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## Exploring the ambiguous consensus on public–private partnerships in collective risk preparation

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**Abstract** Once considered potential sources of danger, generating industrial risks, companies are now viewed as indispensable partners in preparing risk responses. However, this shift raises the crucial question of the coordination between the various actors, especially as the literature – particularly on public–private partnerships (PPPs) and inter-organisational collaborations – highlights multiple potential obstacles. This article analyses the conditions and difficulties of this type of collaboration in preparing the response to a major collective risk – the threat of an influenza pandemic – by examining the relations between French public authorities and companies before and during the alert raised by an outbreak of A(H1N1). Shaped by responsibility and legitimacy issues, these relations are problematic and ambiguous, revealing a poorly designed framework which seems to be a source of difficulties rather than conducive to the effective handling of a pandemic threat. Ultimately, the study questions the desirability of a PPP in the specific context of risk management. This study is based on 30 interviews with public and private-sector actors together with the observation of conferences and the meetings of groups that exchange good practices between companies.

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**Keywords:** influenza pandemic, sociology of disasters, accidents and natural catastrophes, large-scale risks, public–private collaborations, France

### Introduction

In France, the definition of the problem posed by the threat of an influenza pandemic has gradually incorporated the question of maintaining the fundamentals of social life. The potential length of such a crisis (three successive phases of 10–12 weeks, using Spanish flu as a benchmark), with part of the working population absent from their jobs due to illness or confinement, and disruptions in the supply of all types of goods and services, are reasons to fear an impairment or interruption of vital services (Gilbert *et al.* 2010). Consequently, the realisation that these services are part of a complex network of interdependencies has drawn attention to the question of the continuity of all organisational actors in the economy. Alongside public authorities, which tackled the issue in response to the World Health Organisation (WHO) alert (1999), it has gradually been recognised that other economic actors, especially companies, have a role in preparing for this ‘major’ risk, which like certain natural or technological risks (Lagadec 1981) may cause profound disturbances in modern societies.

Once considered potential sources of danger, generating industrial risks (Beck 1992, Perrow 1984), private-sector organisations, including companies, are now seen as indispensable partners in risk preparation and response. This shift, also observed for other types of risk (Borraz 2008), raises the question of the coordination between these different actors – coordination which is crucial to the effectiveness of the preparations (Dingwall 2008). The literature, especially that focusing on the question of public–private partnerships (PPPs) and inter-organisational collaborations, identifies numerous challenges (e.g. Greve and Hodge 2005, Huxham and Vangen 2000, Klijn and Teisman 2003).

This article analyses the conditions and difficulties of such a collaboration in preparing for a major collective risk. It is based on a study of the relations between French public authorities and companies before and during the alert raised by the 2009 outbreak of A(H1N1). The French case is particularly interesting because, spurred by public authorities, the country quickly undertook preparations to handle the flu pandemic threat (Mounier-Jack and Cooker 2006). The need to mobilise the private sector gradually became evident (Gilbert 2007) while a discourse on the necessity of a partnership between the various actors emerged.

The analysis shows, however, that, despite this assertion, the conditions necessary for a true ‘partnership’ were not achieved. Owing to various constraints and ambiguities, both public authorities and large companies took action on the flu pandemic (and other collective risks) within the framework of a poorly organised system, which itself is a risk factor. The study thus paints a more nuanced picture of the exhortation to set up PPPs to prepare for and manage collective risks and questions the desirability of this type of relationship in the specific context of risk management.

After tracing the evolving role of companies in the sociology of disasters, accidents and natural catastrophes, and discussing the difficulties of public–private collaboration evoked in the literature, we examine the possibilities and limitations of a PPP to manage the pandemic risk in the French context. We will conclude by exploring the impact of the ensuing reciprocal expectations effect on the country’s preparation for these collective risks.

