

# Crisis Response and Management of Public Administrations: Forgotten Tales

**Yannic Schulte**

University of Wuppertal  
Institute for Public Safety and Emergency  
Management  
yschulte@uni-wuppertal.de

**Malte Schönefeld**

University of Wuppertal  
Institute for Public Safety and Emergency  
Management  
schoenefeld@uni-wuppertal.de

**Patricia M. Schütte**

University of Wuppertal  
Institute for Public Safety and Emergency  
Management  
schuette@uni-wuppertal.de

**Frank Fiedrich**

University of Wuppertal  
Institute for Public Safety and Emergency  
Management  
fiedrich@uni-wuppertal.de

## ABSTRACT

Crises and disasters have become omnipresent worldwide in recent years. But thinking of managing those critical situations the focus of the public and scientific research in recent years was primarily on blue light organizations, i.e., classic emergency response organizations. This changed with the refugee situation in 2015/2016 and the COVID-19 pandemic, when public administrations and local authorities in particular took on a central role in crisis management. They became the central players in those situations, played an important role at the interface with the local population and were the first point of contact and information for them. This article sheds light on municipal administrations in Germany which have often be overlooked in various stages of crisis management. Drawing on empirical evidence from a German research project, it delves into the extent to which municipalities may have been overlooked or disregarded in certain aspects.

## Keywords

Public administrations, Crisis management, Refugee movements, COVID-19, Empirical research

## INTRODUCTION

Crises and disasters have become omnipresent worldwide in recent years. Authorities and organizations with safety and security tasks (AOS) implement measures to deal with these events on the basis of their (organizational) structures and processes, and developed and tested operational plans. Thinking of crises and disasters, the focus of the public, but also of scientific research in the last few years, was primarily on blue light organizations, i.e., classic emergency response organizations like the German Federal Agency for Technical Relief or fire brigades. On the basis of an ongoing research project, we would like to draw attention to an actor apart from the classic “blue light organizations” who, in our view, plays an important role in all phases of crisis management: local administrative authorities or municipalities. While “usual” crises such as extreme weather events are particularly challenging for established emergency organizations, the refugee situation 2015/16 and the COVID-19 pandemic are examples of how important crisis-proof and crisis-tested structures are, not only in established emergency management organizations, but also in public administrations. These situations are characterized by the range of tasks that arise for public administrations (on different levels) in the context of crisis management, which makes them the central players in those situations. They played an important role at the interface with the local population and were the first point of contact and information for them. During the refugee situation in 2015/16,

administrations took on tasks in the area of health protection, registration and accommodation of refugees. During the COVID-19 pandemic, administrations had to compensate for staff shortages, while at the same time the number of personnel-intensive tasks, such as contact tracing and vaccine prioritization and distribution, increased. This clearly shows that administrations play a key role in crisis situations. Therefore, it is necessary for them to establish processes for the preparation, management and also recovery phase. Personnel in public administrations needs the necessary training and flexibility for effective crisis management, for which sufficient resources and skills are required even before the crisis situation arises in order to be able to react quickly and flexibly.

This article sheds light on municipal administrations in Germany which have often be overlooked in various stages of crisis management. It will be discussed to which extent local administrations or local authorities may have been forgotten or neglected in some respects in an integrated perspective on crisis management. Based on empirical interview material on the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and the analysis of media and administrative documents in Germany, we look at how local authorities have positioned themselves in the area of crisis management in this long-lasting situation. We also examine how cooperation between local authorities and other crisis management stakeholders has developed and evolved and why the preparation and follow-up phase of the crisis management lifecycle play an important role in integrated crisis management.

