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Consulting firms in the public management of epidemics. A scoping-review protocol

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1 Context

Social sciences research evidences about private consulting firm's role in public policy is large (Saint-Martin 2006; Empson et al. 2015; Hurl et Vogelpohl 2021a). Studies in sociology, political science, economy, or international relations, reveal that the involvement of these firms with public organizations has not only increased, but has also become normalized over the past 30 years (Saint-Martin 1999; Henry 2012; Bezes 2012; Belorgey et Pierru 2017; Kipping 2021). Some of these authors even consider these firms as transnational public policy actors (Hurl et Vogelpohl 2021b) and show how they played an important role in the diffusion of New Public Management techniques in public sector services (Bezes 2009; Aucoin 2011; Pollitt et Bouckaert 2011; Bezes et Musselin 2015). These approaches remind us of the blurry nature of the separation between public and private action, as suggested by francophone political sociologists on interest groups (Offerlé 1998; Courty 2006; Michel 2010).

Concerning health care, social scientists have mainly worked on private firm intervention on national sectoral reforms, such as those on the hospital in France (Belorgey 2010; Belorgey and Pierru 2017), or on the National Health Service in the United Kingdom (Kirkpatrick, Lonsdale and Neogy 2016). Some studies are also focused on the international circulation of health norms and policy and have highlighted the role of private firms as "diffusion entrepreneurs" of public policies and policy instruments, alongside other actors. This is the case of our research team, who has worked on the diffusion of health-sector performance-based financing in Sub-Saharan Africa (Gautier et al. 2018; Gautier, De Allegri et Ridde 2019; Gautier et al. 2019).

If the role of consulting firm on the public management of epidemics is, at first glance, less documented by academic literature, recent journalistic pieces have however documented the prominent position of the private actors on national policies to prevent and control COVID-19 in different countries (Hurl et Werner 2021; Aron et Miguel-Aguirre 2021; Laurent 2020; Rice 2020; Tribot Laspière 2021; Collington et Mazzucato 2021; Castonguay 2020; Petitjean 2021). In France, for example, several consulting firms report having supported freely public action to prevent and fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. This is the case of the French branch of Bain & Company, which piloted "pro-bono" the testing strategy (Girard 2020). In the same vein, McKinsey & Company was responsible for developing the logistical and operational aspects of the vaccine strategy in France (Braun and Momtaz 2021; Cohen and Vazquez 2021). These private involvements produced controversies and social and political concerns in France, but also in the UK or in Canada about the effectiveness of their action and their role in public issues (Jacquot 2021; Sturdy 2021; Collington et Mazzucato 2021; Hurl et Werner 2021; Petitjean 2021; France info 2021; Aron et Miguel-Aguirre 2021; Harper 2021; Laurent 2020; Krug 2021).

This scoping-review aims to better identify scientific works analyzing consulting firms' role in the public management of epidemics, and to document and understand what their

theoretical/conceptual approaches are, and what research methods are used.

This work will be based on the expertise on epidemics and the context of COVID-19 pandemic produced by our multidisciplinary and international research team working for a year in Brazil, Canada, France, Japan, and Mali within the framework of the HoSPiCOVID research project (<https://u-paris.fr/hospicovid>), co-financed by the ANR in France and the CIHR in Canada. It will extend the collaborations between research teams from the North and the South taking part in the project by focusing on the structuring of political choices in the face of epidemics in a context of an increasing privatization of health.

2 Review Objectives

The aim of this scoping review is to produce a state of knowledge about the role of private consulting firms in the public management of epidemics. The review will also identify theories, approaches and methods used by researchers to study this subject.

Based on the results of this scoping-review, an exploratory empirical study will be implemented in France.

2.1 Research Questions

This exploratory research work is based on two research questions:

1. What is the role of private consulting firms in the public management of epidemics?
2. What are the theories and the methods used by scholars to study this research object?

3 Methods

We will conduct a scoping-review (Arksey et O'Malley 2005; Micah DJ Peters et al. 2020; Micah D. J. Peters et al. 2020; Dagenais et al. 2021) which will allow us to: i) summarize, based on a broad search, the state of knowledge on a specific research question in a relatively short period of time; and, ii) identify and analyze gaps in the knowledge base to inform public decision makers, stakeholders, and researchers (Munn et al. 2018; Saul et al. 2013).

We will follow the standardized steps proposed by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) checklist (Tricco et al. 2018).

3.1 Search Strategy

Several databases will be searched:

1. Generalist databases: Scopus and Web of science
2. Social sciences database: Bielefeld Academic Search Engine
3. Biomedical sciences databases: PubMed and Embase

3.2 Keywords Strategy

We carried out preliminary tests prior to validate the keywords strategy. Tests findings showed a scarcity of academic literature on the topic. We thus decided to lead an open oriented research strategy.

For each concept (i.e., “consulting firms”, “epidemic/infectious and tropical diseases” and “international and national (semi)public institutions”), we will select keywords to create specific requests on the sus-mentioned databases. Due to the limited number of keywords that can be inserted in the Bielefeld Academic Search Engine database, we will use a specific and shorter keyword strategy.