### **Companies: from ‘risk-generator’ to ‘partner’ in dealing with risks**

In the sociology of disasters, accidents and natural catastrophes, companies are mainly studied from the angle of the dangers they generate. This is especially true of companies that employ dangerous technologies (nuclear, chemicals, etc.) or technologies whose effects are unknown (genetically modified organisms (GMOs), nanotechnologies, etc.). Numerous catastrophes have demonstrated the limitations of man’s ability to control certain technologies (Zinn and Taylor-Gooby 2006), bolstering the argument that accidents are inevitable or even ‘normal’ in certain types of technological system (Perrow 1984). Controversies have arisen concerning ‘new risks’ that are harder to define, but which may eventually have equally catastrophic effects (Godard *et al.* 2002). Emphasis is placed on the negative effects on safety from economic pressures and production targets (Vaughan 1996). In this perspective, companies are seen less as producers of ‘goods’ than ‘bads’ (Beck and Holzner 2007: 10–11), contributing to the creation of a ‘risk society’ (Beck 1992).

Although quite dominant, this view has been qualified, however. Researchers have described the specific characteristics of high reliability organisations which, although they work with complex, high-risk technologies, have nevertheless managed to avoid accidents for long periods, while still attaining challenging production targets (Rochlin *et al.* 1987, La Porte 1988, Bourrier 1996). Although Weick (1987) has shown the difficulties of such an endeavour, research has lent support to the idea that managers can build resilient

organisations (Sullivan-Taylor and Wilson 2009). These organisations are being held up as models to all companies confronted with uncertainty and a great deal of study is being done on the resilience of organisations (Hollnagel *et al.* 2006, Weick and Sutcliffe 2007, Comfort *et al.* 2010).

With the inevitability of catastrophes being challenged, a new approach to the role of companies is now possible. Companies are playing a key role in the management of high-risk activities by constantly working to ensure safety, which goes beyond compliance with the rules enacted by the public agencies that regulate these activities. Companies' capacity for autonomous risk management is now recognised. Added to this is the idea that they are also capable of mobilising precious competencies to deal with the aftermath of technological accidents (even where they bear no responsibility) as well as natural disasters and public health problems (Clarke 1999). The role to be played by companies in handling collective risks has therefore evolved. Companies – especially those involved in the production of goods and services or managing large networks (energy, transport, etc.) – are now also seen as indispensable partners in risk management. It is hardly surprising then that people are calling for the development of public–private collaborations to handle large-scale risks (Godard *et al.* 2002). The 'whole-of-society approach' has also gained acceptance internationally as the appropriate way of preparing for a pandemic threat (Ong *et al.* 2008).

### **Pessimistic literature on the potential of a public–private partnership (PPP)**

This evolution raises the question of the coordination – crucial to the effectiveness of preparations – between these different actors (Dingwall 2008). What form might such a collaboration take?

The abundant literature on PPPs explores different formats in different contexts, with great variations and imprecision on the conceptual level (Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff 2011). At a minimum, PPPs can be defined as 'cooperative institutional arrangements between public and private sector actors' (Greve and Hodge 2005: 1). There are different PPP approaches depending on their goals, context and formal structures and the actors involved (Weihe 2008). Among these, we find the 'infrastructure approach', based on a contract with the public sector as principal and the private sector as agent, including the prior identification and allocation of risks (Bing *et al.* 2005). In contrast, the 'urban regeneration approach' emphasises co-production and risk sharing (Klijn and Teisman 2003) and envisages PPPs as a complex cooperation involving actors from different networks and spheres. Since public and private sectors operate with different norms, procedures and values, they are hard to reconcile (e.g. Jacobs 1992). Opting for a more flexible framework, the 'policy approach' sees the PPP as constellations of public and private actors arranged around a specific domain (Vaillancourt Roseneau 2000, Weihe 2008). It may even be conceived of as a specific form of governance, a non-hierarchical coordination different from the two conventional forms (market and hierarchy). It is no longer a question of dividing responsibilities, but of pluralist representation and transparency in policy-making (Börzel 1998).

