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SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Time frames: Crisis expertise and rapid response mechanisms

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Abstract

Experts step into global governance most prominently in times of crisis. But if crisis governance at international organizations (IOs) involves the construction of specific temporal horizons, how do these horizons affect the constitution of expert authority? This article argues that expertise produced under such conditions – to meet a demand for 'timely' knowledge – differs substantively from other kinds of expertise. Crisis governance thus contributes in notable ways to the pluralization of expertise. The article examines this phenomenon in the case of the relatively recent proliferation of rapid response mechanisms (RRMs). By examining the making and implementation of RRMs at two major IOs – the World Health Organization and the World Food Programme – the article offers a new understanding for how RRMs have become part of institutional repertoires of expertise. Based on this, it contends that RRM-based timeliness claims a shift in expert knowledge production from credentialed individuals to infrastructures and standardized procedures; second, they prioritize large homogenous datasets over consultation and contestation among different experts; and third, they streamline expert selection such that experts are recruited from existing intra-institutional pools rather than third parties. Jointly, these shifts speed up monitoring and reaction capabilities, but also risk eroding important checks on expert overconfidence.

Keywords: crisis; expertise; humanitarian aid; public health; rapid response; temporality

International organizations (IOs) and the multilateral system as such confront significant challenges today – fierce contestation by their members on the one hand and proliferating humanitarian, ecological, and economic crises on the other. Eroding confidence in these organizations and that system notwithstanding, IOs remain protagonists in the development and implementation of practical responses to these crises. Expertise and the authority of experts are a core ingredient of such responses. Yet in the midst of IO contestation, demands for accountable expertise are at tension with simultaneous demands for swift action. Organizations have responded to this twin pressure by innovating how they pursue expert governance. Policymakers increasingly conceptualize crisis expertise, in this context, under the rubric of 'rapid response'. Yet while scholarship on crisis governance and expertise abounds, their connections in the constitution of crisis expertise remain under-explored. To develop them further, this article asks: in the case of rapid response, how do timeliness claims and practices affect the constitution of crisis expertise?

IR's understanding of how expert knowledge becomes authoritative has vastly expanded over recent decades, but remains largely wedded to the understanding that it is some claim to objectivity

that lends expertise its power.[1] In keeping with this special issue's aim to shed light on the pluralization of expertise, this article explores the role of claims about timeliness in international governance as a counterpoint to that understanding. Work on crisis, as well as work on timing and temporality, tells us that in times of crisis, actors are able to gain authority by constructing their contributions, services, or interventions as 'timely'.[2] Such input is understood as timely when it appears, to follow a dictionary definition, to be 'coming early or at the right time' or alternatively to be 'appropriate or adapted to the times or the occasion'.[3] Close attunement to the broader timing exigencies of a governance context, as well as intersubjectively constructed standards of appropriateness and adaptation, are thus key. International policymakers, both the staff of IOs and those circling their orbit, likewise frequently base calls for a closer involvement of experts on the need for a faster pace of decision-making. What consequences does this have for the constitution and contestation of expert authority? Our understanding of and ability to answer this question remains lacking to date, despite recurrent references to timely knowledge as a supposedly essential crisis management resource.[4] Expert-centred timely governance practices are bound to affect horizons of possibility in global governance and IOs more broadly.

A growing proportion of recent work on expertise adopts a historical perspective, simultaneously uncovering the longer technocratic legacies of modern IOs and advancing the study of the ideological assumptions as well as social networks of expert-centred governance practices in international relations.[5] A background assumption underpinning much of this burgeoning literature is that the politics of expertise cannot be fully grasped unless we historicize it. This opens up the temporal horizon of expert-centred practices themselves, but also raises new questions about the relationship between expertise and time more generally. Much of the historical literature on expertise connects expertise again to claims about objectivity and impartiality, but notably also to projections into and speculation about the future. In the latter case, the temporal politics of expertise refers to the temporal horizons that expert involvement may variously open up or foreclose. This article explores the potential of this connection for how we understand expertise in IR. Yet rather than continue the important project of historicizing expertise, my aim here is to conceptually probe the implications of *claims about timeliness* for the constitution of expert authority. In other words, if historical work in IR reminds us that expertise frames time – how does time frame expertise?

[1] See, for example, Ole Jacob Sending, *The Politics of Expertise* (University of Michigan Press, 2015); Anna Leander and Ole Wæver (eds), *Assembling Exclusive Expertise: Knowledge, Ignorance and Conflict Resolution in the Global South* (Routledge, 2019); Marieke Louis and Lucile Maertens, *Why International Organizations Hate Politics: Depoliticizing the World* (Routledge, 2021).

[2] Kimberley Hutchings, *Time and World Politics: Thinking the Present* (Manchester University Press, 2008); Janet Roitman, *Anti-Crisis* (Duke University Press, 2013); Andrew R. Hom, 'Timing is everything: Toward a better understanding of time and international politics', *International Studies Quarterly*, 62:1 (2018), pp. 69–79.

[3] Merriam-Webster, 'Timely', *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, available at: {merriam-webster.com}, accessed 5 December 2025.

[4] Ulla Rosenström and Jari Lyytimäki, 'The role of indicators in improving timeliness of international environmental reports', *European Environment*, 16:1 (2006), pp. 32–44; Daniel Stauffacher, 'Strengthening crisis information management', *The Digital Dividend/UN Chronicles* (2011), available at: {un.org}, accessed 30 June 2025; Timon Forster and Mirko Heinzel, 'Reacting, fast and slow: How world leaders shaped government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic', *Journal of European Public Policy* 28:8 (2021), pp. 1299–1320; Sabine Kuhlmann, Mikael Hellström, Ulf Ramberg, and Renate Reiter, 'Tracing divergence in crisis governance: Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in France, Germany and Sweden compared', *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 87:3 (2021), pp. 556–575. For a critical discussion see Jack L. Amoureux JL, 'Is faster better? Political and ethical framings of pace and space', *International Theory* 1:2 (2020), pp. 163–188.

[5] Douglas Howland, 'An alternative mode of international order: The international administrative union in the nineteenth century', *Review of International Studies* 41:1 (2015), pp. 161–183; Joanne Yao, '"Conquest from barbarism": The Danube Commission, international order and the control of nature as a Standard of Civilization', *European Journal of International Relations* 25:2 (2019), pp. 335–359; Jens Steffek, *International Organization as Technocratic Utopia* (Oxford University Press, 2019); Waqar Zaidi, *Technological Internationalism and World Order: Aviation, Atomic Energy, and the Search for International Peace 1920–50* (Cambridge University Press, 2021); Jan Eijking, 'Historical claims to the international: The case of the Suez Canal experts', *International Studies Quarterly* 67:3 (2023), sqad041.

This article first connects IR scholarship on crisis with theories of timing to investigate how timeliness – a factor that presumably intensifies in situations constructed as crisis – affects the constitution of expert authority. My approach considers this question on three main dimensions: knowledge production, epistemic diversity, and expert selection. These are mediated by specific procedures, instruments, and technologies. The article then examines this mediation in the case of the post-Cold War proliferation of 'rapid response mechanisms' (RRMs). In response to notable moments of crisis, from the 1994 Rwanda genocide to the 2008 financial crisis, a widening range of IOs has implemented RRMs. Initially, these efforts were inspired by the 1970s security sector concept of 'rapid deployment'. Rather than providing a comprehensive account of the institutional mechanisms that make RRMs work or not work, however, the aim of my analysis is to conceptualize, based on the phenomenon of RRMs, the political effects of timeliness on expert authority. This is a speculative exercise in moving the study of expert authority beyond objectivity.