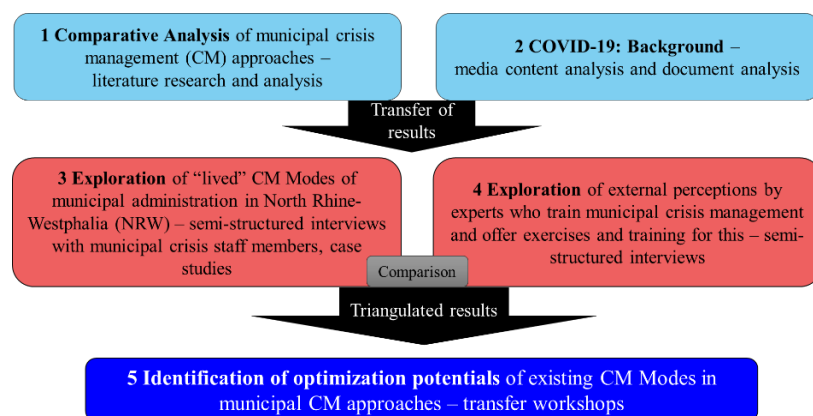
## RESEARCH PROJECTS: DATA COLLECTION AND METHODS

The project "*Local governments in crisis mode (KoViK)*", which is funded by the German Research Foundation between 2022 and 2024, deals with the management of the COVID-19 pandemic from a municipal perspective. The project builds on previous research on dealing with the refugee situation in 2015/2016 from the perspective of various actors, including various public administrations. The resulting findings revealed the following:

- (1) that administrations had little practice in crisis management at that time, that administration representatives did not see themselves or their organizations as central authorities in crisis management and that crisis management was not a central, but merely an "additional task" alongside the actual administrative work;
- (2) that they were not perceived by third parties such as AOS as professional representatives of crisis management;
- (3) that administrations lacked suitable structures for the adequate management of an acute crisis, but were instead rather inhibited due to bureaucratic principles and a so-called "iron cage" inherent in bureaucracy, and
- (4) that in some places they were preoccupied with addressing their internal organizational challenges rather than effectively managing the situation at hand (Schütte et al., 2022; Schulte et al., 2022).

The KoViK project builds on these findings and pursues three objectives: Firstly, using the SARS-CoV-2 situation as an example, insights are to be gained into practiced approaches to crisis management and crisis communication by municipal administrations. Secondly, those are reflected with regard to established forms and, thirdly, the consequences of pluralistic approaches for the population and other actors are anticipated. The project focuses on cases in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW).

In order to take as comprehensive a look as possible at the crisis management of local authorities, the study uses a multi-method approach, which can be seen in the following figure (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Work structure of the KoViK research project on municipal crisis management (Source: own illustration based on Schönfeld et al. (2023)).**

The aim of the first work package (WP) (1) was a comparative analysis of scientific studies that deal with the topic of municipal crisis management. Here, a state of research and the approaches to be derived from it were developed. Parallel to this, a media content analysis on the development of the pandemic in municipalities in NRW was carried out in WP 2. In addition, legal texts in the field of disaster and crises law were analyzed to see how they deal with the concept of crisis management (WP 2). Based on the results of WP 2, 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted: (a) 19 interviews with administrative staff of independent cities and rural districts in NRW who were involved in crisis management activities during COVID-19 pandemic at least, i.e., in crisis teams (self-perception) (WP 3) as well as (b) 6 interviews with experts who provide training in municipal crisis management, design and conduct training, exercises for this purpose and are therefore able to provide an external assessment of municipal crisis management and crisis team work (external perception) (WP 4). The empirical results of WP 1, 2, 3 and 4 will be triangulated and documented in five case studies. In these, the results for the 19 cities and districts are summarized at the level of administrative districts (there are five administrative districts in NRW) in order to ensure a certain degree of anonymity. All of the results will be triangulated and prepared for practice transfer workshops in which practitioners will collaborate to identify opportunities for improvement explore feasible implementation strategies (WP 5). The following sections present the (not yet conclusive) results of WP 1 to 3.

### **(LOCAL) PUBLIC ADMINISTRATIONS IN CRISIS MANAGEMENT: BRIEF STATE OF THE ART**

Global critical situations also affect the local level. This was the case for the COVID-19 pandemic as well. For more than two years, public administrations at all federal levels in Germany operated in a continuous crisis mode. Municipalities, as the "lowest main administrative level(s) responsible for the entire local administration" (Ehl & Wendekamm, 2013, p. 133, own translation) were facing major challenges, because it was their mission to implement decisions made at federal and state level. Municipal governments took over a central part of coping with consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic within their frameworks of local crisis management, while their daily tasks had to be continued. Before that, local and intermediary (here: *Landkreise/Regierungsbezirke*) actors typically gained relatively low attention by the public, media, research, etc. in crises and disasters, compared to "blue light organizations" or the administrative counterparts on the national and federal level (Benton, 2002; Schneider & Park, 1989), although it does not match with the high importance of local and regional emergency management. Major exceptions are events such as the storm surge in Hamburg in 1962, when Helmut Schmidt (then Hamburg's police senator and later German Chancellor) implemented a rapid but legally difficult rescue operation.