This variety implies that partners' expectations as to the nature of their cooperation may diverge, thus engendering a disconcerting ambiguity. There may also be additional difficulties that are common to every inter-organisational collaboration. Membership is often a source of ambiguity (Huxham and Vangen 2000): its scope is vague, relations between individual and organisational members are uncertain, and numerous partnerships with overlapping membership are a source of complexity. Each organisation's constraints and the internal tensions between collaboration and competition may compromise the reliability of individuals'

commitments (Babiak and Thibault 2009). Collaboration is a dynamic, emergent and non-linear process (Thompson and Perry 2006). External pressure and shifting goals cause its structure to change constantly. These dynamics and complexities make it hard to build relations of trust (Huxham and Vangen 2000, Huxham 2003). Yet trust is an important if not an indispensable factor for success (Ostrom 1998, Faulkner and de Rond 2000), though it is rarely present initially. Thanks to reputation, experience and formal contracts, partners can take the risk of diving in and thus initiating a trust-building loop (Vangen and Huxham 2003). Expensive and arduous, collaboration can easily lead to 'collaborative inertia' (Huxham 2003).

In risk management, issues of legitimacy and responsibility make relationships even more complex. In France, the preservation of public safety is a state prerogative. Through its core functions, known as '*fonctions régaliennes*' (national defence, justice, police, etc.), the power of the state is affirmed (Gilbert 1992). This affirmation of authority and competence in public discourse is, however, often accompanied in practice by a certain disengagement of responsibility by public authorities (Borraz and Gilbert 2008). Responsibility is partly transferred to the organisations, mainly companies, that actually implement safety initiatives. But there are numerous ambiguities that tend to deter companies from taking on responsibility. Companies are more inclined to respond to directives from public authorities within the established regulatory framework (cf. requisitions), while endeavouring to solve their own difficulties, than to take initiatives and collaborate voluntarily in the prevention of collective risks. In each case, these initiatives are determined by company size and the extent of their network: there is a significant difference between large, medium and small companies.

Certain factors may, however, impel companies to be proactive. This is true of large companies, especially those involved in international trade. Seen as essentially determined by global market forces and somewhat insensitive to local concerns, multinationals often lack legitimacy (Beck and Holzner 2007). Getting involved in public health matters – undeniably a common good – through pandemic threat preparations can be a response to these growing criticisms (Herrick 2008). Additionally, this demonstration that they are 'good citizens' might bolster the social importance of their role as producers of indispensable goods and services for society. However, the public health (or environmental) efforts of these companies sometimes amount to no more than symbolic actions, like 'fantasy planning' (Clarke 1999), without any concrete impact. Offsetting the view of organisations as risk generators, the idea has emerged that good corporate governance has to include formalised risk management practices (Scheytt *et al.* 2006), which has stimulated the development of risk management systems (Power 2004) and the normalisation of business continuity management – a kind of crisis management focusing on resilience in the face of external shocks (Herbane 2010).

Studies on disasters, accidents and natural catastrophes tend to conclude that it is necessary to develop PPPs to manage collective risks. The spread of business continuity management practices may encourage companies, especially the largest ones, to go beyond mere window-dressing in these matters. Nevertheless, according to the literature on inter-organisational collaborations and PPPs, such collaborations face numerous challenges. How do these different movements mesh in practice? To answer this question, we will examine what happened in a particular case where a PPP was set up to face a collective risk: the flu pandemic in France.

## Methods and data

The aim was to explore the different dimensions of public–private relationships in preparing a country for a collective risk. We chose the case study method to capture the interaction

between the different movements identified in the literature and focused on a single case in order to examine its complexity in detail. We carried out interviews and used field observation to gather actors' discourses, representations and practices.

The first data-gathering phase, on preparations for an avian flu pandemic (A(H5N1) virus), was carried out between May and December 2008. We interviewed representatives from the business world (business continuity managers (BCMs), consultants and representatives of professional associations) and public authorities (government ministries, defence zones<sup>1</sup>). The sample was designed to collect the main actors' perceptions (purposive sample). Four representatives from companies and the governmental sphere were contacted. The sample was then expanded through a 'snowball' effect: public authorities' representatives gave contact names in companies, and vice versa. Four more people were approached independently to diversify affiliation networks and business sectors (state-owned companies, former state companies, private sector and subsidiaries of foreign companies). Altogether, 14 representatives from the business world and six from public authorities were interviewed. We also observed a conference on national preparation in September 2008 and a meeting in March 2009 where a group of BCMs in charge of flu pandemic preparations at their companies met to share their practices.

