A PRACTICAL TOOLKIT FOR POLITICIANS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

CRISIS RESPONSE KIT

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INTRODUCTION

Any time during their tenure, a politician can be confronted with a crisis -- an unexpected situation that impacts the lives of many citizens in a country. During a crisis, the normal rules of politics no longer apply and there is no business as usual. Politicians, political parties and elected and government representatives need a different set of skills and have different responsibilities during a crisis. Yet, politics and democracy do not stop during pandemics and other extreme events.

A strong, healthy democracy needs constant care and attention. During a crisis, we need to be even more vigilant as governments commonly make use of crisis situations, during which people are fearful and uncertain, to expand their powers and limit political and civic space. In other words, times of crisis are dangerous moments in the political life of a country. Citizens understandably look to their government for protection and reassurance, and are often willing to grant authorities extraordinary powers to that end. Emerging or less resilient democracies are at more risk of democratic backsliding because they lack strongly established democratic principles, institutions and processes. This makes the role of politicians therein even more important. They should serve as safeguard of democratic principles and guard against misuse of power or money during a crisis. That makes it important that politicians understand the dynamics of a crisis and how to respond. This guide provides a practical framework that helps politicians do exactly that.

Crises occur in different shapes and sizes. Each crisis is unique and requires a tailored response. A financial crisis is different from a natural crisis like an earthquake, tornado or flood. And a terrorist attack is different from a health crisis like an epidemic or pandemic. Nonetheless, there are also similarities between crises and how to respond. This toolkit has summarized important lessons and responses to a crisis for politicians, parties and, to a lesser extent, governments. As such, this guide can be applied to different crises, but it was created in response to the unprecedented global COVID-19 outbreak in 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic confronts political leaders with immense challenges on different levels; they need to control the spread of the virus, monitor health care capacity, support their communities through adapted delivery of services, support local businesses and citizens facing unemployment and financial insecurity, all while government revenues decrease and economic insecurities loom large. This response kit provides guidance to politicians on how to respond to COVID-19, with lessons that should be applicable in other situations.

Coen Pustjens, April 2020

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1. Contextualizing a crisis

A crisis is often too encompassing and chaotic to comprehend in its entirety and people struggle to understand what is going on, especially shortly after the crisis starts. This causes uncertainty and raises questions among citizens, but can also translate into despair and even panic, anger and frustration. People look to their political leaders for guidance during such a time. Therefore, as political leaders, it is important to respond to a crisis as quickly as possible. The following recommendations can be used by politicians to develop a political party response or to check if the response of a government is satisfactory. Key information to give during the first response to the crisis is:

1. Defining the crisis - describe the scope, size and who is or can be affected by the crisis
2. The geographic location where the crisis took place or can take place
3. Information about the nature/origin of the crisis

It is important to remember the initial response to a crisis should be factual and concise. This communication should provide concrete and practical information. In the case of COVID-19, the following information could be shared by governments or political parties, but should be supplemented with country specific information from reputable resources:

WHAT IS THE CORONA VIRUS AND COVID-19?

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses, which may cause illness in animals or humans. In humans, several coronaviruses are known to cause respiratory infections. The most recently discovered coronavirus causes coronavirus disease COVID-19. This new virus and disease were unknown before the outbreak began in Wuhan, China, in December 2019.

WHAT ARE SYMPTOMS OF COVID-19?

The most common symptoms of COVID-19 are:

-Fever **- Tiredness** **- Dry cough**

Some patients may also experience aches and pains, nasal congestion, runny nose, sore throat or diarrhea. These symptoms are usually mild and begin gradually. Some people become infected but do not develop any symptoms and do not feel unwell. Most people (about 80%) recover from the disease. without needing special treatment.

WHO CAN GET INFECTED?

Everyone can potentially get infected and the virus is likely to spread until a permanent vaccination is found. Around one out of every six people who gets COVID-19 becomes seriously ill and develops difficulty breathing. Older people, and those with underlying medical problems like high blood pressure, heart problems or diabetes, are more likely to develop serious illness. People with fever, cough and difficulty breathing should seek medical attention. [*Be sure to provide specific information about geographic hotspots of COVID-19 infections and deaths in the country, so people can act accordingly*].

WHEN SHOULD I CONTACT A DOCTOR?

If a person has a high fever and/or has trouble breathing, in combination with other symptoms, people should consult a doctor. Do not visit a doctor or hospital, but get instructions over the phone before physically attending a health care professional.

a. Sources of information and building a coalition

Crisis and emergency responses function better if a government and parties have as much information as possible and if they are designed and implemented in consultation with crisis-affected communities and stakeholders. Therefore, it is important to: 1) set up mechanisms for information collection about the crisis, and 2) form an inclusive crisis coalition. Apart from government agencies and experts, governments and political parties can acquire information through several channels. The global nature of the pandemic means that there is a wide range of sources, experiences and lessons learned to draw upon. Examples include international organizations like the World Health Organization, the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund and regional bodies. In addition, other (neighboring) countries may have useful experiences or information to share. Other sources of information and partners that should be included in the case of COVID-19 are associations of medical professionals, non-government organizations involved in service delivery at the national or local level, scientists/academic experts (virologists, epidemiologists, public health professors etc.), sub-national authorities and community social activists. A broad coalition should be created in response to the crisis and should be made part of the conversation that informs political decision-making.

