

# Convention on Health Analysis and Management

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### Centralism: an accelerator or an obstacle to development?

*Nicolas Baverez, Gaspard Koenig, Philippe Tcheng  
Moderator: Claude Le Pen*

The connection between centralization, decentralization and development in the health sector has many different dimensions, including the regionalization of funding, the decentralization of prices, the decentralization of public health priorities, and the decentralization of decision-making centres, more so than administrative decentralization. These are all open-ended questions.

It is common knowledge that France has the most centralized healthcare system in the world. In other European countries, such as the United Kingdom and Sweden, the national vision is not incompatible with the taking into consideration of regional realities. In these countries, the regional health economy is a reality.

#### **1. From decentralization to the welfare state**

Historically, the French healthcare system has been highly decentralized. It was left in the charge of churches and local institutions. The first move towards centralization took place in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, followed by the development of the welfare state in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This welfare state has taken various forms, ranging from centralization to decentralization.

#### **2. The respective advantages of centralization and decentralization**

Centralization allows for financial balance and the management of shortages. It ensures that care is accessible throughout the national territory and guarantees the reliability of the healthcare system.

Decentralization responds to challenges specific to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The healthcare market has become globalized and can no longer be controlled by governments. Healthcare demand is increasingly individualized. In response to this demand, supply is growing in a decentralized manner. Decentralization also allows research and innovation to be managed in a more flexible and reactive manner. Finally, the increasing power of prevention is antithetical to excessive centralism.

#### **3. Centralization: a demonstration of distrust in civil society?**

What concerns does France wish to eliminate through centralism? A fear of the nation breaking apart? Guaranteed equal access to care? Cost optimization? Does France see a kind of disorder in independence, with the State operating as the guardian of order?

France has fallen into fanatical centralism. Its method of operation differs from the reform projects seen elsewhere in Europe and deviates from movements towards regionalization. The French healthcare system operates as if the government does not trust civil society.

#### **4. The end of the French government's omnipotence?**

In the end, it is not a matter of choosing between centralization and decentralization, but of identifying what should be the government's responsibility and what should be entrusted to civil society. In France, the government attempts to control everything, which has had certain disastrous effects: the appearance of "medical deserts", stifled innovation, a growing deficit and the emergence of a feeling of distrust in the system, which finds its most extreme expression in the rejection of vaccines. This distrust is a direct consequence of the government's failings. While the government should not be entirely excluded from the healthcare system, its days of attempting to stand in for doctors, scientists and citizens are over.

#### **5. The challenges of decentralization: the State as a guarantor, rather than a manager**

The growth of outpatient care and the stimulation of competition will not arise from downward movement, but from decentralization. Similarly, the true emergence of prevention will arise from bottom-up movement. With the state discredited, top-down prevention would lead to a reinforcement of risky behaviours. Decentralization is also necessary to encourage territorial innovation. The government can pursue a strategy through funding, but it must not attempt to guide research. Finally, while the State has its place in the regulatory system, it must transform from an operator into a strategy-maker and find balance between French regulations and European directives. Health should no longer be a State monopoly, but should instead make space for citizens to become participants in the system.