The A(H1N1) outbreak in April 2009 triggered a second stage of investigation where the main method used was observation. Ten BCM exchange-group meetings were observed between April 2009 and March 2010, and a national conference in September 2009. In addition, two public officials and three company representatives were re-interviewed and five new representatives from companies were approached.

The 30 interviews focused on large companies and national public authorities. This bias is a reflection of the groups most active in preparations, but was offset by observations (conferences, BCM groups) which involved a wider variety of actors (small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), associations, local government). The study probes the relations between national public authorities and large companies – actors focused on in the existing literature – and outlines the 'grey areas' between them and the other actors who may potentially be involved in flu pandemic preparation.

The interviews were semi-structured, lasting between 26 minutes and 4 hours (averaging 76 minutes). All were recorded and fully transcribed, except six (due to refusals or technical difficulties). For those, extensive notes were taken during the interview and completed immediately afterward. The same procedure was followed for the meetings. We acquired the minutes of the conferences and complemented them with notes taken by one of the authors. These texts were examined to identify any themes that emerged, with a view to describing and categorising the relations between public and private actors. These themes were then used to code and organise extracts of relevant data. When necessary, they were completed and modified during the coding process. We were careful to verify that the information from interviews with different types of respondent was consistent with naturally occurring data.

## **French preparation for the pandemic**

### *Recognition by public authorities of the need to involve companies*

Although the first version of the French pandemic response plan (2004) emphasised the public health issue and sought solutions from the perspective of a 'state of emergency', the anticipated length of the crisis gradually caused public authorities to consider the continuity of the country's vital infrastructures and the effects of a long crisis on the basic structures of



society. Though incomplete, this shift was prompted by both internal government discussions and seminars that brought public officials and researchers together (Gilbert 2007, 2010). At the request of their corresponding ministries, a small number of large, private-sector and state-owned companies recognised as national critical infrastructure operators (CIOs) tackled the issue.

These companies disclosed their complex dependencies with respect to the national and international economic fabric. Employee absenteeism, procurement difficulties and monetary problems could combine and affect the country's economic and social functioning. While this may impair the ability to respond to the health issue, more broadly it jeopardises the ability to keep the economy running. The involvement of these CIOs prompted an exploration of the system's vulnerabilities. In the pandemic threat, the economic continuity problem is interwoven with the health problem. Companies are doubly concerned: they are both places of potential contamination and essential partners in the country's resilience.

#### *The necessary 'partnership' discourse*

The public officials in charge of the issue were now faced with the question of how to mobilise the private sector. An authoritarian approach would be at odds with the general tendency in France toward less government involvement. Most importantly, measures would be ineffective without the cooperation of companies, especially given the question of competency: 'asking the government to guide large or small companies in preparing business continuity plans (BCPs) would be a mistake' (public official, 2008).

The idea of a necessary shift in the governance of risks and crises took root in public authorities: '[The public officials in charge] have to work through recommendations, certifications, advice and partnerships' (public official, 2008). The partnership idea raises the question of how a public service mentality and a market mentality might work together: hybridisation, public service delegations to companies in times of crisis ... how could it be done? (Gilbert 2007).

This partnership discourse found an echo in companies: 'This matter is a prime example of where we must become more involved in the principle of ... public-private partnership' (employers' union, conference, 2008).

#### *Ambiguous implementation*

The scope of the partnership called for in discourses was hard to define. First, which 'public sector' and which 'private sector' were we talking about?

