POLITICAL DECISION-MAKING DURING A CRISIS

A PRACTICAL TOOLKIT FOR POLITICIANS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE

INTRODUCTION

During a crisis quick and effective political decision-making is crucial. Not only because there is limited time to make important decisions, but also because a crisis is unpredictable and affects large sections of the population. If political decision-making is not well organized this hampers the ability of elected representatives, parties and governments to respond to the crisis effectively. This document gives recommendations of frameworks, processes and structures that define strong political decision-making during a crisis. It outlines why it is important to create them, the different types of decision-making bodies there are, who should be on them and what their responsibilities are.

Coen Pustjens, May 2020

1. Reasons for a political decision-making framework

Teams, frameworks and processes that are set-up in response to a crisis go by many different names, examples include: Crisis Response Team, COVID-19 Task Force, Outbreak Management Team, War Room, Emergency Coordination Command Center, Disaster Management Committee and more. Nonetheless, their set-up and objectives are often similar. They are a group of individuals that make up the central decision-making body in response to a crisis. These crisis decision-making bodies serve three purposes:

1. Facilitating quick decision-making
2. Streamlining the collection, provision and dissemination of essential information
3. Ensuring coordination and collaboration among key stakeholders

An effective political decision-making framework in response to a crisis is often a balancing act between opposing interests. It needs to be small enough to be able to make decisions quickly, but large enough to include different perspectives and sources of information. It needs to be hierarchical and have a clear division of responsibilities, but also be flat and vertical, ensuring that criticism is not suppressed, groupthink is avoided and decision-making power is not overly centralized. And it needs to act decisively and swift, while ensuring that those decisions are well-informed and based on facts and expert opinions.

2. Types of political decision-making

The COVID-19 pandemic is unique as it is causing harm on an unprecedented scale and impacting different sectors and aspects of our lives. It is three crises wrapped into one: 1) a health crisis (both individually for people as well as institutionally for the health sector), 2) a social crisis and 3) an economic crisis. This is important because it means that parties and governments need to set up several crisis decision-making bodies, with one that focusses on each of these areas and includes subject matter experts for each topic. The following teams should be set-up in response to the COVID-19 pandemic:

- **Political:** *The central decision-making body. This entire document is about this team. In addition, this team is responsible for ensuring the cabinet, parliament and other political stakeholders are regularly informed about its decisions*
- **Health:** *Tracking the impact of COVID-19 on the health care system and citizens, but also advice on public health measures, containing the spread of the virus, testing capacity, contact tracing, treatment, ICU capacity and determinations on relaxing crisis measures aimed at containing the virus*
- **Social:** *Providing advice on the social impact of the crisis. This team looks at who is affected most, as well as how and what can be done to alleviate their suffering. Special focus should be given to vulnerable and at-risk communities, such as women, people with disabilities, ethnic and religious minorities, indigenous groups, young people, the economically disenfranchised and people directly impacted by the pandemic such as senior citizens and people with pre-existing health conditions. Areas of focus include, provision of essential needs (water, food, soap), rising homelessness, the psychological impact of stay-at-home measures, social services for those most in need, etc.*

- *Economic:* Aimed at managing and reducing the economic fall-out of the pandemic. This team needs to create insight into how businesses, employment, income, international loans, debt and other micro- and macro-economic developments are being affected by the pandemic and propose solutions to mitigate those problems.
- *Communication:* The communication team is responsible for gathering, sharing and disseminating information in a clear and concise manner. It needs to develop a crisis communication plan, adopt a crisis communication protocol and manage the timely and correct dissemination of essential information to citizens, media and stakeholders.
- *Sub national governments/party branches:* Lower levels of governments and parties will struggle to respond to the pandemic. They have less experience, money, expertise and capacity to respond to the crisis. A team should be set up to regularly interact with them, provide guidance on how to respond and allow them to share needs, ask questions and exchange experiences about challenges and how to overcome those.
- *External stakeholders advisory body:* Inclusive decision-making is important during a crisis. Citizens, institutions and organizations that are affected by COVID-19 and on whom emergency measures have a direct impact should be included in political decision-making. This team should ensure that the most important stakeholders have the opportunity to express their interests, provide feedback on political decisions and emergency response measures and inform decision makers about needs and problems in their communities or sectors.

3. Individual roles and responsibilities

Getting the right people in the room greatly impacts the quality of decision-making. A lot of people want to be part of the crisis decision-making body, because it gives standing, exposure and influence. Although it is crucial that everyone that needs to be included is, it is also essential that the team does not become too large. Involving too many people undermines its effectiveness, mainly in decision-making. During a crisis more people equals more opinions, more disagreements, more time meeting and less consensus. Moreover, it is also important that there is clear assignment of responsibilities. People need to have well-defined roles and know what is expected of them. This will make sure people stay in their lanes and allow things to happen at the same time, rather than consecutively.