I advance three overall claims. First, I argue that RRM-based timeliness claims a shift in knowledge production from credentialed individuals to infrastructures and standardized procedures. Second, they prioritize large homogenous datasets over consultation and contestation among different experts. Third, RRMs streamline expert selection from existing institutional pools rather than third parties. Jointly, these shifts speed up monitoring and reaction capabilities, but also risk eroding important checks on expert overconfidence. They give rise to a type of expert authority that is substantively different from non-time-framed expertise. None of these effects derives authority from objectivity. Inversely, this means that the contestation of expert-based crisis responses thus also faces substantively different conditions.

The article proceeds by first outlining the central argument and the emergence and role of RRMs; second, by placing its core contribution in the context of the wider literature on expertise and of this special issue; and third, by examining timeliness effects of two major RRMs at the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Food Programme (WFP), respectively. This brief analysis suggests that proliferating calls for more timely knowledge in the IO context are subject to informationist bias: they rely on assumptions of international actors as rational information processors; and suppose that information contains self-evident action imperatives that can be unproblematically translated into policy prescriptions.[6] Yet in addition, demands for timely knowledge are also constrained by the specific pressures and political effects of timeliness itself, a better understanding of which is the aim of this article.

Expertise in times of crisis

Work on crisis in political science and IR spans a wide range, including rationalist and interpretivist approaches which I distinguish here in simplified form for the sake of brevity. Rationalists, including some historical institutionalists, emphasize the exogenous dimension of crisis: crises erupt in the real world and subsequently impress themselves upon social actors. Like natural disasters, they happen 'out there' and social actors respond to them.[7] Interpretivists instead emphasize endogeneity: they assume that crisis and crisis management tend to interact and are therefore not necessarily empirically separable.[8] They do not claim that crises are not actually occurring external phenomena – crises are real. What they insist on, rather, is that policymakers approach them by means of selective interpretation. Some crises are not recognized or 'elevated' to the level of emergency: governance elites have persistently framed poverty, for example, as an enduring protracted problem even though it exhibits many of the same features of various crises. The merits and disadvantages

[6]For a historical account of informationism in international organizations, see Jan Eijking, 'Brain worlds: information order and interwar intellectual cooperation', *European Journal of International Relations* 31:3 (2024), pp. 537–560.

[7]Most classically, Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (HarperCollins, 1971).

[8]See Wesley W. Widmaier, Mark Blyth, and Leonard Seabrooke, 'Exogenous shocks or endogenous constructions? The meanings of wars and crises', *International Studies Quarterly* 51:4 (2007), pp. 747–759.

of framing climate change as a crisis or, say, as a 'long problem' in Thomas Hale's recent phrasing,[9] continue to fuel debate among civil society organizations. Conversely, some events are labelled as crises that others welcome as opportunity: the 1960s invention of quartz technology in watchmaking – which brought us affordable timepieces and reliable digital timekeeping – was framed as the 'quartz crisis' by Swiss watch manufacturers, who saw this innovation (to which they had themselves contributed) as an existential threat to their business. Crisis is, in short, a profoundly relative statement.

Events do not, on this view, simply impress themselves upon us as crises; they are rather only constituted by way of labelling, framing, and other practices of interpretation. These in turn depend on the expectations and rational as well as ideological preferences of decision-makers and their advisers – including experts. This approach need not fully reject rationalist perspectives but can, in a minimal formulation, simply refer to a difference in emphasis. It chiefly asks that we interpret political and institutional actors' different claims about the temporal nature of a crisis: its eruption, the speed at which it unfolds, but also the time frame for any response to it. The interpretive approach also requires that we pay attention to those engaged in crisis construction, that is, actors involved at various stages, within an organization or beyond, in formulating and advancing denotations of crisis. This article takes the opportunity to build on such interpretivist work to examine the production of timeliness-related claims – here understood as time pressures that are thought to flow from an urgent need to respond to crisis – in relation to the constitution of expert authority.

So how exactly can crisis construction be said to relate to claims about temporality? A literature on time horizons and future discounting, inspired by game theory, has illuminated how decisions in global governance routinely involve time horizons and so-called intertemporal trade-offs.[10] Others have explored the relationship between risk preferences and resolve in 'wartime', pointing to the accommodation of risk under conditions of time pressure.[11] On the other hand, interpretive approaches to foreign policy analysis have most recently turned to time perception and constructions of temporality in foreign policy decision-making.[12] There is thus relative agreement that time pressures affect decision-making outcomes. It is less clear, first, to what extent such pressures affect the role of *experts* and expert knowledge; and second, how the construction of a particular situation as characterized by *crisis* relates to the constitution of expert authority. From an institutional perspective, 'claims about time have been used to rationalize the institutional distribution of powers', particularly for unelected supranational bodies in need of sources of legitimacy other than representativeness.[13] Claims about the long term may fulfil this function: constructions of long histories can cast a policy as overdetermined; projections into a long future routinely spur action in the present. Invocations of crisis, too, may involve the long term insofar as they frequently activate comparisons and analogies. But they also dramatically reconfigure political temporality.

In broad strokes, to identify a crisis is to identify a change in the pace and rhythm of governance; to mobilize comparative past chronologies against which a present predicament stands out; and to project speculative future chronologies that prescribe a certain course of action based on risk estimates.[14] Each of these corresponds to specific pressures for 'timely knowledge' and thus affects how timeliness validates knowledge. Let me briefly elaborate on these points of contact between the crisis literature and the literature on timing. First, crisis signals a change in the pace

[9]Thomas Hale, *Long Problems: Climate Change and the Challenge of Governing Across Time* (Princeton University Press, 2024).

[10]Philip Streich and Jack S. Levy, 'Time horizons, discounting, and intertemporal choice', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 51:2 (2007), pp. 199–226; Ronald R. Krebs and Aaron Rapport, 'International relations and the psychology of time horizons', *International Studies Quarterly* 56:3 (2012), pp. 530–543.

[11]Joshua D. Kertzer, 'Resolve, time, and risk', *International Organization* 71:S1 (2017), pp. S109–S136.

[12]Ryan Beasley, 'Time on their minds: Narrative reasoning and leaders' construction of temporality in foreign policy', *Review of International Studies*, online (2025), pp. 1–21, available at: {doi:10.1017/S0260210525100946}.

[13]Antoine Vauchez and Jonathan White, 'The crisis of long-termism: Time and independence in the European Union', *West European Politics*, online (2025), available at: {doi:10.1080/01402382.2025.2521595}, p. 2.