Many governmental actors were concerned: the inter-ministerial delegate to the fight against the influenza pandemic (DILGA), government ministries (health, economy, etc.), and so on. This issue required a high level of cooperation between ministries. But 'the interministerial aspect has always caused problems and continues to do so ... [each ministry has] its own culture, strategy and very specific organisation' (public official, 2008). Moreover, the structures that would have to implement this 'inter-ministeriality' lacked the legitimacy to impose their will or they appeared to be precarious or even ambiguous (e.g. the DILGA only has a very small team, placed at his disposal temporarily). Assigning tasks was problematic: who, for example, should specify the roles to be played by companies? 'It could be the [Ministry of the Economy] acting with regard to companies in general. But other ministries might also lay claim to this function, such as the Labour Ministry' (public official, 2008). This complexity was disconcerting for companies as they lacked a clearly identified contact for pandemic preparations.

The companies were no more uniform, however, either in size or in their relations with public authorities. At first glance, it seemed easy to establish relations with large companies

(those that operate internationally and those that were once – or remain partly – state-owned), especially as many of them – CIOs – are obliged to ensure the continuity of their activities. But this apparent ease of contact must be qualified: some companies openly ‘reminded the government that their objective ... is to make short term profits’ (BCM of a privatised company, 2008). SMEs were even harder to reach. The actors usually in contact with them are not those in charge of pandemic preparations.

Finally, ‘public’ and ‘private’ are two spheres with different mentalities: ‘the public sector often considers the private as this horrible little capitalist ... and the private sector sees the public sector as ... you just shrug your shoulders’ (BCM, 2008). Each functions with a simplified vision of the other: the ‘government’ for companies and a focus on a few large companies for public authorities. In practice, the dialogue is engaged (or becomes strained) between the DILGA, the Ministries of the Economy and Labour on the public side and, on the company side, the largest, recognised CIOs, through a few professional associations and unions (Médéf and industry unions).

Concretely, the way the government deals with companies remains fragmented, essentially based on individual initiatives (involvement in conferences, etc.). The national plan nevertheless anticipates more systematic integration of large companies in the subcommittees of the economic continuity taskforce, which would direct the country’s economy in the event of a crisis.

Public appeals and the manifest willingness to form partnerships have, nevertheless, opened a space for dialogue, allowing selected companies to (attempt to) negotiate the details of the national plan. When confronted with a plan that called for the suspension of some of its activities, one company reaffirmed its necessity at a meeting and suggested a different way to plan for downgraded operations, better suited to the company’s interests.

Finally, the appearance of new actors – BCMs – provides public authorities with a contact in companies to disseminate the business continuity subject. This ties in with the movement to normalise business continuity management (Herbane 2010). While it is more pronounced in English-speaking countries, and therefore in some French subsidiaries of American and British companies, large French companies with international operations are receptive, especially as discussions at French and European levels on the resilience of vital infrastructures have resulted in a business continuity obligation for CIOs in France (Secteurs d’Activités d’Importance Vitale (SAIV) decree, 2006). In this context, these BCMs are seeking a positioning closer to top management and a broader jurisdiction (Abbott 1988). Various professional associations are developing (though not without ambiguities: some of them are associated with consulting firms, others with international certification bodies) in which representatives from competing companies form alliances and exchange ideas while being careful not to reveal their vulnerabilities (excessively). Described as ‘a bustling milieu that tries to take control of new ideas and “kill off” its neighbour’ (consultant, 2008), these associations constitute competing interfaces between public authorities and companies. The pandemic is seen as a precedent-setting case, where the form its management takes will prefigure future regulations. For these BCMs, being part of these public-private networks is crucial and they are eager to have discussions with the public officials in charge of the issue.

Although determining the form of the partnership was problematic, initiatives and meeting places did develop. However, these initiatives were championed by individuals holding peripheral positions in their organisation. The search for external partners was therefore tied to an effort to consolidate their positions and build on this boundary-spanning role that echoes the ‘marginal-secant’ position described by Crozier and Friedberg (1977).

*A major difficulty: assigning responsibilities*

The partnership discourse is at odds with traditional (more central) positions and habitual modes of action, i.e. the affirmation of the central role of government in managing collective risks, with companies reduced to ‘private operators having to implement [the plan]’ (public official, conference, 2008). In keeping with this traditional view, the governmental mobilisation of companies apparently was largely done through labour and CIO regulations. Ultimately, the officially adopted recommendation stance appears limited. This recourse to the regulatory approach reignited issues of responsibility in the event of failure.