The following positions represent the key personnel to include in the political decision-making team during a crisis, including their responsibilities:

- *Chair*

The role of the chair is to lead and coordinate the political decision-making body. This role must be even more clearly articulated and understood than others, since he or she is responsible for the supervision of the crisis decision-making body. It is important to note that the sitting prime minister or president is not always the chair.

• Is one of the most important decision-makers in the chain of command
• Heads meetings, unless the responsibility is delegated to someone else
• Sets the agenda for meetings, together with the information officer and secretary
• Plays central role in communicating political decisions with citizens and other stakeholders
• Takes decision to scale up or down state of emergency

- ***Ministers/Senior Party Leaders***
Ministers of ministries that are involved with the crisis response are part of the crisis team. For COVID-19, these, at a minimum, include the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Economic Affairs and Ministry of Communication or their national equivalents. For political parties it should include senior party leaders and parliamentary spokespersons on the topics of health, the economy and communication.
• Provide ministry/sector-specific expertise and know-how
• Ensure the proper implementation and monitoring of decisions and emergency response measures
• Responsible for communicating on specific subject-matter expertise
• Lead coordinator for organizing relevant network partners. For example, the Ministry of Health should play a central role in coordinating with hospitals, health care professionals, retirement homes and other national health care stakeholders. Messages, needs and observations from these stakeholders should be relayed to the crisis team.

- ***Secretary***
Often an underrated role, the Secretary supports the Chair/crisis team by ensuring effective meeting protocols and processes.
• Responsible for developing minutes and properly recording and summarizing decisions
• Prepares the draft agenda in consultation with the Information Coordinator and Chair and then distributes it to the participants in the crisis meeting
• Develops a unified format, draws up a draft report of the meeting and distributes it among its members after approval by the Chair
• Closely monitors and reports on the progress of implementation of decisions from prior meetings

- ***Subject Matter Experts***
Each crisis is unique. The role and importance of subject matter experts and scientists cannot be overstated. They provide objective, informed and evidence-based data that should inform political decision-making. In the case of COVID-19 these can include: 1) Health care professionals, doctors and nurses; 2) professors or academics specialized in health and virus-related or economic crises; 3) epidemiologists, virologists and micro-biologists; 4) economists, business leaders and workers representatives; 5) experts with prior experience with contagious outbreaks, such as those who worked on containing SARS or Ebola; and 6) representatives from at-risk communities.
• Map out what the current status of the pandemic is and its consequences on different sections of society, if possible with data and visuals
• Explain the crisis in simple terms, so everyone can understand the complexities of the crisis

• Identify possible control measures, weighing the consequences and impacts of those measures and the timespans they expect them to be necessary
• Share potential scenarios on how the crisis can develop or expand, how likely these are to happen and how to minimize or manage risks in those scenarios
• Advise the Chair and the members of the crisis team on its decision-making. Each political decision should be heavily based on their input and recommendations

- ***Senior Information Officer***

Sometimes this role is assigned as an extra responsibility to someone else in the team, such as the Secretary. In the case of a large-scale crisis, however, a separate person should fulfil this role. He or she is responsible for the collection, organizing and dissemination of essential information and decisions among the right people.
• Develops a process to gather, organize and disseminate information from different sources, including the time and frequency of communication, contact persons, urgency escalation, type and form of information, mutual expectations, required follow-up, etc.
• Is a proactive driver of the information processes both within the crisis team and for other relevant network partners
• Assembles and displays information during team meetings in conjunction with the information from others, for the sake of the overall picture
• Identifies which information is missing and identifies sources for where to retrieve such information

- ***Government Crisis Response Representative***

Some countries have existing independent or advisory crisis bodies. If they exist, the most senior representative or the organization should be included in the crisis decision-making framework.
• Shares best-practices or lessons-learned from past crisis experiences in the country or other (neighboring) countries
• Shares pre-developed crisis response information or processes that can be used
• Monitors the use and correct implementation of existing crisis management processes
• Serves as an independent outside observer and advisor on the quality of decision-making

- ***Communication Advisor***

The team Communication Advisor or spokesperson is usually the most senior communications advisor to the prime minister, president or party leader. He or she develops messages and communicates political decisions with the media, citizens and other stakeholders.
• Conducts regular media analysis, shares what is being reported and keeps track of (changing) public perceptions about the crisis
• Coordinates the crisis communication strategy with communication counterparts and fellow spokespersons. Ensures there is an approved communication protocol that outlines who responds to which questions and developments, as well as when and how