[14]See Jonathan White, *In The Long Run: The Future as a Political Idea* (Profile Books, 2024).

and rhythm of governance. Crisis transforms time: any particular crisis urges us to reassess past, present, and future to draw comparisons, learn lessons, formulate expectations, issue warnings, be better prepared, and so on.[15] Crisis also acts as a point of identifying analogues across time: international relations is rife with historical comparisons of one crisis with another, a recent example being comparisons between the international response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the experience of the 1918–20 influenza epidemic. Janet Roitman's work on crisis has further foregrounded temporalization or the construction of time frames as an effect of crisis construction.[16] On her reading, crisis construction imposes a certain view of chronological time on which the present stands out as exceptional *because* of crisis. This argument has been taken up in IR. Jordheim and Wigen concur, for instance, that 'the concept of *crisis* is increasingly being used to order the international', specifically insofar as it performs 'conceptual work by synchronising multiple times – speeds, rhythms, and durations – into one homogenous global time': crisis time.[17] The IR literature on securitization notably shares considerable common ground with work on crisis and crisis construction, given that both are concerned with political constructions of emergency and contrasts between 'normal time' and times of exception.[18]

Second, crisis claims mobilize past chronologies against which a present predicament stands out. The exception is always a judgement of the past against which the crisis stands out.[19] On the one hand, this implies a claim to historical forms of stability that are now, at the time of crisis, ostensibly disrupted: the binary of crisis time and normal time returns. On the other hand, the past also gets 'slowed down' to make the present appear accelerated. If crisis construction generates 'time compression', then this alters simultaneously the narration of the present and the narration of the past.[20] Crisis claims also mobilize the past by way of previous claims about the exceptionality of time. Crisis claims may lend support to intensified monitoring, which in turn can increase the likelihood of future crisis – the more you want to see, the more you get to see. Monitoring systems, widespread for example at the European Union, 'identify, more readily and clearly than ever before, a broader universe of problems that are ripe for construction into an emerging crisis'.[21] Again, the effect goes both ways: the present looks different based on the introduction of these monitoring systems and methods, but the past too gets articulated as the path that leads to a decision taken in the present. 'The regular search for new crises', Rhinard points out, 'crowds out policy space for issues that could have been arrived at through processes of deeper, democratic deliberation'.[22] What applies to policy space can just as well be recognized in time space.[23]

Third, crisis claims project speculative future chronologies that prescribe a certain course of action based on risk estimates. If crisis 'privileges a politics of speed', it encourages rushing towards a projected conception of the future.[24] Two aspects to this affect the constitution of expert authority.

[15]Murray Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle* (University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 29.

[16]Roitman, *Anti-Crisis*, p. 4.

[17]Helge Jordheim and Einar Wigen, 'Conceptual synchronisation: From progress to crisis', *Millennium* 46:3 (2018), pp. 421–39, p. 425. For a process-relational theory of *timing* rather than time, see Hom, 'Timing is everything'. Roitman, *Anti-Crisis*, p. 5.

[18]The securitization literature is far too large to fully address here, but for a more recent example of overlap with the politics of risk/threat construction, see Eric Van Rythoven, 'The securitization dilemma', *Journal of Global Security Studies* 5:3 (2020), pp. 478–493.

[19]Christian Kreuder-Sonnen, *Emergency Powers of International Organizations: Between Normalization and Containment* (Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 962.

[20]Arjen Boin, Paul't Hart, Eric Stern, and Bengt Sundelius, *The Politics of Crisis Management: Public Leadership Under Pressure* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 3.

[21]Mark Rhinard, 'The crisisification of policy-making in the European Union', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 57:3 (2019), pp. 616–33, p. 624.

[22]Rhinard, 'Crisisification', p. 625.

[23]A version of this argument underpins Jonathan White, *Politics of Last Resort: Governing by Emergency in the European Union* (Oxford University Press, 2019) and White, *Long Run*; also see Hom, 'Timing is everything'.

[24]Claudia Aradau and Rens Van Munster, 'Governing terrorism through risk: Taking precautions, (un)knowing the future', *European Journal of International Relations* 13:1 (2007), pp. 89–115, p. 107.

For one, the rise of modern practices of governance needs to be considered in the historical context of the changing legitimation of political authority. It is no coincidence that 'ideas of the future as an object of calculation, best placed in the hands of experts' emerged at a time when colonial capitalism and the still-emerging scientific and technical professions entered international governance institutions in a powerful new transnational coalition.[25]

The role of information and statistics, gradually anchored in modern conceptions of international governance, plays a fundamental role here. As a mediated, compressed, and accumulated signifier of knowledge, information affects the constitution of expert authority insofar as what counts here is not the status, credential, and recognition of the individual expert, but the ability of technical specialists to collect, coordinate, and issue numerical and patterned projections of the future. Some IOs were in fact wholly founded upon this as their guiding rationale: the long history of UNESCO is rooted in utopian plans for a world information centre[26]; the forerunner of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) – the International Institute of Agriculture – was conceived as a global data hub for crop statistics;[27] and the League of Nations Economic and Financial Organization was heavily influenced by the professionalization of statistics and the expertise of statisticians.[28] As purveyors of such projections, experts brought major forms of social capital into the modern international organization – an epistemic form of social capital, to be sure, but one wielded as and converted into political authority precisely not based on epistemic merit but on political preference and selection.

Eventually, the popularity during the Cold War of governable risk and systems analysis heavily shaped the role of expert predictions in public policy circles as well as think tanks such as RAND. Nuclear weapons strategy, as is well-known, was heavily shaped by a cottage industry of risk models and simulations. In the security sector, meanwhile, the Cold War inspired a wide range of policing and military innovations, including of course the well-known expansion of counterinsurgency warfare but also the invention of rapid deployment.

Conceived in the 1970s, rapid deployment referred to the efficient mobilization of funds and personnel as soon as a crisis had been identified. It combined classical planning for contingency arrangements for an event that would require immediate action, with longer-term monitoring mechanisms, such as early warning systems. The possibility of rapid action was premised simultaneously on institutionalizing long-term information infrastructures and on a suspension of business as usual once a crisis was to hit. This was a potent and promising idea, and dedicated rapid deployment units were established in military and policing forces across the world. 'Rapid' was a buzzword that outlasted the Cold War, inspiring governance reform proposals after the fabled end of history. As liberal internationalists thought time had finally come to a standstill, international politics needed not reform, not redistribution, not reparations – but sophisticated information infrastructures that signalled readiness for immediate action. The solutions were settled; now they needed to be sped up.

It is against this backdrop that from the 1990s, so-called rapid response mechanisms and models began to proliferate across a broad spectrum of formal and informal IOs. Peacekeeping operations were the first to do so by taking inspiration from military rapid action units, but by the 2010s, this had shaped up into a distinctive trend across the international governance sector. From the International Monetary Fund to the Food and Agriculture Organization, from Greenpeace to the G7: today, RRMs are everywhere. On the one hand, this is a predictable answer to vocal demands for more responsive IOs that prove their worth by acting more quickly in the face of crises. This is a time when the UN system faces ever-tighter budgetary constraints, caused in part by the second Trump

[25] White, *Long Run*, p. 7.

[26] Eijking, 'Brain worlds'.

[27] Amalia Ribi Forclaz, 'Agriculture, American expertise, and the quest for global data: Leon Estabrook and the First World Agricultural Census of 1930', *Journal of Global History* 11:1 (2016), pp. 44–65.

[28] Patricia Clavin, *Securing the World Economy: The Reinvention of the League of Nations, 1920–1946* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

administration's stance against multilateral institutions, but also by the increase across Europe and elsewhere in defence spending at the expense of foreign aid and development budgets. RRMs are framed here as more cost-effective alternatives to longer-term, expensive missions.[29]

On the other hand, an increasing reliance on RRMs poses new questions about crisis construction and the effects of temporal imperatives, not only on the action capacity and functionality of different IOs, but also on the constitution of actor authority. In this sense, RRMs are directly connected to and illustrative of the pluralization of expertise in the focus of this special issue. If crisis construction affects the authorization of experts, then RRMs should introduce their own specific forms of expert authorization. That in turn raises key questions as to the foundations and limits of expert authority under conditions of time pressure and demands for timely knowledge, but also questions about how RRMs shift the locus, production, and contestability of expertise. Examining these issues up close is necessary as a first step towards better understanding the potentials but also limitations of IO reliance on RRMs as part of their crisis response repertoire.