The opinions expressed by the interviewees on certain points reveal this entrenchment of positions. The idea that it fell to major corporations to spread the word about economic continuity was ill-received: ‘We’re not going to step in and do the authorities’ job of explaining how to make a BCP ... It’s like the sword of Damocles ...’ (BCM, 2009). Similarly, the authorities’ emphasis on business owners’ legal obligation to guarantee the health and safety of their employees – and to produce results – came under fire; influenza is not a risk that is confined to companies. Some BCMs decried attempts to make companies shoulder responsibilities that exceeded their powers: obligations concerning employee safety transferred costs and responsibility to companies. Mask purchases became the symbol of a company’s preparation, of compliance with regulations: ‘The masks are wrapped up with the issue of the company’s civil responsibility’ (BCM, 2009).

Relations between public and private sector actors vis-à-vis the pandemic seem therefore to be strongly shaped by questions relating to the future attribution of responsibility. Everyone is careful not to go beyond their obligations.

*The partnership discourse: complications rather than help in time of crisis?*

These relations were tested by the outbreak of A(H1N1) in April 2009. The partnership discourse led some BCMs to expect that there would be more sharing. They were disappointed: large companies did not get more information than the general public and their participation in subgroups of the Economy Ministry’s economic continuity taskforce turned out to be a one-way street. Although the partnership discourse did not live up to its promises, the affirmation of the government’s central role led people to expect, at the very least, clear directives. But no strong message was forthcoming. No official position was announced on a coordinated signal to trigger the BCPs, in spite of the discussions on a new type of coordination between public authorities and civil society on risk preparation (Mallet *et al.* 2008). Further, the alert caused a change in the people in charge within the public authorities. When the crisis came, ministers’ cabinets took over. For their contacts, ‘it was very worrying, really quite distressing. The official contacts were just becoming familiar with the issue and didn’t have any answers’ (BCM, 2009).

In the eyes of the BCMs, the public authorities were not assuming their leadership role, nor were they entering the promised partnership. On the contrary, tensions were growing, owing to the anticipated transfer of responsibility. For example, the market supply of masks dried up due to government orders, provoking the ire of companies, which found themselves physically unable to comply with legislation. Any divergence by public authorities from their initial plan was seen as a betrayal by certain companies, especially by the BCMs who found themselves in an awkward position vis-à-vis their superiors. In short, relations between public authorities and large companies suffered from the lack of stabilised agreements and continuity in the system and interaction of actors.

Some large companies made direct contact with public officials locally. Rather than wait for answers ‘from above’, their BCMs handled concrete situations pragmatically, e.g. by having people wear masks when flu cases were detected. It was a lesson in forced autonomy:



'We were sent back to our companies to assess the risk. We were not to expect governmental instructions. But we were expected to take appropriate measures' (BCM, 2009).

The partnership discourse proclaimed by public authorities thus had harmful effects. The divergence between discourse and practices impaired the trust between participants and weakened their coordination, instead of improving it, though it is true that companies moved closer to local actors. Perhaps the readjustment was necessary, demonstrating the difficulty of managing a pandemic risk at a global level when the phenomenon is first and foremost local and growing unevenly in space and time. Doubt is cast on the role of national public authorities in managing this type of risk, however.

Ultimately, this episode sets a precedent in public-private relations for risk management. The disappointment experienced is not conducive to building trust between public and private actors which, according to many scholars, is crucial to the development of the sought-after partnership.

## Discussion and conclusion

The research on disasters, accidents and natural catastrophes tends to conclude that PPPs should be developed to manage collective risks. Yet, numerous challenges have been identified in the literature on inter-organisational collaborations and PPPs. How do these movements interact in practice? To answer this question, we have analysed a particular case where PPPs were set up to face a collective risk: that of a flu pandemic in France.