• Develops a crisis communication plan, outlining messages, timing of communication, a strategy to counter misinformation, primary channels and tools of communication and recommendations for press briefings. This plan should address how the government or party will communicate with other government/party departments, parliament and elected representatives, citizens and the media
• Advises on the effect of decisions and measures on the "outside world"
• Conducts internal, public and media crisis communication, including developing, testing and disseminating messages, chairing press briefings, preparing draft press releases and answering media questions
• Maintains close contact with all major media outlets and important journalists, or oversees this work by other spokespersons
• Develops communication resources, such as infographics, posters, public service announcements and videos

- ***Political Advisor***
The team Political Advisor is responsible for managing the political process of the crisis. He or she makes sure that the political consequences of the crisis are well managed and controlled and that political decision-making processes are followed.
• Has strong understanding of political decision-making processes and procedures and is able to anticipate, recognize and understand how it is impacted by the crisis
• Translates decisions by the team into a feasible legislative political decision-making strategy, including who to inform, when and how to ensure political approval
• Makes sure political parties (governing and opposition) and elected representatives are well informed about and involved (in the back office) with the decision-making process
• Identifies and shares political sensitivities or criticisms with the Chair, both from within the party as well as from other parties or external partners
• Has a broad and strong political network, the ability to work across party lines and is seen as a trustworthy political interlocutor
• Serves as liaison for political decision-makers, party leaders and other political contacts

- ***External Stakeholders***
It is important to involve external organizations and representatives in political decision-making. Different people will be affected differently by a crisis. Engaging targeted representatives in decision-making will add different perspectives, strengthen the quality of decisions and ensure accountability. When people are included in the decision-making that affects them, there is more buy-in and ownership and a higher likelihood of compliance and, therefore, impact from emergency measures. These representatives are not permanent members of the political decision-making framework, but can be invited during targeted topics about areas that affect them. They are often also organized into a separate advisory crisis team, as mentioned earlier. Important external stakeholders include the media, business leaders, unions, religious leaders, vulnerable groups (women, people with disabilities, ethnic and religious minorities, indigenous groups and young people) and people directly impacted by the crisis.

It is also possible to appoint an external liaison coordinator, who:
• Establishes and maintains contacts with important persons and organizations
• Knows how to find the right people to get support and cooperation
• Initiates, forms and maintains alliances and coalitions
• Understands and translates the consequences of decisions for different communities
• Identifies which stakeholders should be invited to the central decision-making body and for which sessions
• Relays important messages and emergency measures taken by the central decision-making body to affected stakeholders, and ensures buy-in and ownership of those provisions, as well as feedback from those communities to the crisis body.

- ***Sub-National Government Representatives***

Sub-national governments and party offices often have less information, capacity, budgets and experience with crisis management than their national counterparts, but they are also the first line of defense. State and local political representatives 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. Therefore, it is crucial that they are involved with crisis decision-making. Since there are often many sub-national political representatives, umbrella organizations or a designated coordinators from among peers need to be identified and included. A particular focus should be placed on including sub-national representatives from crisis-affected areas, villages and cities. Similar to eternal stakeholders, sub-national governments are not permanent members of the group (with the exception of crisis-affected "hot spots"). Sub-national political representatives should:
• Collect and share information about sub-national priority needs
• Relay on-the-ground problems to the political decision-making framework and team
• Make informed suggestions for the division and allocation of available resources among sub-national governments
• Receive and relay crisis related instructions, measures and information from the national to the state/local level

- ***Security Advisor***

If security considerations come into play, for example due to growing resistance to stay-at-home measures or large scale breaches of social distancing measures, it is important to include a senior Security Advisor who provides updates on security-related issues, challenges and containment measures. This could be the most senior police or military officer in the country, for example.

- ***Financial Expert***

A crisis often requires a lot of money for response. Furthermore, money frequently needs to be spent quickly. Proper channels of oversight, accountability and transparency become more difficult to maintain. It is important to know how much is being spent, how much money is needed and remaining, and if the spending is having the intended consequences. Having a financial expert on the body will help in clarifying this information. This person could be a senior civil servant from the Ministry of Finance, for example.

- ***Legal Expert***

During a crisis, temporary emergency measures and legal restrictions are often adopted, giving executives tremendous power. That does not mean normal legislative procedures become obsolete. Legal experts need to make sure the rule of law is respected and that restrictions and emergency provisions are justified, necessary and proportionate. Furthermore, they also need to ensure that crisis provisions are adopted and implemented while observing the proper legislative and political approval processes and ensure that measures are not susceptible to misuse, corruption or litigation. This person could be a legal ombudsman or a senior judge, for example.