In the context of this special issue, RRMs offer a revealing illustration of how expert authority gets constituted from sources other than objectivity. As an informally standardized method of crisis governance, RRMs should tell us how different IOs conceptualize the relationship between timeliness claims and expert authority. This raises the central question: how does timeliness, in the shape of rapid response imperatives, affect standards of knowledge production but also the contestability and performance of expert authority? Psychologists tell us that time pressures introduce different kinds of bias in decision-making, including what social psychologists call the 'mere urgency effect'; a prioritization of intuition over analytical thinking; habitual rather than goal-oriented decisions; non-adjustment of initial judgement; or an increased reliance 'on gut feelings in social situations'.[30] These pressures may turn into distinct forms of governance bias. What remains unclear is whether this is structurally the case; whether RRMs simply institutionalize time pressure or relate to time in more ways than one; and how exactly different constructions of urgency and timeliness affect the constitution of expert authority in IOs. The remainder of this article, based on the theoretical and conceptual discussion in this section, turns to these questions by examining three specific examples of RRMs at three major IOs.

In sum, if crisis construction, as the literature has made abundantly clear, is essentially a form of time construction, then claims about timeliness are by definition crucial components of crisis management practices. This much is unsurprising, and the wide range of scholarly work on the political imperatives of urgency, emergency, and exception in times of crisis has made this much clear. Yet what also follows, and this has been met with relative neglect, is a specific imperative to mobilize expertise following a similar logic. We have strong reasons, that is, to expect that the mobilization of expertise in times of crisis is subject to validation by criteria other than objectivity. Crisis expertise – one of the most salient avenues for engaging expertise in global governance writ large – is fundamentally inflected by claims about timely knowledge.

So how exactly do such claims reconfigure expert authority in international governance? One major, widely acknowledged source of expert authority is the production of certainty. This includes certainty about the temporal horizon of policy: a closure of the policy time frame. Demand for such certainty is heightened in times of crisis, when fast-paced decision-making takes priority. But claims about timeliness also feature in a longer time frame, insofar as they inform various measures and adjustments to the overall decision-making *process* – a core principle underpinning, for example, the notion of preparedness. While the reliance of global governance practices on quantification, modelling, and big data is not new but in fact historically foundational, claims about timeliness are subject to change as they are mediated and shaped by changing techniques of risk

[29]E.g. Annika S. Hansen (ed), *The Future of United Nations Peace Operations: Compendium of Policy Papers and Policy Recommendations for the UN Peacekeeping Ministerial 2025 in Berlin*, Berlin: Global Alliance for Peace Operations (2025), pp. 6–7.

[30]Rongjun Yu, 'Stress potentiates decision biases: A stress induced deliberation-to-intuition (SIDI) model', *Neurobiology of Stress* 12:3 (2016), pp. 83–95.

management, prediction, and modelling.[31] Specific kinds of experts, and specific kinds of expert knowledge, are privileged.

This discussion generates at least three empirical questions. First, if timeliness exerts time pressure (whether constructed or real) such that an institution prepares for an exceptional mode of accelerated decision-making, then we should expect expert-based practices built into normal decision-making likewise to get accelerated. But what does that mean? *What, if anything, do timeliness imperatives imply for the production of expert knowledge?*

Second, expert consultation normally works by means of commissions: a number of different specialists get invited to provide input on different aspects of a given policy domain. Collectively, this expert commission then formulates a number of policy recommendations. How diverse the composition of such a commission is can vary greatly, both by type of institution (intergovernmental or non-governmental, for instance) and by domain specificity. The WHO's IHR Emergency Committees, for example, mobilize specialists from its so-called 'expert roster' on a highly specified public health threat such as H1N1, Zika virus, or Covid-19; such commissions are thus low diversity but high specificity. Inversely, the UN's Human Development Report, an advisory document intended to assess progress in the deliberately broad policy domain of 'human development', gets produced in consultation with an advisory board variously including economists, public policy scholars, environmental scientists, sociologists, lawyers, or philosophers.[32] How is such variation affected by demands for timeliness? *What, if anything, do timeliness imperatives imply for deliberation between different expert perspectives?*

A third type of variation concerns expert selection. Criteria deployed for expert mobilization can vary greatly.[33] Since expertise is a status label applied by already-authoritative actors, expert authority is highly dependent on social recognition and thus on the intents and purposes (political, institutional, or otherwise) of the mobilizer. Such bias is only one part of the difficulty; however; another is the sheer practicality of selection. When an epidemic erupts, who do journalists first turn to – do they call on established contacts with public communication skills, or do they try to identify the currently most knowledgeable and most experienced individual in the specialized area of concern? There is no simple answer. Many universities have 'find an expert' tools on their websites. Some organizations manage pools of registered experts, as in the case of the WHO's IHR expert roster cited above. These workarounds presumably depend not least on the sense of urgency that marks out crisis contexts. So *what, if anything, do timeliness imperatives imply for how experts get selected?* These three questions, regarding knowledge production, expert diversity, and expert selection, guide my empirical analysis in the next section.

Two registers of rapid response

By probing the role and design of RRMs at two major IOs, this section yields preliminary answers to the three guiding questions formulated in the previous section: what, if anything, do timeliness imperatives imply for the production of expert knowledge; for deliberation between different expert perspectives; and for how experts get selected? Based on a close look at two RRMs, my answer is that RRM-centred timeliness claims privilege, first, mediated infrastructures of knowledge production rather than credentialed individuals, thus shifting the locus of expert authority; second, data and data visualization, understood as self-evident, over slow deliberation among a diverse group of experts; and third, expert selection from pre-existing social networks. Jointly,

[31] See Luis Aue, 'How do metrics shape polities? From analogue to digital measurement regimes in international health politics', *International Political Sociology* 15:1 (2021), pp. 83–101; Annabelle Littoz-Monnet and Juanita Uribe, 'Methods regimes in global governance: The politics of evidence-making in global health', *International Political Sociology* 17:2 (2023), olad005.

[32] Pedro Conceição, *A matter of choice: People and possibilities in the age of AI. Human Development Report 2025* (United Nations Development Programme, 2025), p. iv.

[33] See Sending, *Politics of Expertise*; Jan Eijking, 'The micro-politics of international commissions: The case of telegraphic standards', in Negar Mansouri and Daniel Quiroga Villamarín (eds), *Ways of Seeing International Organizations* (Cambridge University Press, 2025), pp. 186–207.

these risks reinforce informationism, facilitate corporate lock-in, and erode important checks on expert overconfidence. While it may be unsurprising that some checks and balances get sidestepped under time pressure, I argue that RRMs institutionalize concomitant risks as desirable procedural attributes. Ironically, then, the RRM reform drive risks obstructing adaptation rather than facilitating it.

RRMs perform and standardize expertise as a unitary and homogenous contribution to high-speed crisis management: their purpose is to produce single statements with clear policy implications. This is at odds not only with the contested and heterogenous reality of scientific knowledge production, but also with two important lessons from the crisis management literature discussed above: that crises are both exogenous and endogenous to institutions; and that crises are rarely as fast-paced as they seem, instead forming part of longer-term patterns of turbulence, 'long problems',[34] or 'creeping crises'.[35] It also represents – in the context of the pluralization of expertise – an interesting counterpoint to another prominent means of expert authorization in IOs: long-term foresight.[36] Whereas technocratic supranational institutions such as the European Central Bank or the European Commission 'tie their authority to an idea of temporal long-sightedness', as Vauchez and White argue, this gets rhetorically juxtaposed to the supposed short-termism of democratically elected institutions. The 'supranational sphere' emerges thus as 'a key laboratory for the development of long-termism as a principle of legitimation'.[37] RRMs turn this logic on its head: an internal critique of slow-moving bureaucracy, in anticipation of pushback against underperformance, becomes the basis for governance reform aimed at producing a sense of timeliness, immediacy, and hyper-reactivity. This is part of the classic dilemma of expertise in politics, and I am not arguing that we can somehow dissolve this tension. But to remove institutional safeguards that mitigate this tension, in the name of reaction speed, as I illustrate below, contributes to an 'illusion of control'.[38] It also potentially shapes public perceptions of how expertise and policy do and should relate in self-undermining ways.

