be prepared to adapt them to the real (complex and dynamic) world, accept that they are not ideal, and combine them with innovative thinking around critical ideas. Government responses to the coronavirus pandemic provide an interesting case study, because while the situation demanded governments find different types of solutions to normal, in reality most found comfort in measuring how their actions stacked up against the old tried-and-tested decision-making models. The ontological world is entering a place where contradicting notions can be placed together. Myths around rational decision-making, which suggest we choose from two sides of a false dichotomy, force people into a false position, where they inevitably continue to be disappointed by decisions from policymakers. This can only serve to continue to deepen the governance crisis the world is experiencing. This paper has highlighted ten myths that surfaced in the Israeli State Comptroller’s reports into his government’s pandemic response. Expanding this research to other countries can help identify other myths. These beg the question of whether, if decision-making was as simple as following the heuristics set out by existing, rational, decision-making models, why don’t government policymakers experience more success? If “superhero” decision-makers really existed, why don’t we see more of them?