The first concept (i.e., “consulting firms”) contains few words used by the academic literature to define the groups at the core of our research interest. The second one (i.e., “epidemic/infectious and tropical diseases”), integrates health crisis issues and epidemics, tropical and infectious diseases defined by the WHO (including neglected and vector borne diseases) which were still present after 2000 (Organisation Mondiale de la Santé 2012; PAHO WHO). The third concept (i.e., “international and national (semi)public institutions”), contains the main institutions to whom consulting firms can sell their services, at the international or national level. The objective is to get a complete overview of scientific works linked to our research interests.

A	B	C	D
Scopus – Web of Science – Embase - PubMed			
Concepts	Consulting firms	Epidemic/infectious and tropical diseases	International and national (semi) public institutions
Keywords	service firm; consulting firm; management consult; big four; professional service firm AND NOT financial service firm	health; epidemi; pandemic; outbreak; infectious disease; communicable disease; tropical disease; virus; covid; coronavirus; h1n1; hiv; aids; ebola; dengue; sars; influenza; measles; chikungunya; hepatitis; opioid; malaria; gastroenteritis; fever; ulcer; rabies; trachoma; syphilis; leishmaniasis; dracunculiasis; trematodosis;	state; governance; government; polic; ministry of health; public sector; international agenc; ppp; care international; the global fund to fight aids tuberculosis and malaria; global fund; gfatm; gavi; the vaccine alliance; global polio eradication programme; global alliance for tb drug development;

		onchocerciasis; schistosomiasis; geohelminthiasis; filariasis; echinococcosis; fascioliasis; cysticercosis; chagas; trypanosomiasis; yaws; leprosy; zika; tuberculosis; meningitis; polio; poliomyelitis; cholera; encephalitis	gatbdd; international aids vaccine initiative; iavi; international aids society; international federation of red cross and red crescent societies; ifrc; joint united nations programme on hiv/aids; unaids; world health organization; who; médecins sans frontières; msf; the partnership for maternal newborn and child health; pmnch; roll back malaria partnership; rbm; special programme for research and training in tropical diseases; safe injections global network; sign; stop tb partnership; save the children; unitaid; united nations international children's fund; unicef; world bank; medicines for malaria venture; united states centers for disease control and prevention; us cdc; the us president's emergency plan for aids relief; pepfar; eu public health; european commission's directorate for health and food safety; european centre for disease prevention and control; ecdc; dg santé; direction générale de la santé et de la sécurité alimentaire
Bielefeld Academic Search Engine			

Concepts	Consulting firms	Epidemic/infectious and tropical diseases	International and national (semi) public institutions
	service firm; consulting firm; management consult; big four; professional service firm	health; epidemi; pandemic; outbreak; disease	state; governance; government; polic; ministry of health; public sector; international agenc; ppp

Table 1. Keywords strategy on the databases

3.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

We will include references:

- Related to “consulting firms”, that are private firms with for profit ambition which sale expertise services to public actors.
- Related to epidemics or health crisis issues which have emerged from the 2000s.
- Published between January 1st, 2000, and December 31th, 2021. This time frame is justified because of the important growth of private consulting firms since the 2000s.
- Published in English, French, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese.
- Original research papers using qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods.
- Peer-reviewed journal articles and books/book chapters.

We will exclude:

- Non-academic documentation: any reports and working documents also named “grey literature” which are not subject of a peer-reviewed evaluation, like think tank or international and national organization reports. This choice is linked with the objectives of the scoping-review that are to make a state of academic knowledge about our research object.
- All the references that do not meet the sus-mentioned inclusion criteria.

4 Data Selection

One reviewer will search the different databases with specific requests and will retrieve the documents using ZOTERO, a bibliographic tool. She will proceed to sorting and removal of duplicates.

Two reviewers will then independently proceed to the first screening of the documents based on titles and abstracts. The same two reviewers will independently read the full text versions of the selected documents and apply the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Any discordance will involve a third reviewer. All the references lists of the documents finally selected will also be screened by these two reviewers, to be sure that all the main

references are present in the scoping review.

These screening steps will be documented and justified in a follow-up review document, following the PRISMA flowchart of review process (Micah DJ Peters et al. 2020).

5 Data Extraction and Quality Assessment

Selected items will be sorted in a data extraction table to record the following information: title, author(s), year of publication, country of publication, study design (methods and fundings), methodological limits, concept/theories used, type and year of epidemic/disease and the main results.

The quality of the studies will be assessed using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) (Hong et al. 2018).

6 Data Synthesis and Presentation of the Results

The synthesis of the sources will follow the recommendations of the PRISMA method (Tricco et al. 2018) and will be presented in a descriptive table completed by the two reviewers independently.

Based on these documents and after a discussion and a validation with all the research team members, the results of this scoping review will be presented in a narrative report that will describe the methods and the search strategy used, and that will present the main findings for each research question.

A research paper and an article (in an academic journal) presenting the results of the scoping review will also be published.

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