Today, the UN system routinely refers to 'early warning and rapid response' (abbreviated as EW/RR), but what exactly the notion of rapid response refers to is left undefined and varies considerably from agency to agency. A steep increase in the number of rapid response, rapid assessment, and similar mechanisms and instruments has marked a range of post-Cold War IO reforms and innovations. In 2018, the G7 set up an RRM to tackle 'challenges to democracy and the rules-based international order'; UNICEF has several rapid response teams since 2013; and the FAO has a rapid risk assessment mechanism for animal health threats.[39] The 2008–2009 financial crisis, as well as the Covid-19 pandemic, further spurred the introduction of RRMs. During both crises, IOs were widely perceived as obvious first responders, but also criticized for their crisis responses. These heavily depended on the mobilization of specialized forms of technical expertise. Both crises too had to be interpreted based on controversial choices about who or what caused the crisis, how policy burdens were to be distributed, or what lessons were to be learned from response successes and failures.

This raises questions as to the extent to which RRMs help streamline or settle such choices, and the consequences of setting up RRMs not just for notions of organizational responsiveness and resilience, but also for the constitution as well as contestation of expert authority. By examining two different RRMs – selected to cover the breadth of the policy spectrum to which RRMs are

[34] Hale, *Long Problems*.

[35] Arjen Boin, Magnus Ekengren, and Mark Rhinard M (eds), *Understanding the Creeping Crisis* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

[36] Laura Pantzerhielm, this issue.

[37] Vauchez and White, 'Long-termism', pp. 1–2.

[38] Jon Daníelsson, *The Illusion of Control: Why Financial Crises Happen, and What We Can (and Can't) Do About It* (Yale University Press, 2022).

[39] Government of Canada, *Rapid Response Mechanism Canada: Global Affairs Canada*, available at: {international.gc.ca}, accessed 30 June 2025; UNICEF, *Rapid Response Teams: A UNICEF Experience* (UNICEF, 2019), available at: { unicef.org}, accessed 30 June 2025; FAO, *Technical Guidelines on Rapid Risk Assessment for Animal Health Threats* (Food and Agriculture Organisation, 2021), available at: {fao.org}, accessed 30 June 2025.

thus far applied most extensively – this section sheds light on these consequences. What follows is not a comprehensive analysis of institutional mechanisms of crisis governance in each of these cases, which would exceed the scope of this article. Instead, I provide a brief discussion of how each organization justifies, defines, and implements RRMs. In each case, I ask the three guiding questions outlined above to understand how each organization developed and implements an RRM as a means of producing timely expert knowledge and obtaining expert authority. As such, my analysis loosely applies a practice-tracing logic – specifically to trace the procedural institutionalization of timely expertise – to the study of policy documents and official guidance, as well as public relations materials issued by each respective IO.[40]

Rapid response at the WHO

First, as the major IO tasked with coordinating public health crisis responses, the WHO has a long-standing Emergency Response Framework (ERF), regularly issuing updates which allow lessons to be drawn from the organization's public health interventions. A core component of the ERF is 'rapid risk assessment' (RRA). A 2024 document outlining the latest version of the ERF framework starts from a timeliness-related problem diagnosis: the confluence, co-occurrence, and co-production of a range of different crises. WHO member states, the document notes, face 'increasing numbers of emergencies with health consequences from all hazards' including biological, societal, meteorological, hydrological, environmental, chemical, technological, and even extraterrestrial hazards. 'Emergencies can be complex', the paper stresses, 'with more than one cause, and can have significant public health, social, economic and political impacts'.[41] The ERF aims to respond to this with rigorous efforts 'to strengthen the global architecture for health emergency preparedness, prevention, response and resilience … at the national and international levels'.[42] The rationale for the WHO's updated version of its ERF, in other words, is a characterization of crisis as intersectional and interlinked, as it were. What are the consequences of this understanding for the WHO's practical implementation of rapid risk assessment?

The ERF indicates a close link between crisis construction, timeliness claims, and the production of expert knowledge. Timeliness claims here directly affect knowledge production. The ERF declares its intent to act timely, on the one hand, and outlines specific measures and response protocols, on the other. In response to public health events and emergencies, the ERF drives an imperative to 'undertake a timely, independent and rigorous risk assessment' by deploying 'sufficient expert staff and material resources early in the event to ensure an effective assessment and operational response'. In emergencies, the WHO will 'establish a clear management structure for the response' based on its 'incident management system' and 'develop an evidence-based response strategy, plan and funding appeal'. It will also 'coordinate the health sector response' and 'provide relevant technical expertise to affected Member States and all relevant stakeholders'.[43] A contingency fund for emergencies, established in 2015 by agreement at the World Health Assembly, allows for the 'rapid release of funds for incident managers to meet the early performance standards set out in the ERF'. This means that within 24 hours of an approved request, following the grading of a public health event as an emergency, up to 500,000 US dollars can be released.[44]

The ERF thus contains an ambitious list of institutional demands, illustrating both the operational complexity of WHO responses and the decision-making pressures it faces when tailoring a response to the multi-level and multi-actor exigencies of an unfolding public health crisis. The production and provision of 'relevant technical expertise' remains a key priority, since this is an

[40] See Vincent Pouliot, 'Practice tracing', in Andrew Bennett and Jeffrey T. Checkel (eds), *Process Tracing: From Metaphor to Analytic Tool* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 237–259.

[41] WHO, *Emergency Response Framework: Internal WHO Procedures* (World Health Organisation, 2024), available at: {iris.who.int}, accessed 4 July 2025, p. viii.

[42] WHO, *Emergency Response Framework*, p. viii.

[43] WHO, *Emergency Response Framework*, p. 2.

[44] WHO, *Emergency Response Framework*, p. 4.

unmissable ingredient of the WHO's institutional function, but under the ERF expertise also needs to meet the rapidity criterion. Key to the organization's ability to act fast, under the real time pressures of a public health emergency, is crisis construction – here in the shape of the detection and declaration of an emergency: a responsibility that decides between following standard procedure and unlocking emergency mechanisms.

This responsibility and power lies with experts in charge of rapid risk assessment, pointing us to the connection between timeliness claims and expert authority. As per ERF guidelines, RRA is distinct from 'public health situation analysis' (PHSA) insofar as the latter is more comprehensive and slower. PHSA considers 'all public health issues in a given context'.[45] RRA instead charges 'detection, verification and risk assessment experts at headquarters and regional levels' who 'work closely with country offices and … national focal points … to detect and verify public health events of national or international concern and to conduct RRAs'.[46] In practical terms, conducting an RRA consists of 'searching public and open sources of information for key words across different electronic media using computer-aided algorithms … and through media monitoring systems' as well as threat monitoring based on 'integrated disease surveillance systems' and direct communication with country offices and national focal points, but also UN partners and other UN agencies, NGOs, and professional networks.[47]

How do different expert perspectives come together in the production of rapid risk assessment at the WHO? Verifying a public health event, in order to establish its status, entails 'active and systematic information gathering from various sources for triangulation and technical review'. These sources include WHO staff, local and national health authorities, 'heads of laboratories and other technical experts', staff at other UN and health sector agencies, as well as 'other sources, for example expert networks, published reports and media information'.[48] A 2015 innovation aimed at streamlining these latter more informal sources of public health information, the Electronic Early Warning, Alert and Response System or EWARS, issues mobile data collection kits that allow primary health care professionals and clinicians to share 'real-time reporting from the field'.[49] The final outcome of an individual RRA is to assign, in the WHO's words, 'an overall risk level of low, moderate, high or very high to the event at national, regional and global levels. The risk level is therefore a product of the likelihood of consequences and the public health impact of the event'.[50] On the basis of this, RRA experts issue their recommendation: to discard the event, submit it for WHO grading, or to refer it directly for consideration as a 'public health emergency of international concern' (PHEIC, such as for instance the Covid-19 pandemic) by the WHO's Director-General.