2. National Response

The next immediate step a political party/politicians or government should take is to outline its response to the crisis. This stage should answer the question what the government is going to do to respond to the crisis. It outlines the planned outcome or policy interventions. People are understandably worried and want to know what will happen next, so a quick response, explaining what the government is doing or planning to do to respond to and resolve the crisis is crucial. This messaging gives people reassurance that the crisis is being managed and resolved and provides clarity about what people can expect and should do. It also creates hope for a resolution to the crisis. While responding to a crisis it is important to remember to:

1. Outline a response as quickly as possible, while ensuring strong preparation. Do not rush a response. Incomplete and factually incorrect communication or, worse, speculation or misinformation will cause more confusion and signal you are not in control
2. Be realistic about what people can and cannot expect, in terms of services, emergency measures and a potential timeline for resolution of the crisis
3. Be honest about what you do not know or cannot control
4. Be clear about what people should know and do in response to the crisis

National response communication and measures often includes three stages. In the case of COVID-19, these have consisted of public health advisories, emergency response measures and additional regulatory crisis measures. Examples of each of these are outlined below:

a. Public health advisories

This generic advice applies to all citizens and is aimed at controlling the pandemic and 'flattening the curve'.

WASH YOUR HANDS FREQUENTLY

Regularly and thoroughly clean your hands with an alcohol-based hand rub or wash them with soap and water. Washing your hands will kill viruses that may be on your hands.

MAINTAIN SOCIAL DISTANCING

Maintain at least 2 meters (6 feet) distance between yourself and anyone who is coughing or sneezing. Getting closer increases the chances of being infected with the virus.

AVOID TOUCHING EYES, NOSE AND MOUTH

Hands touch surfaces, which can pick up the virus. Once contaminated, hands can transfer the virus to your eyes, nose and mouth. From there, the virus can enter your body and make you sick.

COUGH INTO YOUR ELBOW

Cover your mouth and nose with your elbow or a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Dispose of the used tissue immediately. If you cough into your hand, you can more easily transfer the virus.

STAY HOME IF YOU FEEL UNWELL

If you have a fever, cough or other potential symptoms stay at home. If you have a high fever and difficulty breathing contact a doctor and call in advance. Do not visit older people.

STAY INFORMED

Stay informed about the latest developments about COVID-19. Follow advice from your healthcare provider, national and local public health authority and your employer.

b. National emergency response measures

After the initial response, it is essential that additional measures are announced as quickly as possible, aimed at mitigating or reducing the impact of the crisis. Depending on the crisis, these measures can take different forms, but are characterized by the fact that they attempt to alleviate or improve the lives of those who are affected by the crisis by targeted interventions. The announcement of these measures can also be rolled-out, which extends the sense of being proactive, showcases each action and signals a longer-term plan. These measures are always temporary in nature. Responses to COVID-19 should include both health and economic (fiscal and monetary) policies. Examples include:

- *Broadening access to social security or unemployment benefits*
- *A temporary basic income guarantee, especially for seasonal workers or day laborers*
- *Suspending housing evictions or a freeze on rent collection*
- *Providing back pay, wage replacement, or layoff protections*
- *Compensating entrepreneurs for lost income due to the crisis*
- *Fundraising for emergency response among donors or the international community*
- *Regulating access to and movement in the crisis affected area*
- *Additional public investments in crisis-affected areas*
- *Allowing for payment deferrals or suspensions (loans, debt, rent and mortgage, utilities, etc.)*
- *Free online school/university courses or educational TV programming for children, as long as schools/universities are closed*

- *Announcing a national day of mourning or remembrance*
- *Free access to and treatment at medical facilities for those affected by the crisis or (partially) compensating citizens for crisis-related health care costs*
- *Ensuring affordable or free access to food, water and basic necessities (including soap) for the most vulnerable groups, including possibly setting up, expanding or supporting food distribution mechanisms*
- *Financial compensation for loss of life or property for citizens as a result of the crisis, including first responders*
- *A delay or temporary suspension of tax collection*
- *Providing interest free loans or grants to small and medium-sized businesses*

While announcing and enacting these measures it is good practice to give as much details as possible. More details give people clarity about the measures, what to expect and when to expect them. For example, the measures should be specific about the type of people they apply to, specify the dates during which the measures come into effect, describe who can apply and how to apply for them, and reference the budget that is available to pay for them. If financial resources are scarce, it is crucial to target primarily those that have been most affected by the crisis or that are most at risk. These often include women, people with disabilities, ethnic and religious minorities, indigenous groups and young people.

c. Additional regulatory crisis measures

In addition to countrywide and specific emergency relief measures, additional temporary regulatory measures might be necessary. They attempt to make sure that the situation during the crisis does not deteriorate further and that people follow the enacted rules and regulations necessary to respond to the crisis. These are so-called negative freedoms that set external restraints, often limiting people's actions and constitutional rights. Examples include:

- *Closure of public spaces and events: parks, beaches, malls, playgrounds, (movie) theaters, schools, sport events, concerts etc.*
- *Banning public gatherings of more than an X number of people*
- *Temporarily suspending religious gatherings*
- *Enforcement of measures through police surveillance and/or fines*
- *Movement and/or travel restrictions*
- *Closing border crossings*
- *Mandatory testing or quarantine for high risk groups and those traveling from abroad*
- *Closure of retirement/nursing homes to visitors*
- *Identifying essential and non-essential professions from national containment measures*

d. Limiting emergency measures and centralization of power

The COVID-19 pandemic presents a threat to public health, but emergency measures adopted to combat the dangers can also have discriminatory impacts and harmful effects, and can be extended and repurposed after a crisis has passed. This includes limiting civil liberties. Therefore, it is crucial that the timeframe and the end of the emergency measures are clearly communicated ahead of time. This will allow political decision-makers to fulfill their oversight and legislative function, enable the media and public to monitor the proper implementation of the measures and ensure that the measures are not misused or extended indefinitely and beyond necessity. If a specific timeframe cannot be given due to the continuation of the crisis, the deadline should be reevaluated and extended periodically. The following principles should help in ensuring emergency measures are concluded in time:

1. Any emergency restrictions should be clearly communicated, enacted in a transparent manner, well grounded in law, necessary to serve a legitimate purpose, and proportionate to the threat.
2. Emergency restrictions should be limited in duration, subject to independent oversight, and imposed and extended based only on transparent criteria. Politicians can push for time-bound provisions within an emergency bill through sunset clauses, stating under which conditions and within what timeframe emergency restrictions have to end.
3. New or expanded surveillance programs that use emerging technologies or collect individuals' personal information must be administered in an open and transparent manner, necessary to limit the spread of disease, limited in duration, subject to independent oversight, and "firewalled" from other commercial and governmental uses such as law enforcement and enforcement of immigration policies.
4. A free press is especially vital during times of emergency. There should be no state censorship or other undue restrictions on the free flow of information. Criminal penalties for distributing false information are disproportionate and prone to arbitrary application and abuse. Instead, governments should counter any falsehoods by delivering clear, accurate, and up-to-date information
.