At least until 2020, it can be assumed that the state of the art in (administrative) science – especially in the German-language literature – was deficient. Research revealed only a few studies on the crisis management of public administrations in relation to social crises, as the following quote makes clear:

"From an administrative science perspective, disasters and manifest crises are rarely studied. This is particularly surprising because public authorities play a central role in coping with disasters" (Hustedt, 2019, p. 183, own translation).

In recent years, overviews of administrative science on administration in Germany have focused on crises, the associated challenges for German administrations, and the resulting (potential) changes and reforms (e.g., digitalization of administrations) have been discussed, but no mention has been made of specific crisis management approaches by administrations for such social crises, forms of handling such as administrative staff or aspects of crisis communication (e.g., Bauer & Grande, 2018; Bogumil et al., 2016; Bogumil & Jann, 2020; Kuhlmann & Schwab, 2017; Möltgen-Sicking & Winter, 2018; Ziekow, 2018 cited after Schönefeld et al., 2023). One possible reason for this could be that public administrations were less likely to appear as "the" central crisis managers in earlier times. Usually, various public safety and emergency response organizations such as the police and fire department were the focus of social and media attention when it came to dealing with critical situations (Schönefeld et al., 2023). However, this changed with the refugee movements in 2015/2016 and the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, studies on public administrations – especially local administrations – focused primarily on, e.g., the assessment of measures (by administrative staff and citizens) and the satisfaction of the population with municipal crisis management (e.g. Eckhard & Lenz, 2020; Otto, 2021; Pöhler et al., 2020). In addition, approaches to learning from critical phases were also examined (e.g. Aden, 2023; C. Bauer & Egger, 2023; Bauer et al., 2022). Nevertheless, there were mostly rather superficial considerations of the crisis management of public administrations (Neumann, 2020). Studies examining the distinctions and interconnections among crisis management at various governmental levels – federal, state, district, and local – have only begun to emerge gradually, roughly coinciding with the progression of the pandemic (e.g., Kuhlmann & Franzke, 2022; Lenz, 2023).

When the KoViK was applied for in 2021, the scientific literature on crisis management in (German) local authorities was comparatively "thin" and pointed to more research gaps and associated questions than findings and answers. Against this background, corresponding media content and document analyses (of legal texts and other legal foundations) were carried out in order to create the basis for an understanding of the image of crisis management in local government that is conveyed. The following passages take a closer look at the findings.

## (LOCAL) PUBLIC ADMINISTRATIONS: FORGOTTEN TALES IN DOCUMENTS AND MEDIA

### Media Content Analysis

As already mentioned, (local) public administrations are an important stakeholder in crisis management. During COVID-19, they were a key player when it came to developing or implementing rules in relation to pandemic management. They were and are an important link between the population (as those affected by the pandemic and the chosen crisis management measures) and the higher crisis management levels on district, state and federal levels. Based on this, the question arises as to whether the role those local administrations have taken on in crisis management has also been reflected in media coverage. This analysis was predicated on the assumption that experiences in complex societies are predominantly mediated through media channels (Sackmann, 2020, p. 354). As the project focuses on one region in Germany, regional newspapers were chosen accordingly. A total of seven newspapers were scrutinized by using a search strategy incorporating terms related to the pandemic, municipal administrations and crisis management (actors) as shown here and translated from German by the authors ((Corona OR COVID-19 OR SARS-CoV-2 OR pandemic) AND (municipality OR public health department OR administration) AND (crisis\*)). This strategy was designed to capture articles published from the onset of 2020 through the early stages of 2023, specifically selecting the first complete week of each quarter as sampling points. This temporal delineation was chosen to ensure a comprehensive overview of the media landscape over the specified period. For initial screening of the articles four inclusion and 19 exclusion criteria were formulated, grounded in qualitative theses on crisis management and municipal administration. Two of the 23 criteria are listed here as examples. The inclusion criteria primarily comprised the relevant actors, as well as the organization and processes for crisis management, e.g. "The report is neutral/positive/negative about pandemic management / crisis management (in particular organization/structure/processes of the stakeholders)". Reports on multiple crises, such as a flood occurring at the same time as the pandemic, were also included. In contrast, articles of less than 300 words were excluded, as were articles that merely reported on the course of the pandemic (e.g., in the form of indices) or, for example, on progress in vaccinating the population. The included articles should explicitly focus on crisis management.

