The Covid-19 Pandemic

Detailed Lessons for Irish Public Policy and the Recommended Response

*Pinpoint Vulnerability*   *Target Supports*

Stay Connected   *Listen*   *Be Data Ready*
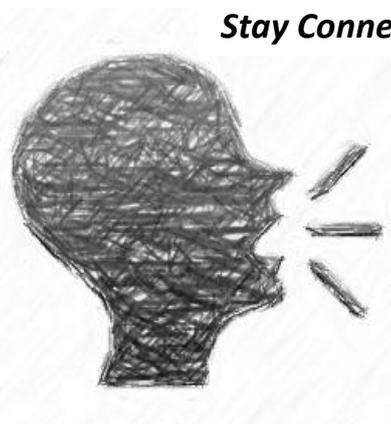
Communicate   *Build Trust*   *Be Agile*

Lesson One: Vulnerability is Complex and Context Specific

Responding to Lesson One: Pinpointing and Managing Vulnerability

1. Support bottom-up, local exercises, often driven by community groups, to identify vulnerable people, places, infrastructure, sectors, and processes, before crises emerge. Such an exercise should be ongoing, should link with and support work at the community level, and should see statutory, voluntary, and community organisations working together. It should also utilise the most granular data available, and should be underpinned by robust (IT) infrastructure.
2. Consider how this more accurate, context specific information on vulnerability can be understood, and responded to, at national level.
3. Assess current policy and systems against experience of prior emergencies to understand the extent to which lessons have been learned, and the extent to which previous crises have strengthened or weakened the ability to respond in the future.
4. Practice and hone emergency planning to ensure roles are clear and appropriately assigned, processes are up-to-date, and to ensure the vulnerable are targeted. Flexibility and agility should be the objective, as a substitute for absolute preparedness.
5. Identify and prepare the resources needed to deliver an adequate response (fiscal; buildings and staff; infrastructure; good procurement and logistics; technology etc.). Involve the community, charity, and private sectors to supplement the State's capacity.
6. Dedicate time now to security of supply and to determining how much excess capacity is needed and sensible, and where.
7. Facilitate and begin greater targeting of supports to ensure that the most vulnerable receive them, and to maximise the value of public expenditure. Consideration could be given to (i) how the appropriate aggregation and use of data from across public institutions would allow the Government to work in a more focused manner in the future, particularly to target those who are vulnerable but who may not be in receipt of the State's main income supports, and (ii) what non-State sources of data could be appropriately used to help with such a task.

Lesson Two: Stakeholder Networks and Experts Shape Outcomes

Responding to Lesson Two: Staying Connected

8. Expand on the tripartite policy interaction which was effective in dealing with labour market issues during the crisis. Employ social dialogue to help build the societal consensus and trust necessary to address other challenges (e.g. driving more ambitious climate action).
9. Ensure the State is deeply connected and involved to be more effective in solving key societal problems related to climate, the cost-of-living, housing, care services, or the digital divide (monitor, regulate, provide). This will increase the State's awareness of, and capacities to address vulnerability, and increase its overall ability to tackle ongoing challenges.
10. Take steps in the public sector outside of crisis-periods to engender the willingness to step-in, the flexibility, and the agility required, via more responsive and engaged problem-solving structures, co-ordinated from the centre.

Lesson Three: Real-time Evidence Transforms Policy-Making

Responding to Lesson Three: Valuing Data and Evidence

11. Carefully evaluate the data gathering, analysis, and application which proved so necessary and useful to policy-makers during the pandemic, to ascertain what should be modified, continued and developed further, what systems should be 'mothballed', and what activity can be ended entirely.

12. Consider applying the WHO's advice for general preparedness activity, but adapted to shape our national data and behavioural analytics activity, to best support wider public policy. For example:

   a. Maintain the **political commitment** to data and behavioural analytics to inform risk assessment and mapping, preparedness, and public policy more generally;

   b. Include data and behavioural analytics in updated national preparedness plans and other **key national policy documents**, aligned to strategic national objectives;

   c. Identify data and behavioural analytics **requirements** needed to underpin new and measurable targets for preparedness and response capacities, and wider public policy;

   d. **Invest in and co-ordinate** data and behavioural analytics strategies that ensure timeliness, transparency, and accountability;

   e. Establish a new system based on **full transparency** by all parties, using state-of-the-art digital tools and behavioural research, with appropriate protections of people's rights;

   f. Conduct multi-sectoral active data and behavioural analytics **simulation exercises** on a yearly basis as a means of ensuring continuous risk assessment and follow-up action to mitigate risks, and accountability, and establish independent, impartial, and regular evaluation mechanisms;

   g. Formalise **periodic peer reviews** of national data and behavioural analytics capability for preparedness and response, and to support public policy development, implementation and monitoring; and

   h. Ensure 'data and behavioural analytics capability' comes **under remit of named national coordinator**/body, accountable to the highest levels of government with the mandate to drive whole-of-government coordination of data and behavioural analytics for preparedness and response, and public policy more generally.