3. E-democracy and Participatory Democracy

During a crisis, it is essential that democratic processes and structures remain operational. Moreover, these become increasingly important during a crisis when decisions are made quickly, substantial amounts of money are spent in a short amount of time and power becomes centralized in the executive branch. Democratic countervailing powers to hold people and institutions accountable, ensure transparency and conduct (financial) oversight are crucial during such a time. During a crisis, more than ever, citizens also need to be able to understand government decisions. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, when communication and political participation are affected by social distancing measures. Also, during a crisis citizens want to be able to participate in decision-making because many of the decisions that are made by their political decision-makers now affect them personally. Several mechanisms can facilitate principles of e-democracy and participatory democracy during a crisis. The examples below apply specifically to the COVID-19 crisis, during which social distancing has to be observed and physical engagements limited:

a. Political decision-making processes during a crisis
The COVID-19 pandemic has created unique challenges for the continuity of parliamentary and subnational representative functions. However, it also creates serious obstacles for politicians to effectively fulfil their constitutional roles and responsibilities. In particular, during the pandemic legislative bodies have struggled to find ways to convene, deliberate and engage with the government and its constituents. Mechanisms should be established to ensure that elected representatives can continue to effectively fulfill their political roles of oversight, representation, accountability, transparency and legislation. Continuing to exercise their role in ensuring check and balances, legislatures and elected representatives at the national and subnational level are the best line of defense against power grabs or abuse of state resources. Certain mitigation and adaptation measures can further help further the goal of limiting transmission, while still allowing politicians and representative bodies to fulfill their constitutional roles and responsibilities. Examples of e-democracy include:

- Facilitate working remotely by conducting **online committee, plenary or council meetings** in a virtual setting and create mechanisms for journalists, citizens and CSO's to observe the sessions remotely. Such an approach should include **trainings for elected representatives and (parliamentary) support staff** in the use of video conferencing systems, moderating virtual sessions, electronic voting procedures and sharing and storing digital information.

- **Elected representatives can continue to meet physically, but with restrictions.** These restrictions may include: fewer sittings of plenary sessions or committees; fewer parliamentarians/subnational elected representatives and staff in the building with some working remotely; changes to the venue of parliamentary meetings, for example using a bigger building that allows for more effective social distancing or limiting the number of representatives allowed in the chamber simultaneously. Such an approach should ensure a minimum politically legitimate quorum and proportionate cross-party representation.
- Setting up **online briefings** between parliamentary committees, subnational governments or individual elected representatives with the ministers/mayor responsible for responding to the crisis. These can also focus on reviewing and providing feedback on emergency measures and spending.
- **Target group taskforces** should be formed to study the impact of the crisis on different target groups, with a focus on vulnerable groups such as women, people with disabilities, ethnic and religious minorities, indigenous groups and young people. The situation of these groups is often exacerbated during a crisis, as it deepens existing inequalities that existed prior to the crisis. That puts these groups at a disproportionally higher risk to be negatively affected during a time of crisis. For example, domestic violence has increased in many countries due to stay-at-home measures, women bear the majority of unpaid care responsibilities in households and they make up a majority of health and social care workers worldwide. These examples underline how women will be disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The taskforce groups should consist of experts and social activists from the target groups, government representatives (including civil servants from responsible ministries) and elected representatives from across different parties. These taskforce groups should ensure the specific needs, risks, barriers, and priorities of at-risk communities are fully considered, that all responses are gender sensitive and inclusive of all segments of the populations, and that these voices are amplified and included in decision-making in response to the crisis.
- Parliaments and parties can create a **Crisis Management Team** composed of high-level members of parliament/the party. This team could be responsible for closely monitoring the rapidly evolving COVID-19 pandemic and the government's response to it. This team remains in regular communication with (local) public health agencies, ministries and experts to ensure that it is receiving the most current information and guidance, allowing elected representatives to play their constitutional role and ensure responsible implementation . The team could also be responsible for informing and updating other MPs, identifying high-risk areas that require oversight or inquiries or instruct committees to meet on and on which topics to meet.
- Members of Parliament and other (locally) elected representatives should get **regular briefings from independent government oversight institutions and audit authorities.** These are different in every country but include institutions like human rights commissions, electoral commissions, auditors general, anti-corruption agencies, constitutional commissions for gender, women, ethnic or marginalized groups and other independent regulatory bodies. These briefings should focus on potential misuse of power, misappropriation or mismanagement of funds, corruption charges, whistleblower complaints, legal necessity of (continuing) emergency measures and monitoring progress on crisis relief efforts.
- In case of a long-lasting national crisis a government or MPs can initiate a temporary **joint crisis response committee,** responsible for conducting oversight of enacted policies, measures and laws, ensuring accountability and maintaining financial transparency on all grants and budgets that are initiated in response to the crisis. A group of senior MPs could play a coordinating role in government oversight. All ministries involved with the crisis and response should be represented in the committee;