The first search identified a corpus of 674 articles. 128 articles then were removed due to duplicates. From the remaining 546 articles 108 were selected on the basis of the in- and exclusion criteria (see Figure 2).

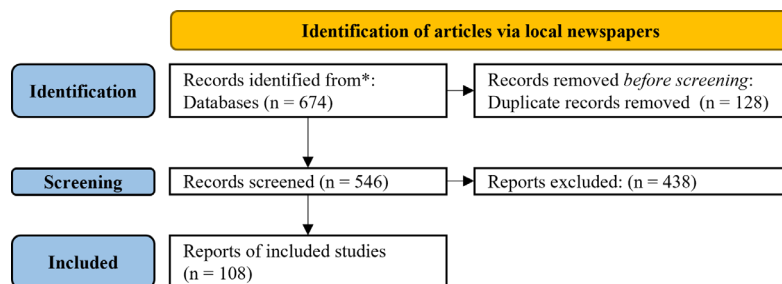


Figure 2. Retrieval of local newspaper articles; own illustration based on Page et al., 2021.

The analysis of the media content has not yet been fully completed. Only initial highlights can be presented here. Using a qualitative thematic synthesis (Thomas et al., 2017) for the analysis illuminates several predominant themes in relation to crisis management. These included the (differences in) municipal handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and the development of case numbers and vaccine availability, challenges for the local citizens like closing of schools, and financial measures implemented by local governments, e.g., for small businesses. A significant emphasis was placed on challenges such as staffing shortages and the imperative for digitalization within municipal crisis management operations. Conversely, less attention was afforded to the structures and processes underpinning crisis management efforts. In summary, explicit references to crisis management were infrequently encountered within the titles or texts of the analyzed articles, suggesting a more implicit engagement with the topic within media discourses. The emphasis in the analyzed media content predominantly lays on the immediate visible aspects and impacts of the crisis, the reactive measures undertaken and the challenges faced, rather than on a detailed examination of strategic or procedural aspects of crisis management. The complexities

of crisis management and more comprehensive public understanding of the roles of municipal administrations in such critical situations remain in the background.

### Document analysis of legal background of CM in Germany

A further step in the project presented is the analysis of documents relating to public administrations and their crisis management. The document analysis was intended to examine how the actor and its crisis management is anchored and structured in terms of administrative law. For this purpose, the 16 disaster control laws on state level – because there are no “crisis management laws” or anything comparable – in Germany were analyzed using a qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022) and compiled in a synopsis. It focused on the statutory frameworks across the federal states of Germany, specifically examining their references to municipal crisis management. This investigation looked into the legal texts to identify the regulations regarding the requirements, structures, processes, and the provisions for personnel and technical equipment outlined therein. Furthermore, the analysis sought to understand how these statutes address the various phases of crisis management in these legislative texts. The primary aim was to identify how these laws articulate the roles and responsibilities at the municipal level, alongside the mechanisms and resources allocated for crisis management and disaster response. The content analysis of the legal documents revealed a few interesting points: A notable observation is that only a few states offer a general definition of crisis management, and even fewer distinguish clearly between the concepts of disaster management and crisis management. This lack of differentiation suggests a conceptual overlap that may affect the clarity and effectiveness of crisis response strategies. Civil protection departments are predominantly designated as the lead actors in these frameworks, a consistent topic across the legislative texts. However, the depth of description regarding the operational teams or staffs for disaster management or crisis management varies significantly, often described in broad terms without delving into the specifics of their formation, roles, or operational guidelines. The general approach to detailing the structure of crisis management efforts underscores a potential gap in providing clear guidance for the execution of these crucial functions at the municipal level. The way in which crisis management work is organized is therefore the responsibility of the actors involved and is therefore left to each local authority. Another critical finding of this analysis is the sporadic mention of the crisis management cycle phases within these laws. Notably, the follow-up phase, essential for learning and improvement post-crisis, is almost never explicitly addressed. This points to a potential oversight in ensuring comprehensive crisis management planning that includes not only immediate response but also the long-term embedding and improvement of the crisis management process. These insights result from the 16 analyzed disaster control laws of the federal states in Germany. The findings highlight the need for clearer definitions, differentiated roles, and detailed procedural guidelines within Germany's disaster management and crisis response statutes. Addressing those gaps through legislative refinement and the incorporation of comprehensive crisis management cycle considerations could significantly enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of municipal crisis management efforts.