The raw material of the WHO's RRM is thus a battery of monitoring and surveillance data coupled with localized medical expert assessments. By triangulating as much information as possible, the WHO aims to produce an impartial assessment of threat levels in a given public health situation. Early warning systems and reliable information flows form the underlying infrastructure needed to enable RRA experts to conduct their analyses and issue timely reports and recommendations. However, the chief locus of expert authority is not where health professionals carry out their work. Timeliness claims change *who* the experts are – coordinators of information infrastructure – and where expert authority resides. Nor is the impartiality of the WHO's epistemic infrastructure what endows RRA experts with the significant and institutionally highly consequential power to weigh risk levels. Rapid response expertise, instead, issues from claims about timely knowledge: *rapid* assessment, *early* warning, and *real time* reporting are the central building blocks of expert authority. If the fast coordination of an incredibly broad and multi-level array of information sources is

[45]WHO, *Emergency Response Framework*, p. 5.
[46]WHO, *Emergency Response Framework*, p. 6.
[47]WHO, *Emergency Response Framework*, p. 6.
[48]WHO, *Emergency Response Framework*, p. 6.
[49]WHO, 'EWARS in a Box: Electronic Early Warning, Alert, and Response System in Emergencies' (WHO Health Emergencies Program, 2015), available at: {cdn.who.int}, accessed 11 December 2025.
[50]WHO, *Emergency Response Framework*, p. 7.

what makes RRAs possible, then staff members with network capital are those best situated to claim expert authority. This is substantially different from conceptions of expertise that assume that it is primarily the production of objectivity claims that authorizes experts.

If timely expert assessments are required, they also raise concerns. The WHO is well aware, for example, that it 'cannot provide an effective response to emergencies without close coordination and collaboration with Member States and with partners'. Yet this coordination, subjecting expertise to deliberation among government representatives and stakeholders, not only slows down the timeliness and rapidity generated by means of RRAs. Such forms of accountability also serve as a reminder that rapid response is part fiction: without the cooperation of member states, rapid assessment cannot translate into action. 'Information sharing, transparency and open communication are paramount', which is why the international health regulations 'provide the legal framework for requiring the sharing of information among Member States'.[51] Yet dependency on member states is precisely one of the WHO's protracted problems, as it has been during the Covid-19 pandemic. Particularly during the early phase of the pandemic, China was reluctant to share data regarding the onset and spread of the disease, which hampered the institution's ability to carry out assessments and implement a response. Despite ERF stipulations, rapid funds release mechanisms, and the coordinated information infrastructure underpinning the WHO's RRAs, public health emergencies are frequently accompanied by repeated and unheeded calls by the organization for 'global data sharing'.[52]

In sum, then, RRMs in the context of public health policy at the WHO are practically riven by a contradiction between timeliness imperatives, urging fast knowledge tailored to fast reaction, and accountability imperatives, where WHO member states will hold onto their deliberative powers as a condition (and indeed purpose) of their membership in the first place. This tension does not mean, however, that RRMs are a mere public relations stunt. On the one hand, the ERF serves as concrete guidance for policymakers within the WHO system, and as we have seen this includes an ambition to involve input from expert advisors as much as field medics. On the other hand, rapid response at the WHO has specific implications for the three dimensions of concern in this article: expert knowledge production, expert deliberation, and expert selection. The WHO's ERF subordinates knowledge production to demands for rapid assessment. Without dropping the aim to triangulate such knowledge across levels as well as societal domains from its official guidance, the point of RRA is explicitly to translate expert judgement, in a timely and efficient manner, into a single statement that sums up the risk level of a particular health situation. Expertise gets produced, in other words, by mediators of the institution's complex assessment infrastructure. These mediators, rather than individual expert scientists, are the relevant holders of expert authority in this context. Homogenization into a single statement also comes at the expense, tolerated as the price of practicability, of including divergent assessments. Finally, in terms of expert selection, the WHO's RRM is explicitly cast as an efficient means of coordinating its own existing network of specialists across all levels, such that rapidity here explicitly closes off expert mobilization to its own internal pool.

Rapid response at the WFP

The UN's World Food Programme (WFP) has established its own set of RRMs in turn. As in the case of the WHO, let me take a closer look at how the WFP institutionalizes its own timeliness claims, and with what effects on knowledge production, epistemic diversity, and expert selection. As the world's largest humanitarian organization, the WFP is a central part of the UN family of humanitarian agencies. It is primarily engaged in disaster relief and food assistance, including

[51] WHO, *Emergency Response Framework: Second edition* (World Health Organisation, 2017), available at: {iris.who.int}, accessed 4 July 2025, p. 16.

[52] United Nations, 'WHO Urges China to be "Transparent" in Sharing COVID-19 data' (UN News, 2023), available at: {new.un.org}, accessed 3 July 2025.

school meals provision as well as emergency food relief in areas of violent conflict. To strengthen its responsiveness to humanitarian emergencies, and as part of its 'strategy to end hunger by 2030', the WFP relies heavily on the technological mediation of rapid response, with its own particular consequences for where expert authority is located and how it is generated.

Since 2017, the WFP runs a drones programme with support from the Belgian and UK governments. Initially in an exploratory capacity, WFP Drones has since expanded its use of unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) to build 'local capacity to use drone technology in countries prone to natural disasters'.[53] Since the WFP's 2019 drone-supported relief operations following Cyclones Idai and Kenneth in Mozambique, as well as 2022 drone-supported damage assessment after Hurricane Fiona in the Dominican Republic, the organization has invested further time and resources in exploring the potentials of deploying UAS across its operations. WFP Drones have supported operations 'from prepositioning equipment and strengthening local emergency preparedness efforts through trainings, to supporting emergency responses when disaster hits'.[54] Rapidity is the core selling point of WFP Drones: the programme has developed, for example, a machine learning tool that automates analysis of 'high resolution images of the impacted areas, cutting assessment time from weeks to hours'.[55] Expert knowledge gets produced, in this context, in 'real time'.

The WFP currently uses drones for cargo delivery and communication, but also for crop monitoring, damage assessment, flood modelling, search and rescue, as well as site surveys. Coordinated by 'a dedicated drone team with cross-functional subject matter experts',[56] WFP Drones also directly serves the organization's rapid response capacities. In other words, it combines fast-paced knowledge production, heavily mediated by technology, with triangulation based on the input of different 'subject matter experts'. Having emerged from the WFP's 2021 Innovation Accelerator Bootcamp, a so-called Rapid Response Connectivity Carrier (R2C2) is currently being explored for broader use after successful tests in Sweden. According to the WFP's own description, the R2C2 is 'a portable 90-metre tower with a tethered drone and 4G transmitter, providing 24/7 coverage over 72 square kilometers'.[57] While triangulation of different expert perspectives goes into the operation of drones, data-gathering is delegated to the drones themselves.