- In some instances, the nature of the crisis can be complicated, as is the case with COVID-19. There are many public health components to the crisis that elected representatives are not experts in. It is also difficult to oversee an issue if one does not understand it first. In those instances, it is important that MPs and elected representatives receive **expert briefings** from leading national and international experts in these areas, so they are able to effectively fulfill their elected roles and responsibilities.
- Governments should set up **intra-governmental coordination mechanisms**. Depending on the national governing system, it is crucial that elected representatives at the subnational level receive clear and detailed instructions from their national government on how to respond to the crisis. Sub national governments often have less information, capacity, budgets and experience with crisis management than national governments, but they are also the most accessible level of government, state and local officials have a responsibility to educate and communicate with their citizens, and to be accountable and transparent while managing crisis-related resources and services, without spreading misinformation or causing undue panic. They are the first line of response for most citizens during a crisis. Therefore, it is crucial that they receive detailed working instructions that provide guidance on how to respond to the crisis from national governments. Email chains, video conferencing, phone banks and other traditional coordination mechanisms (like letters) should be put into place to share national crisis related response measures and instructions to sub national levels government by the national government. At the same time, these mechanisms should serve as platforms for sub national levels of government to raise questions or emergencies related to the crisis to the national level. Regular virtual meetings should be set up.
- It is important to allow periodic questioning of key political decision-makers. Facilitate **oral and written questions** in parliament or municipal councils that can be submitted remotely to ministers/prime minister/mayor. Questions should be allowed to be submitted digitally given COVID-19 safety measures.
- Ensure **online service delivery of the government** is strengthened and broadened. In the case of COVID-19, citizens can no longer visit government agencies. Services, payments, application documents and other essential government services should be made available online as much as possible.
- **Establish or strengthen Public Financial Management practices** (PFM). A crisis often requires the quick mobilization and expenditure of taxpayer money to provide much needed relief to citizens impacted by the crisis. The urgency of the measures needed to contain the contagion and mitigate its socioeconomic impacts creates expanded opportunities for the misuse of funds and other forms of corruption, including nepotism, patronage and cronyism. Therefore, the necessary safeguards have to be put into place to monitor, find and avoid abuse or corruption. Public finance management mechanisms should be set up or strengthened to monitor crisis-related spending. These mechanisms should be overseen by elected representatives and independent stakeholders, such as the media, civil society organizations and independent oversight institutions. Public contracting, procurement, the expenditure of emergency funds and quality of service delivery are priority areas to monitor. Setting up mechanisms to report wrongdoings and provide whistleblower protection is also important.

The goal of setting up these types of processes is to maintain accountability and oversight and enable elected representatives and parties to continue to serve as an independent check and balance to the centralization of power during a crisis. Politicians should initiate and safeguard these mechanisms. While doing so it is important to collectively define a set of key measures/metrics that could be used to identify the effectiveness of emergency measures and their contribution to resolving the crisis. In the case of COVID-19, these could reflect evidence of further spikes in cases, increasing mortality rates, overstretched health care capacity, number of conducted tests, as well as measures of 'community resilience', strength of local support networks, unemployment numbers or accountings of money spent and remaining.

b. Participatory democracy tools

A crisis often impacts the lives of a large group of citizens, as do the emergency response measures. Therefore, it is important that citizens have an opportunity to be involved and informed about those decisions. Politicians, parties and elected and government representatives should conduct active outreach during a crisis. They should inform citizens what they are doing to resolve the crisis, tell citizens how and what decisions are being made, share party positions and initiatives to resolve the crisis, mirror public service announcements (PSAs) and actively engage citizens. Examples of participatory democracy that politicians can conduct during COVID-19 are included below and can be divided into digital and traditional outreach, depending on the accessibility and penetration of internet:

- **Email/SMS platforms** will allow politicians and parties to continue using direct lines of communication with voters or supporters. E-mail and SMS messages are invaluable mechanism to maintain contact.
- **Writing letters or sending out pamphlets/flyers**, preferably with a return address so people can reply, is a proven way of keeping in touch with voters and supports.
- **Putting up banners at public spaces or taking out newspapers advertisement** in targeted media outlets. These serve to get party messages across to a large audience and can include references for further communication.
- On the constituency or subnational level, **citizen assemblies** can be set up to crowd-source ideas, provide feedback on crisis needs, respond to emergency measures and build political consensus around the crisis.
- Particularly on the local level, **participatory budget initiatives** can bring together community leaders and citizens to decide how to spend emergency funds that become available for the crisis.
- **Organizing a hackathon or hacktivism:** an online event in which a problem is shared with a large (digital) audience, who work together to try to resolve that issue. Activism through building 'quick-and-dirty' but effective proofs of concept for online public services.
- Digitally **broadcast parliamentary committee meetings** or other (local) political decision meetings, related to the crisis, live on parliamentary websites or YouTube and allow questions or citizen engagement.
- Rather than organizing a physical town hall meeting, organize online **virtual town halls** on Facebook or other popular platforms with party supporters and members.
- Have **direct message group chats**, during which people can engage you and ask questions. Possibly during a weekly or monthly Q&A or 'ask me anything' session.
- **Regularly post speeches, press briefings and videos online** through your social media accounts (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Viber/WhatsApp, etc.) on issues related to the crisis. These can be videos from politicians personally, reinforcing PSAs or public health messages, messaging from the party or other party leaders on the crisis.