This case highlights the difficulty public authorities and large companies had in positioning themselves. Although both sides seemed to recognise the necessity of partnership, many obstacles arose, echoing the literature: different cultures and modes of operation (Jacobs 1992); multiple arenas engendering problems marking out boundaries (Klijn and Teisman 2003); and ambiguity concerning the nature, scope and membership of the partnership (Huxham and Vangen 2000). The difficulties of adapting to a new type of relationship, with each actor retreating to familiar modes of action (regulation and contractual allocation of responsibilities) (Klijn and Teisman 2003), resulted in anticipated transfers of responsibility and reciprocal expectations effect.

Moreover, the case shows that the particularities of the domain (collective risk preparation and management) dealt with by this partnership placed the actors within a system that was particularly impacted by the anticipation of socio-political or 'secondary' risks (legal, reputation, individual blame) (Power 2004). This system weakened their positions, especially as they were often peripheral actors trying simultaneously to promote their ideas while strengthening their legitimacy within their own organisations. In this situation, the divergence observed between the 'partnership' discourse and practices during the A(H1N1) alert appears to be both the product of a poorly organised system and a force that perpetuates the system, as it impairs the trust between actors and weakens their coordination rather than improving it. Together with the difficulties commonly found in inter-organisational collaborations and partnerships, this poorly organised system is evidence of the need for a more nuanced picture of PPP development to prepare for and manage collective risks.

More precisely, one may wonder whether 'partnership' is a suitable term for such a relationship. Although there is no sharing of responsibilities, we do observe a kind of 'co-production' in formulating the pandemic plan. The many discussions between representatives of public authorities and companies may indicate the emergence of a 'policy PPP' (Börzel 1998). The obstacles arise in moving from the formulation of the plan to its implementation, and intensify when a reconfiguration is necessary to manage a specific project: the A(H1N1)

outbreak. Although the policy PPP does not broach the question of risk-sharing – only the government can bear responsibility for policy in a democratic regime (Börzel 1998) – this transition demands action from companies. Either this action is done to comply with a regulatory obligation (and the BCMs can hide behind the public decision), or it is the result of acknowledged co-production and leads to responsibility sharing.

What is striking is that neither party seems to want to establish a more formal partnership, preferring to maintain ambiguities in their relationship. Paradoxically, although the BCMs seem to be spear-heading the response to the pandemic risk in their companies, they also constitute a barrier to the modification of the relationship formed between companies and public authorities. Their position does not favour the idea of co-production and shared responsibility. Although the data do not allow one to judge the extent of all the companies' preparations, certain companies carried out actions that went far beyond mere window-dressing. One factor determining their actions (mask purchases, formulation of plans) is undeniably the goal of compliance. The BCMs were angered when they found it impossible for them to comply, owing to contradictory directives from authorities. One may then question the true nature of the risk managed by companies. Are they managing the pandemic risk at the primary level, or 'secondary', individual and organisational risks (Power 2004)?

By extension, a more pronounced formalisation of the partnership would raise the question of accountability. Paradoxically, in becoming partners in the management of societal risks, companies would, rather than shoring up their faltering legitimacy (Beck and Holzner 2007), run the risk of weakening it further as they would be compelled to take eminently political decisions without being democratically mandated to do so. What then might be the legitimate place of a company – a non-elected actor – in decisions relating to societal risks in a democratic regime? Is such a formalisation really in companies' interests?

Likewise, for public authorities, relinquishing the prerogative of protecting the population would undermine a founding element of their role and mission. While large companies can do more than they say and the government says more than it can do, the relationship between these two spheres seems to hang on ambiguities that are best not clarified. Moreover, if public authorities were to engage in a true partnership (with co-production and shared responsibility), would they be able to justify the role they assign to the companies selected? Here we find the legitimacy problem of policy PPPs in democratic regimes, which threatens the effectiveness of the very policies they support (Börzel 1998). The formalisation of a policy PPP for risk management would be subjected to extreme vigilance and any mistake could easily spark a scandal.

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## Note

- 1 Defence zones are administrative districts in charge of organising the civil and economic defence of the country.

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