By contrast with the WHO's RRA, the WFP pursues a slightly different kind of timeliness: knowledge production is sped up less to achieve the rapid production of a single risk statement, and rather to rapidly collect large amounts of data. WFP Drones pursues this goal by means of technological innovation. In so doing, it closely collaborates with corporate actors from the UAS sector. For example, the WFP leads an Emergency Telecommunications Cluster (ETC), a consortium of a range of different public and private actors that describes itself as 'a global network of organizations that work together to provide shared communications services in humanitarian emergencies'.[58] One of the network's main partners is French drone company Elistair, which specializes in tethered drones for civil and military operations to 'help teams in the field protect lives and assets', and has clients that include the US Army and UK Royal Marines.[59] Another key partner is Ericsson Response, the humanitarian branch of the Swedish multinational Ericsson Group, famous as the inventor of Bluetooth technology. Ericsson is also a key supplier of mission-critical technology, such as portable 5G, to the US Department of Defence. While this is perhaps unsurprising, epistemic diversity is thus limited to technological–industrial expertise – by framing WFP

[53]WFP, 'The Rapid Response Connectivity Carrier (R2C2)' (World Food Programme), available at: {drones.wfp.org}, accessed 3 July 2025.

[54]WFP, 'WFP Drones Factsheet' (World Food Programme, 2023), available at: {drones.wfp.org}, accessed 3 July 2025, p. 2.

[55]WFP, 'Drones Factsheet', p. 2.

[56]WFP, 'WFP Lessons Learned on Scaling Up the Use of Drones in Humanitarian Context' (World Food Programme, 2024), available at: {drones.wfp.org}, accessed 3 July 2025.

[57]WFP, 'Rapid Response Connectivity Carrier (R2C2): Using drones for humanitarian emergency response' (World Food Programme, 2025), available at: {innovation.wfp.org}, accessed 3 July 2025.

[58]ETC, 'Emergency Telecommunications Cluster', available at: {etcluster.org}, accessed 3 July 2025.

[59]Elistair, 'The Tethered Drone Company', available at: {elistair.com}, accessed 3 July 2025.

data-gathering practices as a matter of implementing technological innovation, timeliness again narrows the scope of relevant specialist input.

Not unlike the WHO's RRA, the WFP's drones programme also shifts the locus of expert authority. Heavy reliance on technological mediation and automation, both of which are understood to be necessary to increase operational efficiency and particularly operational speed, means that the core function of experts – working either as remote UAS pilots, or as advisors in one of four multi-stakeholder 'technical working groups' (on ethics, regulations and operations, imagery, and connectivity) – have shifted significantly. So has thus, once again, who the experts are: drone operators, on the one hand, and analysts of rapid-response information, on the other.

Drones technologically displace, outsource, and mediate rapid information gathering processes. The result is first, technological lock-in, which introduces dependencies on the skills and expertise of corporate actors whose normative commitments to the WFP's humanitarian goals cannot be expected to remain constant; and second, an incentive for mass data production under conditions of reduced demand assessment and quality control. Neither of these, it should be noted, subtract from the substantial advances that the WFP's drones programme clearly enables, not least in the context of risk monitoring. A 2018–2019 WFP Drones project in Mozambique built a flood-hazard model based on drones monitoring data to support community preparedness for climate change-related flooding.[60] Still, the programme serves as a technology-centred RRM, where rapidity is achieved by means of drones-generated information gathering, on the one hand, and wireless connectivity as well as operational support, on the other. This translates rapidity in practical terms into the fast generation of more data, while entering into a dependency on corporate epistemic capital.

Compared to the WHO's approach to rapid risk assessment, it is notable that the WFP turns to technological mediation as a chief means of pursuing the production of timely expertise. To what extent, then, is technological mediation rather than rapid response as such the driver of expert authority in this case? And how does technological mediation relate to rapid response, exactly? A first point of note here is that UAS are specifically deployed as a means of achieving rapid response capabilities; they are thus subordinated to a claim about the need for timely monitoring information as well as the need for timely intervention. Of course, it is conceivable that the use of UAS spreads by contagion or technological mission creep, such that more and more adjacent policy areas within the WFP start deploying drones even where UAS are not in demand. In the context of RRMs, however, drones are assigned a predetermined and thus limited role in a broader information and knowledge production infrastructure. To that extent, it is timeliness imperatives rather than technology itself that drives the changing constitution of expert authority. That said, centring the implementation of an RRM on one specific technology arguably brings in private actors much more directly than in the case of the WHO. While underfunded public institutions are generally vulnerable to private donors, and the UN system is no exception there, technological dependency on industry leaders is of a different order of magnitude. Here timeliness imperatives, at the same time as they reduce checks on expert knowledge itself, also lower the readiness threshold for involving corporate actors.

The most clear-cut difference between the WHO and WFP RRMs, however, lies in the types of knowledge that timeliness imperatives respectively privilege. Whereas the WHO emphasizes data-gathering at every level, simultaneously contributing to both detailed local knowledge and localized institutional legitimacy, the WFP compiles datasets from top-down geographical monitoring. Technological mediation, and costs sunk into establishing the WFP Drones programme, here not only narrows the possibilities for epistemic diversity and cross-referencing, but also makes it much harder to bring other types of knowledge to bear on the WFP's rapid response capabilities.

[60] WFP, 'We Take Thousands of Aerial Photos and Run Them through a Big Computer', *Insight by the World Food Programme* (Medium, 2020), available at: {https://medium.com/world-food-programme-insight/we-take-thousands-of-aerial-photos-and-run-them-through-a-big-computer-ff08eb096351}, accessed 3 July 2025.

In other words, technology may increase speed and cost-effectiveness, yet at the same time reduces input flexibility and diversity.

To conclude, the above two cases illustrate the purchase of investigating the role of timeliness claims through the lens of RRMs across different governance domains in the UN institutional ecosystem. My analysis first turned to the role of rapid risk assessment in the WHO's Emergency Response Framework, which I argued introduces two notable shifts in terms of public health expert authority: one, the locus of expertise shifts from individual experts to a diffuse data infrastructure, in part supplied by mobile real time alert kits; and two, expert authority is vested less in clinicians and field medics and more in those coordinating and linking up the different parts of the RRM data infrastructure.

Second, I zoomed in on the technology-centred approach to rapid response at the WFP's drones programme and its R2C2 project. Here too, RRMs practically translate into the reorganization of the agency's data infrastructure, but specifically in this case that infrastructure is coupled with physical technological devices. This reproduces the same shift of expert authority towards network power rather than objectivity, but also generates distinct lock-in effects and dependencies on corporate actors from the companies that support and technologically enable WFP Drones.

It is important to emphasize that I am not advancing a normative argument for or against RRMs. This article is not an assessment of whether or not RRMs are useful or effective, either. Instead, I have taken a closer look at how RRMs generate expert authority on the basis of institutional claims that 'rapid response' is how IOs can produce and act on timely knowledge. This is distinct from objectivity as a source of expert authority – in obvious and less obvious ways. The obvious way in which timeliness differs from objectivity is that timeliness pressures reduce checks on the validity and accuracy of expert knowledge: knowledge is recognized as timely when it guides action, even if it is potentially erroneous; whereas knowledge is recognized as objective when it has been validated by procedures such as credentialed peer review, regardless of how 'applicable' it may be. More crudely put: timely knowledge is policy-shaped and objective knowledge is evidence-shaped.