· **Support or initiate social media support campaigns** aimed at resolving the crisis. Many people cope with tragedy but trying to help their community. So give people ideas of places they can volunteer, donate to, or otherwise support existing initiatives. There are often hashtags and organic relief initiatives set up by civil society organizations or citizens. It is good to express support for those and contribute to them if possible. Also, share how followers can help support these initiatives.
· **Use webinars to educate citizens** on emergency measures, what they can do to help resolve the crisis or allow citizens to build their skills in an entertaining way during stay-at-home measures.
· **Conduct community check-in calls** to get a pulse on what is happening with your voters/supporters by calling them and talking about the crisis. You can start with prominent business, religious and civil society leaders and community activists and broaden it by checking in with regular citizens. Share their feedback and stories on other platforms, but also use their input for political decision-making.
· **Actively engage citizens** on social media by asking questions or seeking feedback on decisions to show that their opinion matters. For example, ask citizens what their priority needs are in response to the crisis, ask them to share how they are responding to the crisis or have been affected by it or request feedback on emergency response measures that have been enacted in response to the crisis.
· Organize **informal surveys** with digital focus group discussions, online polls or digital citizen survey questionnaires to gather information from citizens about the crisis, emergency response measures and their concerns and needs;
· Form an **expert advisory groups** within parties, including and representing stakeholders affected by the crisis and experts who can help inform you how the crisis is affecting people and advise you on policy options. Stakeholders and experts should be identified among party members, supporters or affiliated party networks.
· Set up a **virtual school or training website** aimed at educating citizens on how to prevent, identify, and treat the virus. These platforms can also include other valuable information that help people cope with the pandemic. For example, parenting tips during social distancing, information on how to telework effectively, tips on how to deal with anxiety and activities to keep your family entertained while stay-at-home measures are in effect.
· **Establish a seed capital fund** inviting companies and citizens to come up with solutions to the crisis. This can be initiated by a government, but also by a party or with the help of crowdsourcing also by an individual (politician).

c. Tips for political outreach
In addition to these examples, below are a few practical tips that will help make your (virtual) outreach as effective as possible during a crisis:

· ***Visualize your message:*** *people process visual information better and more easily than reading. So make sure that you use pictures, videos, images and examples in your language rather than just posting long statements.*
· ***Engage your audience and be interactive:*** *social media is a two-way street, so invite participation. Do not just post things online without asking feedback or input, allow people to respond or interact with you directly. Show them you are listening and taking them seriously.*
· ***Do not be descriptive:*** *Only describing what you are doing is dull and will not interest people to follow you or share what you have to say; show them what you are doing.*
· *Do not get into arguments or 'fights' with people online; there is nothing to win' especially during a crisis.*
· ***Be personal and authentic:*** *Share how the crisis is affecting you personally or post a picture of how your family is coping with the crisis. People want to know the person behind the politician and can relate better to you if they see you are in the same situation. Take your audience behind the*

scenes with spontaneous photos and videos. People will also increasingly be looking for distractions, so lighthearted non-crisis related content is useful at times.

*• **Post news quickly.** This will motivate people to share your message with other followers, make you part of the conversation and help shape the media narrative.*

*• **Reserve a specific time for every event you are hosting, even though it is online.** This is crucial to driving attendance because it is easier for attendees to remember one time and day. Also make sure that events are clearly communicated and announced, so people know when and where to tune in.*

*• **Use popular hashtags** or support existing public initiatives in response to the crisis. It will make you part of existing online 'buzz'. Leaning into popular user-generated content is a good way of ensuring your messages will reach a larger audience.*

*• When using online tools, **set ground rules** up front about what the format will be, when to speak, and how to contribute, so you do not get many people trying to talk over each other, and everyone has a chance to contribute. You will also want to set ground rules for any chat spaces you create about what people can or cannot use those spaces for. They can quickly devolve into promotions and negativity if you do not have rules in place.*

*• Give examples of **bipartisanship** during a crisis and cast party politics aside. Now, more than ever, citizens expect politicians to work for the common interest of all citizens, not in the narrow political interest of one person or party. Come together and show that you are putting differences aside in the interest of resolving the crisis. Showcase examples of political cooperation, consensus and political agreement.*

d. Using virtual tools to keep citizens informed

COVID-19 has made it difficult to use many traditional political outreach methods, since they require physical engagement. That means that citizens are more dependent on online communication channels to gather information. This has several implications for political communication of parties, the government or personal social media tools.

First, there should be an easy to find, user-friendly and mobile-responsive public website. As the weeks drag on, the socially distant will have rapidly shrinking attention spans. Make sure your landing pages have the ability to capture contact info with minimal effort on the user's end. Government, party and politician websites or Facebook pages should be redesigned around messaging about the crisis. The content should be constantly updated in line with the latest developments and decisions made in response to COVID-19. It should also have a statement from senior government/party leaders about the crisis. Lastly, it should mention what the party and its leaders are doing to resolve the crisis and allow citizens to become involved or provide feedback.

Second, it means that there should be uniformity of messaging across different digital platforms. Whether someone visits a party website, its Facebook page, Twitter account or local chapter website, they should all have the same messaging and refer to the central crisis related website and information, for example, by posting "Stay at Home" graphics across all platforms at the same time.

Third, traditional forms of political engagement are not possible during the COVID-19 pandemic. That engagement has to be replaced by digital online engagement. As mentioned earlier, the government, political parties and elected representatives should actively engage citizens through their different social media accounts. Keep them up to date about crisis related information, emergency response measures, ongoing political decision-making processes and actively request feedback, questions and input about people's needs.