However, the document analysis has not yet been completed. Further documents will be included. The authors see the need to look at regulations and decrees at the local level, which can provide additional detail and concrete examples of crisis management practices. For example, the crisis management directive in NRW represents a more detailed formulation of local crisis management, which could provide insights into the operationalization of local crisis management frameworks.

### (LOCAL) PUBLIC ADMINISTRATIONS: FORGOTTEN TALES IN EMPIRICS/PRACTICE

This section is about forgotten tales and our findings in the empirical data in terms of interviews that we collected in the KoViK research project. The interviews were semi-structured, i.e., they combined pre-determined questions with the opportunity for the interviewer to explore deeper insights or follow up on responses through additional, impromptu questions. This approach allowed for a flexible conversation while ensuring that specific topics of interest were covered, facilitating both comparability across interviews and in-depth exploration of individual perspectives. The interviews were then transcribed and subsequently coded. Coding of interview content is a systematic process used in qualitative research to organize and categorize the data collected from interviews. This involves identifying patterns, themes, or concepts within the interview transcripts and assigning codes (labels or tags) to segments of text that represent these ideas. Coding serves as a crucial step in interpreting and drawing meaningful conclusions from qualitative data. For this interview material, a deductive-inductive approach was chosen for coding the interviews (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022).

We concentrate on four main topics that we consider as particularly relevant.

- (1) *The myth of follow-up (respectively evaluation) of actual crisis management practices in municipal administrations:* Follow-up practices are regularly been considered as important in a holistic approach to crisis

management. However, it regularly falls by the wayside or is carried out subordinately. It can be noted that a debriefing is universally desired, but often there is a lack of personnel resources, as one crisis follows another, or the return to day-to-day business leaves no more capacity for in-depth follow-up. Moreover, employees leave the administration faster than expected, taking the relevant knowledge with them:

*“What we would like is truly a debriefing of all participants [...] Besides the fact that so much has changed, the memories fade. And it's not just me; next year, our department head, who played a major role in handling the pandemic, will no longer be here. And who are you going to work with to process things when the key players involved are no longer around?”* (PublicAdministrationInterview(PAI)\_15)

In addition to the content, however, the importance of a ceremonial follow-up in the form of thank-you celebrations and small tokens of appreciation was repeatedly mentioned, which are seen as important from an emotional point of view in order to return to normal mode, but also to maintain the willingness to actively support crisis management in future situations. It is the explicit aim of the KoViK research project to gather and systematize the available crisis knowledge in order to be better prepared in the future and to support the often-limited follow-up resources of municipalities.

(2) *Learning on the job and missing exercises:* Exercises play a pivotal role in any civil protection curriculum. In the case of municipal administrations, the relevant training content is how to work in an administrative (not an operational) crisis management staff. Various public institutions in Germany offer these courses (e.g., Federal Office for Civil Protection and Disaster Assistance, Fire Brigade Institute of North Rhine-Westphalia), but resources are limited. On the other hand, interest of municipalities has so far been limited. The size and length of the crisis meant that untrained personnel also had to be deployed in crisis management (and therefore *was learning on the job*).

The task “crisis management” had to be re-learned: *“After the fall of the Cold War wall, I believe, no one thought anymore about disasters, crises, wars. The change has definitely been there for the last two years”* (PAI\_3). This departure from the task of crisis management also meant that hardly any resources were available for it: *“The mechanisms that used to exist, and the resources that had been dismantled, are only now slowly being rebuilt.”* (PAI\_7). This also includes that untrained personnel had to be trained on the job, in the crisis: *“not everyone who was involved there was fully trained. Instead, they had to grow into the task through the crisis”* (PAI\_1).

