

RECENZIE/ BOOKS REVIEW



A Review of book: ANSELL, C., SØRENSEN, E., TORFING, J., & TRONDAL, J. (EDS.). (2025).

Robust Public Governance in a Turbulent Era: Theoretical Framework and Empirical Experiences. Edward Elgar Publishing.

In an era increasingly defined by poly-crisis and chronic instability, the paradigms of public administration are being fundamentally tested. *Robust Public Governance in a Turbulent Era* (2025), edited by Christopher Ansell, Eva Sørensen, Jacob Torfing and Jarle Trondal, confronts this reality by arguing that traditional, rigid models of governance are inadequate for navigating modern challenges. The volume contends that the solution lies in "robust public governance," a dynamic framework designed not merely to recover from shocks but to adapt and innovate, thereby "bouncing forward" to a better state. The book situates itself within the broader debate on adaptive governance and the resilience paradigm, contributing a distinctive perspective on how public institutions can transform uncertainty into capacity for innovation. This review will delineate the book's theoretical framework for robust governance, analyze its empirical validation through a series of Norwegian case studies, and synthesize its core recommendations for cultivating the institutional and collaborative drivers necessary for future readiness.

The book's foundation is laid by meticulously distinguishing between a "crisis"—a discrete threat to fundamental values and structures—and "turbulence," which is conceptualized as a near-permanent, volatile, and unpredictable condition of societal systems (Ch. 1 & 2). This chronic turbulence, exemplified by the interlocking challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate disasters, and geopolitical conflicts, renders obsolete governance models focused solely on stability. The authors critically evaluate two common responses: resilience, which aims to "bounce back" to a pre-existing state, and agility, which embraces radical innovation. They position robust governance as a superior, contingent middle path that strategically adapts to "change in order to preserve" core public functions, goals, and values (Ch. 9).

To operationalize this concept, the text introduces a five-step analytical framework for policymakers: diagnose the turbulent event, identify relevant actors, select potential strategies, analyze their viability, and track their outcomes (Ch. 4). The core of the robust response is a repertoire of nine complementary strategies (Ch. 3). These include: (1) Building Distributed Networks to mobilize diverse actors; (2) Creating Collaborative Platforms for coordination; (3) Promoting Accountable Autonomy to enable local decision-making; (4) Scaling Governance Responses flexibly; (5) Building Redundancy, Slack, and Buffers for unforeseen demands; (6) Becoming Bricoleurs by repurposing existing resources; (7) Conducting Experiments to test solutions in uncertainty; (8) Planning for Surprises with precise contingency plans; and (9) Exerting Multi-vocality to communicate effectively across society.

Together, these strategies form a flexible toolkit that underpins the book's empirical examination of how public institutions in Norway operationalize robustness in practice.

The theoretical framework is rigorously tested and refined through a series of empirical case studies from Norway, which form the evidentiary core of the book. A comparative analysis of these cases reveals both the universal applicability and the critical context-dependency of the robust governance model.

The response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Ch. 5) demonstrated the activation of a core set of strategies, with Building Distributed Networks, Creating Collaborative Platforms, Promoting Accountable Autonomy, Scaling Responses, and Building Redundancy being most evident. This highlights how a public health crisis triggers a need for wide-scale coordination and resource flexibility. In contrast, the case of Storm Hans, a climate-induced flood (Ch. 6), identified Collaborative Platforms and Distributed Networks as foundational "enabler" strategies without which other actions like Planning for Surprises and Conducting Experiments (e.g., using drones for mapping) would have been less effective. This case also exposed a recurring operational challenge across all studies: the difficulty of downscaling responses after the acute crisis phase.

The comparative study of the Ukrainian refugee crisis (Ch. 7) crucially introduced the variable of institutional capacity. It proved that municipality size is a decisive factor in experiencing turbulence and deploying strategies. While all municipalities used networks, scaling, and autonomy, larger ones could employ a wider array of strategies more steadily (Civinskas et. al., 2). In contrast, smaller municipalities were more vulnerable to fluctuations and were forced into a reactive pattern of dramatic scaling, underscoring that robust governance is not a one-size-fits-all model.

The role of technology is analytically examined in Chapter 8. The research finds that Digital Technologies (DT), particularly ecosystem-centric platforms like MS Teams, are potent tools for implementing the Collaborative Platform and Distributed Network strategies. However, their application was largely confined to these two areas and relied on existing, generic technologies. The development of custom public sector platforms is constrained by high costs, complexity, and the need for greater "digital maturity" within government bureaucracies, pointing to a significant area for future investment.

Synthesizing the lessons from the case studies, the authors conclude that a reactive stance is insufficient. They argue for the proactive cultivation of robust governance through specific drivers. These are divided into collaborative drivers such as multi-level governance, hybrid organizational forms, and the harnessing of societal intelligence and institutional design drivers (Ch. 9). The latter necessitates a fundamental shift in public organizations from a "predict and control" model to an "observe and respond" paradigm, supported by "liquid professionalism" and "trust-based management" that replaces rigid hierarchies with participatory systems. The key prescriptive recommendations are to construct permanent platforms and networks before crises hit and to train public servants to act as adept bricoleurs.

The book's major strength lies in its successful translation of a sophisticated theoretical model into a practical, empirically grounded framework. Its use of multiple, comparative case studies within a single national context provides compelling validation. A logical limitation, which the authors acknowledge, is the focus on the well-resourced and stable Norwegian context, which may limit the generalizability of some findings. Future research, as they suggest, should test this framework in more fiscally constrained or fragmented governance settings and further investigate the concept of "societal robustness." Ultimately, *Robust Public Governance in a Turbulent Era* makes a vital contribution to the field by providing a coherent, evidence-based, and actionable blueprint for building public institutions that are not only crisis-resistant but also capable of turning disruption into an opportunity for progress.

For scholars and practitioners alike, the book provides a valuable framework for understanding how public institutions can institutionalize adaptability and resilience in the face of chronic turbulence. In the context of my doctoral research on strategic resource allocation and workload management in fire rescue services, the concept of "robust public governance" offers theoretical grounding for exploring how emergency organizations can balance stability and flexibility when facing unpredictable operational demands.

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