4. Communication resources

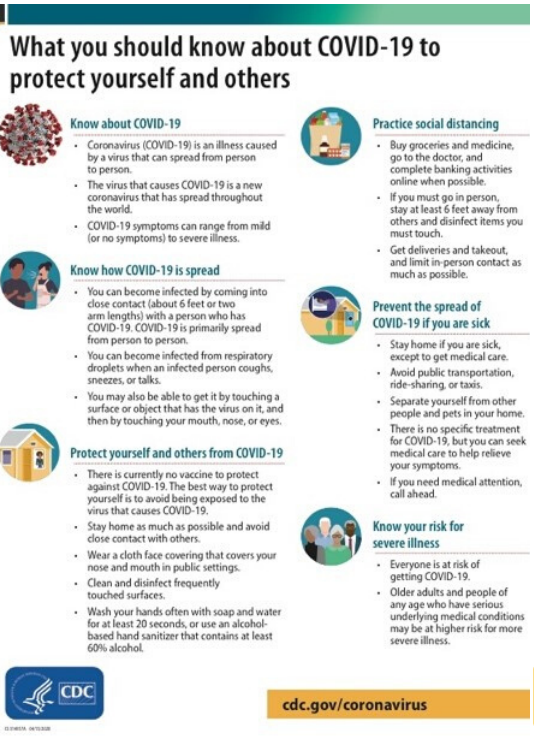
As mentioned, strong fact-based and ongoing communication is crucial during a crisis. Yet in many countries, media outlets lack the capacity to adequately develop necessary crisis communication resources. In those instances, it is up to the government to develop standardized communication resources that media outlets can use in their reporting and to inform citizens about the crisis. Politicians and political parties should ensure that governments are providing these type of resources and ensure that they are unbiased or create them if needed. These resources should include:

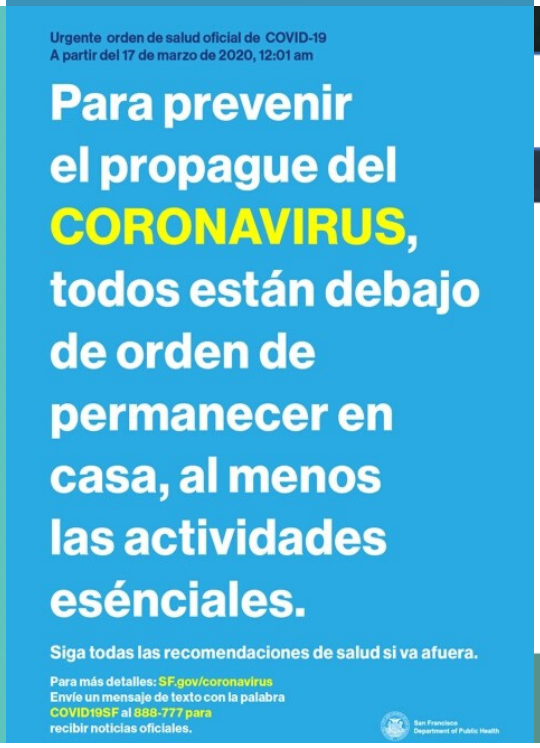
a. Videos and infographics

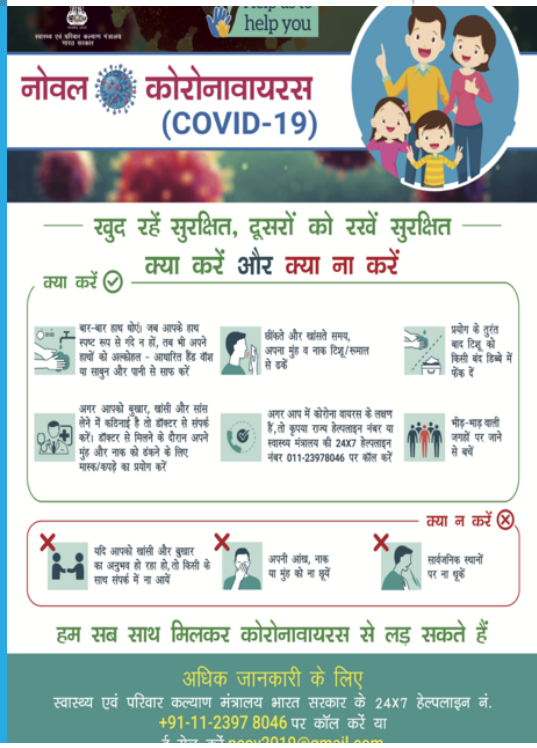
- A website with videos of the most important press conferences, press releases and speeches by key stakeholders involved with the crisis response.
- Explanatory videos or infographics explaining the crisis, who is affected and what to do. These can be used by television stations, online media outlets and on social media.
- If the government or parties do not have the resources or experience to develop these materials, they can use publicly available resources. Please see Appendix 1 for a list of examples.

b. Posters

- The government should develop posters for essential service providers, such as supermarkets, hospitals, bakeries, postal/delivery services, etc. Business owners, civic groups and community activists should be able to download them free or get free copies. The posters provide guidance on the rules that apply to shopping and remind people of the crisis measures that are in place. They will also ensure that there is uniformity in messaging and that entrepreneurs do not have to create their own materials. Below are several examples from different countries and regional bodies:







c. Public Service Announcements (PSAs)

- Develop pre-recorded PSAs that can be downloaded. These can be used by (local) radio stations to spread awareness about the crisis and emergency response measures.

5. Media

No matter what the relationship with the media is during normal political circumstances, during a crisis it should be viewed as a constructive partner. Even if politicians have an existing contentious relationship with (certain) media outlets, now is the time to set differences aside and come together in the interest of the nation. The media are uniquely positioned to reach

large audiences and provide people with much needed public information, both of which are key during a crisis. To that end, there are several components to keep in mind while dealing with media:

a. Maintaining a media roster

Governments and political parties should set up a media roster of major media outlets and prominent journalists covering the crisis. This roster needs to be frequently updated on the latest developments about the crisis. It should include both national and leading regional media outlets and both traditional media (television, newspapers, radio, magazines) and social media (Facebook, Twitter, digital media outlets, Vimeo, WhatsApp, etc.). For example, a concerted effort should be made to share Public Service Announcements (PSAs), cover press conferences and briefings and report on key developments about the crisis, including emergency response measures. If possible, the roster should be frequently updated. The media outlets and journalists on the roster should also have a designated government or party spokesperson that they can contact for questions and follow-up.