(3) *Empowerment of public servants during crises:* The extent of the COVID-19 pandemic required a large part of the municipal workforce to actively participate in crisis management – in addition to or instead of their actual tasks. Especially in the particularly intense initial phase of the pandemic, municipal staff were occupied with crisis management tasks in multiple shifts over several months. A cliché of working in administration is that of routine and sometimes even boring-monotonous work. The crisis provided staff with the “opportunity” for a different kind of work, across established hierarchical and professional boundaries, and possibly also with a different sense of self-efficacy: *“this mixing of levels was incredibly good for the self-perception of a district administration. Because suddenly people were important whom one might have foolishly thought before were not so important. And they were very important for certain things”* (PAI\_1). The fast-paced environment was felt as an attractive alternative to the usual tasks: *“it wasn't as slow as the administration usually operates, but it was fast-paced. Suddenly, you could be active. So, for the first time in a while, I really enjoyed my job again because there was real momentum”* (PAI\_15).

(4) *Collaboration with stakeholders:* Crisis management is often associated more with emergency services, i.e., the operational aspect, rather than with the administrative part, which is less illustrative. On the contrary, the image of administration is pretty much the opposite of what one associates with crisis management organizations. This also affects the perception that AOS have of administrations. In Germany, this seems to have started to change only in recent years. Various prolonged situations (migration situation in 2015/2016 and again since 2022, COVID-19, energy crisis) were not classic emergency services situations but primarily required leadership through the administrative strand of crisis management.

On the one hand, administrations were very active but not immediately visible. One could rather see the classic relief organizations instead: *“Many others, of course, see on-site, (...) Red Cross, fire department, and don't even know (...) that we organized it”* (PAI\_1). However, municipal administrations were key network facilitators on the local level and this corresponds with their self-perception: *“we always function as a network organization, always”* (PAI\_12). Despite the health focus of the crisis, collaboration with medical professionals are not reflected as a good practice: *“the worst, (...) and I say this very critically, were the doctors. The doctors were not the pioneers. (...) They didn't want to test, they didn't want to vaccinate afterwards. They were afraid of Corona.”* (PAI\_15)

## **CONCLUSION**

Drawing upon an integrated perspective on crisis management, this article emphasizes the central role of local administrations during the COVID-19 pandemic. We shed light on the significance of local administrations, which are often overlooked in both research and practice.

In the past, public administrations have been part of "forgotten tales" in crisis management research, where the focus was instead on blue light organizations and their crisis management. This is gradually being addressed as these public administrations as well as their crisis management are increasingly being included in the academic discourse. Additionally, their crucial contribution to crisis management is being recognized through crisis situations such as the 2015/16 refugee situation, the COVID-19 pandemic, or the energy crisis in Germany. The roles of local administrations are now slowly being more and more recognized and integrated into broader narratives of crisis management.

The underlying legal framework also reflects the "forgotten tales". The pandemic has stressed the need for "new chapters and layers" within the legal paradigms to adequately capture, define and delineate crisis management. The permanent crisis mode during the pandemic provides a favorable opportunity for the adaptation and refinement of legislation, as it is currently happening in NRW. At the same time, the forgotten perspective of local governments as crisis actors was also not highlighted in the local media landscape even during COVID-19. It became apparent that local administrations were not really portrayed as crisis managers in the media and that the visible aspects or the consequences of measures tended to be described or that individual, specialized experts or important political decision-makers had their say in some articles.

In practice, the pandemic has served as a catalyst for awareness-raising and change in perception of and in local administrations. The pandemic has highlighted the shortcomings and unexplored potential of current crisis management practices and highlighted areas for improvement and innovation in public administrations. Despite this progress, experience from previous crises shows that certain lessons are not being addressed. Issues such as the follow-up and sustainability of crisis management often fall by the wayside and are overlooked after the crisis has been managed. Conversely, certain practices, such as conducting exercises, have become much more common, although this may be more of a passing trend than a permanent part of crisis preparation.

In summary, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the key role of local administrations in crisis management. It has drawn attention to the legal, scientific and practical framework for crisis management and made it clear that an integrated perspective on crisis management is necessary in various crisis situations. However, not all lessons have been learned from the pandemic. With the research project and further research work, we would like to contribute to ensuring that not only immediate adjustments are made in crisis mode, but also that the sustainability of these measures is guaranteed. The experiences and adjustments made by local administrations during the pandemic provide a valuable basis for this.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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