4. Team Responsibilities

It is important that the political decision-making body has a clear sense of its responsibilities. Knowing what to focus on, what not to and what the objectives of the group are will help ensure it makes the decisions that matter most. A political decision-making body during a crisis has the following responsibilities:

- ***Identify and prioritize problems***

The crisis team needs to ensure that major problems, bottlenecks and challenges that are critical to the well-being and functioning of the country and its citizens are identified and addressed quickly. The team needs to prioritize those decisions, determining the order for dealing with issues according to their relative importance, impact and gravity. Not everything can be done at once; the most urgent and important issues need to be dealt with first.

- ***Manage response and develop solutions***

The most important responsibility of a political decision-making body is to manage the response to the crisis. Solutions should minimize the negative impact on people's lives, alleviate hardships and resolve the crisis as quickly as possible. This includes managing first response needs, setting up emergency measures and regulations and thinking through long-term solutions to the crisis that end it as quickly as possible and with the least amount of causalities or impact to society.

- ***Monitor developments***

Keep close track of how the crisis is unfolding. Are there areas that need specific attention, are there pockets where contaminations have suddenly peaked (again), are response measures having the intended consequences, are there unexpected developments that require a change in strategy?

- ***Develop scenarios***

By definition, a crisis is unpredictable and difficult to manage. Therefore, it is important to be prepared for the unexpected and have contingencies in place. A political decision-making body needs to identify and develop scenarios on how the crisis might develop and plot courses of action for how the party or government would respond if they did take place. Subject-matter experts and sector specialists should be leading the development of these scenarios.

- **_Gather information, communicate and inform_**

Political decisions should be based on all available evidence, facts and information from affected stakeholders. During a crisis there is often a surplus of information, including extensive media reporting, speculation, misinformation, disinformation, rumors and gossip. The World Health Organization (WHO) has said that the challenge is not only to battle the virus, but also the trolls and conspiracy theories that undermine crisis response; misinformation "might be the most contagious thing about the pandemic". Accurate information is essential for responding to and containing the pandemic as quickly as possible. A crisis team needs to gather as much information as possible from different reliable sources, filter what is relevant and trustworthy and communicate that information to citizens. This also means a crisis communication plan and approved protocol for communication needs to be developed, as noted above. It also means that communication resources need to be created, like infographics, posters, public service announcements and informational videos.

- **_Monitor, evaluate and learn_**

A crisis team needs to learn as it goes. Nobody is ever fully prepared for a crisis, which is exactly what makes it a crisis. This means that political decisions, response measures and crisis communication might not have the intended consequences at first, be misinterpreted or require updates due to unforeseen developments. The crisis team is responsible for monitoring the progress of resolving the crisis. It should ask itself what measures are and are not working, what are failures, are there new circumstances that require re-evaluation of earlier decisions and which processes or emergency measures need to be improved. Iteration should be part of every step of the political decision-making process.

- **_Set up crisis management systems and operational structures_**

The crisis response team needs to set up clear procedures and structures that allow different stakeholders to play an effective role in containing and resolving the crisis. Coordination and collaboration include developing a crisis management plan and outlining which people, institutions or organizations should be consulted. The team should also create mechanisms to identify critical needs, resources and budgets necessary to respond to the crisis and continue operations. In addition, the team needs to set up and oversee the work of other teams, as outlined above. It needs to clearly assign responsibilities to all involved, set deadlines for completion of deliverables and ensure that everyone involved has the logistical, organizational and administrative support to fulfill their responsibilities.

In short, a political decision-making body during COVID-19 should aim to: 1) suppress the spread of the virus and protect citizens through compliance with social distancing, hygiene measures and other health advice; 2) take care of those affected by the crisis (whether infected or not); 3) provide relief for the unemployed and businesses; and 4) ensure that the capacity of the health care system is not strained through effective testing, contact tracing and isolation.

Appendix: Political Decision-Making Framework Example

External Stakeholders:
Advocates or organizations representing women, people with dissabilities, religious minorities, indiginous groups, the economically disenfranchised, senior citizens

Economics:
- Business associations
- Entrepreneurs
- Corporations
- Banks
- Unemployed
- Worker Reps

Sub-National Governments:
- Municipal/State Associations
- Mayors/Governors of crisis affected areas

Political Decision-Making Body:
1. Chair
2. Minister/Senior Party Leader
3. Secretary
4. Subject Matter Experts
5. Senior Information Officer
6. Government Crisis Response Rep
7. Communication Advisor
8. Political Advisor
9. Security/Legal/Finance Experts

Health:
- Hospitals
- Health workers (doctors, nurses)
- Health care academics: epidemiologists, virologists, micro-biologists
- Retirement homes

Social:
- CSOs, CBOs and FBOs
- Food banks
- Community/Tribal Leaders
- Mental health workers

Communication:
- Spokespersons, from parties, sub-national governments and ministries
- Traditional and new media outlets
- Journalists
- Social media Influencers

Politics:
- Parliament
- Sub-national elected representatives
- Party members and branches
- Senior party leaders
- Cabinet