b. Media monitoring

Governments, parties and elected representatives should closely monitor media reporting on the crisis. First, it allows politicians to better understand the impact of the crisis on people's lives. Journalists have access to personal stories that can help in better understanding the impact of a crisis on average citizens. These examples can, in turn, inform political decision-making and policy responses. Furthermore, media monitoring will also give a better idea about what citizens think about the political response to the crisis. This will tell politicians if citizens agree or disagree, if they are satisfied with emergency measures or not, if they the measures are comprehensive enough and working, how politicians are rated, and more. Second, media monitoring will allow you to quickly identify misinformation about the crisis quickly. This information should be used to improve communication. Third, media monitoring will allow you to check if crisis communication and key facts and information are reaching target audiences. If media outlets are not reporting on the crisis accurately, better coordination and information is necessary. Moreover, as elected representative and political parties, it is important to get messages across to voters, members and supporters. Media can be monitored by installing Google Alerts and developing and sharing a daily news update within parties, featuring the most important articles about the crisis. Spokespersons or communication departments play an important role in monitoring and communicating media stories and developing these daily updates.

During a crisis, it can be tempting for governments to temporarily curtail the rights or freedom of media by, for example, starting to strictly regulate what they can report on, setting fines for spreading misinformation, censoring certain types of messages, mandating what issues they have to report on etc. This is a mistake and should be avoided at all cost. Media are one of the key partners for governments, parties and elected representatives during a crisis. They are the voice that reaches and informs citizens and provides them with much needed information. If they are censored or negatively influenced in performing this job effectively, you are undermining their ability to play a crucial role in resolving the crisis.

c. Facts and experts

Reporting during a crisis needs to be based on facts as much as possible. People are already insecure due to the crisis, so governments, parties and elected representatives need to show that they are in control of the crisis as much as possible. The best way to do this is to show that they take the crisis seriously and base decisions on available facts and expert opinions. In the case of COVID-19, it is important that public health experts, virologists, epidemiologists, microbiologists and health care professionals are included in the conversation and political decision-making in response to the crisis.

d. Frequent updates

Updates about the crisis should be given frequently. Depending on the scale and duration of the crisis, this can range from two or three times a day, to once a week. Different methods can be used for updates. These can include press conferences, press releases, expert briefings, televised speeches, and visits to crisis-affected locations to inform the public. It is important that governments, parties and elected representatives remain visible and vocal during a crisis. It is almost impossible to communicate too much during a crisis. However, a lack of communications and updates almost always results in dissatisfaction and criticism from citizens.

e. Rapid Response Team

Governments, political parties and elected representatives should form a rapid response team during a crisis. A rapid response team is an organizational framework that: 1) makes rapid strategic analysis of issues or messages that need to be responded to quickly, 2) has a clear decision-making structure, and 3) has clearly assigned responsibilities about who does what. It identifies new threats or opportunities that need a quick response, before they get out of hand. A rapid response team during a crisis often consists of party or government spokespersons, senior political advisors, experts on the nature of the crisis (in the case of COVID-19, these should be public health experts) and either senior government or party representatives. The team briefly meets every day to identify harmful or positive messaging about the crisis. These can consist of criticisms about a failure to adequately respond to the crisis, compliments on an action, additional ideas and recommendations on responses, or news stories in which a party or a party politician is featured. A rapid response team is responsible for drafting a quick response to counter and limit the spread of a negative narrative or increase the spread of positive news as widely as possible. Rapid response teams should respond to factual mistakes, disinformation, political attacks or smear campaigns. They should not be used to attack the media or counter accurate information that the government, a party or an elected representative simply does not like or agree with.

f. Countering misinformation

An increasing problem during a crisis is the spread of misinformation and disinformation, also known as fake news. This means false or factually incorrect information spread deliberately or unintentionally to deceive or create misunderstanding. Prominent examples of misinformation and disinformation about COVID-19 include that 5G networks cause the virus, exposing oneself to high temperatures prevents you from getting the virus, that there are medicines that prevent or treat COVID-19 and being able to hold your breath for more than 10 seconds means you do not have the virus. These claims are incorrect. Disinformation and misinformation can lead to serious problems during a crisis. Apart from causing confusion, fake news can exacerbate or prolong a crisis and therefore needs to be contained and countered as much as possible. Governments, parties and elected representatives can take several steps to respond to disinformation and misinformation:

1. Make sure that people know only to consult and trust information from official government or trusted communication channels.
2. Identify widely shared disinformation or misinformation through social media monitoring and make sure it is publically debunked and countered.
3. Call out, condemn and name public figures that promote the spread of fake news or those who are trying to exploit COVID-19 for personal gain.

4. Do not, under any circumstances, share or promote potential misinformation or disinformation as a government representative, political party or elected representative. When in doubt about the correctness or origin of news messages do not share it.
5. Educate people to check the source of news that is shared and crosscheck to see who else is reporting the story. If well-known media outlets are not covering the news, it is most likely fake news. Sometimes fake news creates mock or doctored images making it look like the news is from a trusted news source. Make sure you go to the homepage to check if the information is actually reported there. Lastly, there are also more and more fact check websites that can be consulted. Parties and politicians can play an important role in improving media literacy of citizens.
6. Together with CSOs and media outlets, political parties and/or governments can also facilitate the establishment of anti-fake news watchdogs.

6. Political mistakes during a crisis

So far, this guide has focused on what governments, parties and elected representatives should do and pay attention to during a time of crisis. However, there are also common mistakes that politicians make during a crisis. These should be avoided. Mistakes can not only further exacerbate or prolong a crisis, but they often also create political fall-out for whoever makes them. Below are the most common political mistakes during a crisis.