A less obvious way in which timeliness is a distinctive source of expert authority is in its implications for how expertise slots into governance practices. Once we pluralize the study of expertise in the way this special issue proposes it, this also changes where we look for the politics of expertise in IR. RRMs are very different from expert committees, advisory councils, or commissions of inquiry, but as procedural instruments for the accumulation and utilization of specialized knowledge they belong to the relevant universe of cases of expert-based governance nonetheless. Here timeliness imperatives turn into pressures not only to speed up knowledge production, but also to institutionalize the authority of data coordinators, data platforms, and information-gathering devices such as the WHO's mobile kit or the WFP's drones. Timely expertise is produced by and through technology, at the same time as timely experts are skilled in-house practitioners rather than third-party advisors. This is, in short, a different kind of expertise in every respect.

Conclusion

Time- and timing-related claims to expert authority are far from uniform, and while this article examined the short-term emphasis of timeliness, there certainly are other temporal grounds that expert-based governance may rely on. This variation may depend on issue areas – in economic and climate governance, for example, constructions of long-term foresight may be more successful than rapid reactivity – or on practical matters such as budgetary constraints. While the focus of this article has been on the relationship between crisis construction and expert authority, its theoretical insights raise questions that are important across these different possible temporal claims. The case of RRMs is intriguing as it combines two seemingly contradictory temporal impulses: as discussed above, the UN system combines RRMs generally with an early-warning approach to risk – a fast-paced, reactive, and short-term technique is thus infrastructurally interwoven with the long-term, big-data monitoring of early-warning systems.

My analysis investigated how timeliness claims – articulated under conditions of crisis – affect expert authority on three dimensions: knowledge production, epistemic diversity, and expert selection. By tracing the making and implementation of RRMs and rapid response practices at two major IOs, I unpacked how timeliness affects the conditions of expert authority in the specific issue areas of public health and humanitarian aid. First, in terms of knowledge production, the pursuit of timely information turns data collection, rather than experience or deep familiarity with context, into the basic ingredient of expert knowledge production. The demand for rapid responses tends to favour mediated, technological systems of knowledge production over individual accredited experts, effectively relocating authority. Second, with regard to epistemic diversity, by placing a premium on speed, timeliness disincentivizes epistemic diversity. RRMs prioritize data perceived as immediately self-explanatory over more time-consuming, diverse, and deliberative forms of knowledge-making. Third, by shifting sites of expert authority – from, say, field staff or third parties – further up the chain of command to staff members whose task it now is to coordinate different knowledge inputs gathered via an RRM, it turns networked timeliness rather than objectivity into the basis of expert selection. RRMs encourage the selection of experts from extant social networks.

This leads me, finally, to a more critical speculation. The risk is that RRM dynamics institutionalize a self-undermining type of expert governance. Fast evidence-based policymaking is by definition subject to fewer checks, which trades off reactivity against accuracy. Added to that, as we have seen, RRMs are widely justified as efficient knowledge processing instruments, which lends itself to an 'illusion of control' that can be a crisis-reinforcing factor.[61] How would RRMs generate such problematic outcomes? By design, they entrench informationist assumptions about the relationship between data-gathering and policy quality; they deepen dependency on private actors; and they perpetuate existing institutional arrangements under the guise of reform.

Paradoxically, such a reform agenda may obstruct transformation and adaptability instead of promoting it. RRMs standardize a mechanistic type of expertise, presenting it as a unified component of fast-moving crisis intervention. This portrayal clashes with the fragmented, contested, and provisional nature of actual scientific knowledge production. It also contradicts two key insights from crisis management scholarship over the past decade: that crises are both endogenous and exogenous; and that they are seldom as immediate or short-lived as they appear and instead connect to historical patterns of turbulence, constitute 'long problems', or manifest as 'creeping crises' as in the case of climate change.[62] This highlights a persistent tension between expertise and politics – one that cannot be entirely resolved. However, accelerating governance practices at the expense of institutional checks and balances risks weakening the mechanisms that help manage this tension. In doing so, RRMs can score short-term points at the expense of long-term vision, and inflate public expectations of what expert-led governance can deliver, damaging its legitimacy.

Demand for timely knowledge, intimately tied to the construction of crisis, shapes expert authority in ways that substantively differ from non-time-framed expertise. The point here is not to argue that this is a qualitatively worse or better form of expertise; nor to suggest that timely knowledge is more fragile or less fragile than alternative. Instead, it is important first of all to notice this shift as such: it means that what expertise in global governance *actually refers to* has changed. This is notable in its own right. But second, this also inversely affects the contestability of expert-based policy in international organizations. Calls for 'more timely' knowledge in governance are deeply constrained by a more general informationist bias: relying on unhelpful assumptions of international actors as rational information processors; and supposing that information contains self-evident action imperatives that are unproblematically translated into policy prescriptions.

I illustrated the analytical upshot of this argument in a brief examination of two RRMs in particular. The United Nations system has long faced budgetary constraints, and today finds itself in even more dire straits given membership contribution shortfalls and renewed pushback

[61] Daníelsson, *Illusion of Control*.
[62] See Hale, *Long Problems*; Boin et al., *Creeping Crisis*.

against multilateral institutions writ large. Faced with these severe limitations to action capacity, UN agencies are looking for ways to undertake reform that somehow squares the circle of cheaper yet also more effective operational capacity. RRMs are a part of the palette of innovations aimed at doing just that. They form a part of the broader so-called early warning and rapid response, or EW/RR, governance complex. A 2023–2027 Executive Action Plan issued by the UN Global Early Warning Initiative for the Implementation of Climate Adaptation (spearheaded by the World Meteorological Organization and endorsed by COP27) titled 'Early Warnings for All' which combines rapid response imperatives, multi-stakeholderism, and forecasting to improve UN preparedness for future climate disaster.[63] Embedded in these broader managerial governance structures, RRMs here too reflect a conception of expertise that privileges timeliness and reactivity over objectivity. At the same time, as with other forms of expert politics, normative demands for inclusion or representation, let alone legitimacy, are sidelined.

Not unlike Cold War risk models and simulations, RRMs can induce what economists have termed 'destabilising stability', or the propensity of risk-reducing measures to encourage risk-taking behaviour.[64] This suggests the possibility of a 'timeliness dilemma' in addition to the security dilemma and the 'securitization dilemma'.[65] Crisis management in response to economic shocks, on this analysis, can be self-undermining in the long run when it produces excessive certainty based on risk prediction models. Such models look reliable but are known to be highly inaccurate for anything beyond the short term. In politics, opinion polls are a well-known example that exhibits similar characteristics: the impression of a foreclosed election outcome can encourage voting behaviour that intentionally deviates from predictions. In the case of timely knowledge, crisis pressures can increase the demand for certainty despite the fact that its supply has not changed. This can distort incentives and lower verification standards. Paying closer attention to how RRMs institutionalize and normalize a timeliness-based form of expert authority, conveyed as a shortcut to evidence-based policy, is thus crucial for anyone interested in the study of expert authority, as well as anyone interested in IO governance reform and its limitations.

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[63] WMO, 'Early Warnings for All: The UN Global Early Warning Initiative for the Implementation of Climate Adaptation' (WMO E-Library, 2022), available at: {library.wmo/.int}, accessed 1 July 2025. On multi-stakeholderism see Juanita Uribe, 'Excluding through inclusion: Managerial practices in the era of multistakeholder governance', *Review of International Political Economy* 31:6 (2024), pp. 1686–1709; on forecasting, see Pantzerhielm, this issue.

[64] Daníelsson, *Illusion of Control*; Jens Beckert and Richard Bronk (eds), *Uncertain Futures: Imaginaries, Narratives, and Calculation in the Economy* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

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