

# Comparative health policy goes qualitative: refocusing research after COVID-19

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has pushed health policy frontstage and exposed the stark differences in government capacities to respond to the crisis. This has created new demands for comparative health policy to support knowledge creation on a large scale. However, comparative health policy has been ill prepared; studies have focused on health systems and used typologies together with descriptive, quantitative methods. This clouds the view for the multi-level nature of health policy, the diverse actors involved and the many societal facets of governance performance. We argue for health policy as a bottom-up process with diverse interests and suggest researching these processes comparatively to support policy learning. This calls for expanding the methodology of comparative health policy to include approaches that make greater use of explorative, qualitative research. We introduce possible developmental pathways to illustrate what this may look like. Firstly, the Pan-European Commission points to novel transnational and cross-sectoral collaborations, and a coordinated policy response to global challenges like the pandemic. Secondly, feminist networks show how to shift the focus towards social inequalities and the health needs of women and vulnerable populations. Thirdly, researchers demonstrate the value of new knowledge emerging from small-scale bottom-up comparisons based on structured assessment frameworks. Together, these developmental pathways demonstrate the potential to refocus comparative health policy towards greater responsiveness to the societal performance of governments, such as social inequalities created by the COVID-19 pandemic. This also opens opportunities for strengthening the global outlook of comparative health policy.

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