- ***Politicizing the crisis***

A crisis is a time when people want solutions and the nation often comes together for the common good. Traditional political divisions become less important. Under such circumstances, citizens often do not respond well to political infighting or attacking political opponents for political gain. Therefore, politicians need to be very careful in politicizing a crisis. Citizens expect them to work for the common good. Criticism should be factual and aimed at resolving the crisis response, not at making political gains, personal attacks or at the expense of people's livelihoods or well-being.

- ***Becoming 'silent'***

During a crisis people look to their leaders for information, guidance and hope. Therefore, it is important to play a prominent and public role in responding to a crisis. However, there are politicians that are unable to control the crisis, let alone resolve it. Criticism on their performance might become so widespread, that they take a step back and try to have the crisis blow over. Alternatively, many governments lack the expertise, experience or capacity to effectively respond to and manage a crisis. Again, under those circumstances some politicians tend to become invisible from the public eye and avoid publically communicating because they do not know what to communicate or how. Although understandable, this is a mistake. Inactivity and a lack of visibility usually adds to the criticism of politicians during a crisis. Do not remain silent; your community is looking to you for guidance. Keep checking what leading experts are saying, so that can provide your supporters with the most up to date information.

- ***Contradicting or second-guessing experts***

As mentioned at the outset of this document, each crisis requires a tailored response. Nonetheless, all crises require the involvement of issue experts on the nature of the crisis. For Covid-19, it is important that public health experts, virologists, epidemiologists, microbiologists and health care professionals are included in the conversation and political decision-making in response to the crisis. The advice, recommendations and analysis they give should inform government responses. A politician that publicly questions, undermines or contradicts experts or their advice jeopardizes public health and may cause a quick spread of the virus. It creates doubt among citizens about who and what information to trust, potentially leading to

prolonging or exacerbating the crisis. Discussions and disagreement with experts, if any, should be conducted behind closed doors. Grandiose statements and unsolicited and unfounded predictions should be avoided.
Even worse than contradicting experts is to spread or promote fake news about the crisis as a politician, for reasons outlined above. In other words, it is important to model the behavior you expect from your citizens as a politician. As a political leader, decision-maker and the most prominent first line of defense against the crisis it is key that you give the right example and practice what you preach.

- ***Suspending political oversight, accountability and transparency mechanisms***

Decisions often need to be taken quickly during times of crisis. This necessitates a centralization of power and funds, often in the hands of a small group of people in the executive. That is understandable. Parliaments can even choose to mandate presidents or prime ministers with temporary powers to effectively manage the crisis. However, it is a mistake to suspend all mechanisms and procedures of political oversight, accountability and transparency. As a politician, a wait-and-see attitude is always the wrong response during a crisis. The opposite is necessary, exactly because there is a crisis there is an even bigger need than normal for governments and leaders to be checked. In section three, this guide has outlined how and what politicians can do in response to a crisis. Parties and politicians should avoid thinking that they do not have any role to play during a crisis. The opposite is true, even if the party is not in government.

- ***Not limiting emergency restrictions in duration***

Crises ask for extraordinary measures. Emergency measures and restrictions are often necessary to respond and end a crisis. However, these conditions create the risk of being extended and repurposed after a crisis has passed. They can potentially be used for issues that are not related to the crisis or not necessary to resolve the crisis. To counter those situations, the timeline and the end of emergency powers, laws and restrictions should be clearly communicated to all.

- ***Curtailing rights of the media or silencing critics***

Crises are not about who is wrong or who is right. They should be aimed at being resolved as quickly as possible with the smallest number of victims possible. Emergency response measures can easily be misused to tighten the government's grip on the media and other critics. These types of provisions run the risk exacerbating or prolonging the crisis and thereby the number of people that are affected by it. Criticism, however difficult it may be, is crucial to pointing out what is going wrong, what needs to improve and what people are thinking. The temptation to silence, censor or regulate critical voices or the media should be avoided. This is because not only it is a misuse of power, but also more importantly because it affects the ability to effectively respond to the crisis and resolve it as quickly as possible.

- ***Stigmatization***

A crisis can fuel and strength existing unfounded beliefs and behavior. In a complex environment, like a crisis, it can be tempting to appoint blame or scapegoat marginalized groups as the cause of the crisis. Politicians and parties sometimes try to deepen existing societal divisions for political gain. Examples of stigmatization during COVID-19 include blaming the outbreak or spread of the virus on people with specific religious, racial or ethnic backgrounds or sexual orientation. Stigmatization can take many forms, like appointing blame, not refuting unfounded accusations or helping spread them, playing up prejudices, using dog whistles and other forms of outright discrimination and racism.

7. Contact information

Throughout the crisis, it is important that citizens can get information about the crisis. In the case of COVID-19, people will want health advice on when to contact a doctor if they have symptoms, testing, areas that have been affected, how to access emergency measures and so on. To that end, governments should set up free and widely disseminated contact information tools. If governments fail to do so, political parties can set up similar tools. The information gathered through these tools can also be used to inform political decision-making. Tools should include a free text number, call center, email address, Twitter and Facebook account and Viber/WhatsApp number (or whatever the most popular communication platforms are) that people can contact to gather information related to the crisis or ask questions.

Appendix 1: Examples of publicly available videos and infographics

- World Health Organization:
- https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/videos
- https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public

- European Center for Disease Control and Prevention:
- https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/covid-19/facts/infographics
- https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/covid-19/facts/videos

- African Union:
https://africacdc.org/covid-19

- Center for Disease Control and Prevention:
https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/communication/index.html

- Dutch Government (different languages available):
https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/coronavirus-covid-19/documenten/publicaties/2020/03/14/coronavirus-communicatiemiddelen-preventie-en-publieksvragen-anderstalig

- ASEAN:
https://asean.org/?static_post=updates-asean-health-sector-efforts-combat-novel-coronavirus-covid-19