13. Consider if and how to apply data and behavioural analytics to other areas of public policy i.e. in areas where data and information on the nature of specific problems, or ex ante and ex post assessment of policy/funding impact, and collective understanding, is vital e.g. climate action, cost-of-living, housing, public sector reform etc.

Lesson Four: Adapting the Policy World to the Data World Takes Great Effort
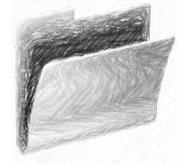
Responding to Lesson Four: Being Data Ready

14. Prioritise and urgently address any governance, privacy, access, confidentially, and data-sharing issues arising from being a truly data-driven public service.

15. Ensure inclusive representation of, and engagement with, relevant stakeholders in actions to ensure public policy is informed by data and evidence. Engagement must include vulnerable, underrepresented, or marginalised groups in open and inclusive consultation processes during the design, implementation, and monitoring of data governance frameworks related to data access and sharing, to reinforce trust.

16. Examine and progress the OECD's advice on appropriate data sharing:

    a. Empower and pro-actively engage all relevant stakeholders alongside broader efforts to **increase the trustworthiness** of the data ecosystem in advance of, and throughout, the establishment and implementation of policy measures for enhancing data access and sharing;

    b. Adopt a strategic **whole-of-government** approach to data access and sharing to ensure that data access and sharing arrangements help effectively and efficiently meet specific societal, policy, and legal objectives that are in the public interest;

    c. Seek to **maximise the benefits** of measures for enhancing data access and sharing, while **protecting individuals' and organisations' rights** and taking into account other legitimate interests and objectives, alongside broader efforts to promote and enable a culture of responsibility for data governance throughout the data value cycle;

    d. Provide coherent **incentive mechanisms** and promote conditions for the development and adoption of sustainable business models and markets for data access and sharing;

    e. Further **improve conditions for cross-border data access** and sharing with trust;

    f. Foster where appropriate the findability, accessibility, interoperability and reusability of data across organisations, **including within and across the public and private sectors**; and

    g. Adopt measures to **enhance the capacity of all stakeholders to effectively use data** responsibly along the data value cycle.

17. Examine and progress the recommendations from the OECD on the strategic use by the public service of data (e.g. mainstreaming isolated efforts and practices, and equipping the public sector with the necessary governance mechanisms, technical means, skills, underpinned by the requisite legal, ethical and social frameworks.)

18. Address any culture of risk aversion in the policy system, where the appropriate safeguards are in place, so data can be shared and used to deliver a better evidence base, and enhanced policy development and outcomes.

Lesson Five: Communication and Trust are Critical

Responding to Lesson Five: Reaching Out and Building Trust

19. Identify and sustain useful processes rolled-out during the pandemic to enhance communication and bolster trust- steps that could be beneficial as Ireland continues to be exposed to emergencies.
20. Consider how pandemic-era engagement structures and processes could assist with the management of other policy issues, such as the climate change/biodiversity emergency, housing, and the current cost-of-living crisis i.e. deep engagement with stakeholders and experts, and data and behavioural analytics work to ensure Government has access to early signals, and a more complete picture of how people were responding, as well as peoples' attitudes, what is working well, and what may need to be adjusted at a given point in time.
21. Improve State communication with local groups so that their connections to vulnerable communities and volunteers are capitalised on to the greatest extent (see Community Call experience). Enhanced communication about, and visibility of, local-level work and role would help ensure that their skills are effectively harnessed to address more policy challenges (e.g. climate/economic transitions).
22. Introduce a new community-based mechanism for self-identifying and notifying of vulnerability, linked to the availability of additional support.
23. Mainstream, maintain, and continually enhance good communications and engagement practice and pilots from the pandemic across the policy/communication system (e.g. multilingual crisis communication, sign-language, variety of formats, taking issues of literacy into account; Community Response Forums; the four new pilot projects on reaching those furthest from participation in decision-making processes).
24. Consider a dedicated programme to ensure policy decisions are seen to work, to generate, foster, and promote trust in government and institutions. This includes sensitising citizens and organisations to the fact that policy shifts are inevitable along the way, as the situation unfolds and the State learns.