HAVING THE RIGHT POLICIES IS SYNONYMOUS WITH GOOD POLITICS: THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IS NO EXCEPTION

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I recently read in my Facebook feed that "when a society regrets the economic loss more than the loss of life, it does not need a virus, as it is already sick." And I add: when a society cannot see the interconnectedness between health and economy it is also positioning itself for complications that can cause a slow but certain death.

Politics is meant to be the governance over a human community. Its main goal is to protect, defend and ensure that the population thrives and lives in peace. Policies, which are the main tool governments must use to achieve specific goals within a society and fulfill its responsibilities, can be achieved in many forms: constitution, laws, regulations, guidelines, protocols, programs, plans, and judicial decisions. The form policies take is secondary to the content and impact they are expected to have.

When policies are not in place, politicians improvise, invent and even concoct. And improvisation, as we know, is tinted by either overconfidence or lack thereof, judging risk and opportunities from a biased position. Thus, when improvisation lacks expertise and a healthy level of awareness, it adversely impacts lives and can damage societies in irreversible ways.

Moreover, the lack of well documented and clearly defined policies has implications for all, mostly adverse. At worst, it can result in unsolved problems; and in an optimistic but often unrealistic scenario, it can produce partial solutions that are inefficient and ineffective. Likewise, the lack of policies weakens the government and its capacity to act responsibly or timely, and often discourages active citizen participation.

Unfortunately, in many countries this pandemic is an exercise in no policies and bad politics… a perfect example of a lack of prudency and expediency. Furthermore, as some governments attempt to establish "policies on the fly" and interpret policies to dodge responsibility, they are engaging and enacting contradictory, unsustainable and unimplementable policies.

Countries should not use the excuse of the urgency of the pandemic to evade enacting policies for future waves of this and other pandemics that can threaten our existence and, like this one, have an impact on our way of life. Government MUST enact various policy categories to be prepared, to plan and to act correctly. History repeats itself, and pandemics certainly do too.

Overview of COVID-19 Policy Categories

Surveillance



Surveillance during a pandemic is critical. It enables healthcare providers and epidemiologists to quickly identify when individuals have been infected, and to locate those with whom they have had contact with and could have spread the disease to. Thus, infrastructure and support of long-term surveillance mechanisms (such as mobile devices, mobile apps and monitoring technologies) are essential to early identify COVID-19 contagion clusters, and to ensure that isolation measures are taken to prevent the disease from disseminating.

Potential Policies:

1. Guidelines for surveillance in time of pandemics.
2. Regulations that allow data sharing between public and private entities.
3. Funding for hardware and software licenses required to gather and analyze data from the population.
4. Data protection policies to ensure that the safety and confidentiality of an individual's data is maintained.
5. Infrastructure for surveillance agencies to share captured data quickly with policymakers, researchers and healthcare providers.
6. Incentives and frameworks for social media companies to capture and share data about infections with policymakers, epidemiologists and healthcare providers, while protecting user confidentiality.
7. Protocols that ensure captured data is securely destroyed once it is no longer required.
8. Platforms that enable communication and sharing of insights between policymakers, healthcare providers and researchers.

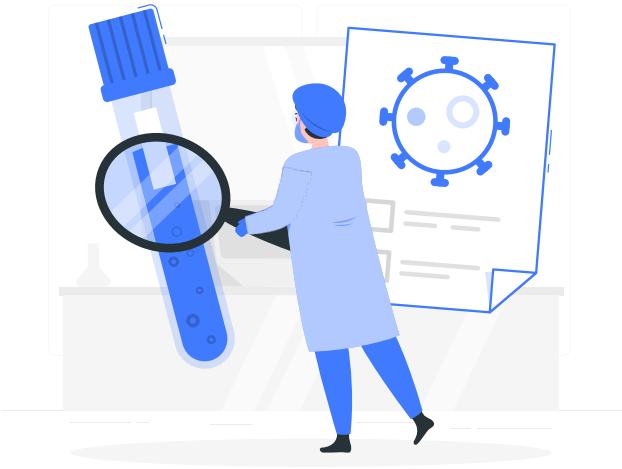
Reporting

Accurate and timely reporting mechanisms are needed to translate surveillance data into customized messages targeted at different audiences, according to their needs and level of expertise, including people without any technical or health background. Businesses and the general public require reliable regular updates of the COVID-19 situation in order to take the necessary measures to protect themselves and avoid spreading the virus within their communities and families.



Potential policies:

1. Protocols that establish criteria that define quality of report and timeframes for delivery.
2. Guidelines that offer templates for reporting to ensure all relevant information is captured.
3. Guidelines that identify who is responsible for developing different parts of the report and the receiving audience of each report.
4. Protocols for frequency, content and clarity of regular and accurate updates from government to the general public on the pandemic.



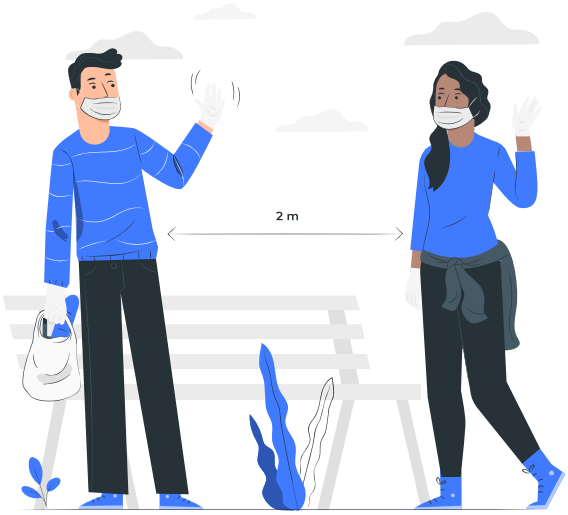
Diagnosing

Given the large-scale and high velocity of COVID-19 spread, it is of vital importance to implement accurate and rapid diagnostic and antibody testing tools to identify infected people, while at the same time, minimizing the risk of misdiagnosis. Diagnostic tools should be affordable so they can be accessed by all health systems, and thus, reach most of the population with zero out-of-pocket expenses. Furthermore, laboratories must have the infrastructure and capability to be able to quickly and safely process large numbers of samples in a timely manner.

Potential policies:

1. Protocols for agreeing on diagnosis of a new entity and for adapting protocols as new evidence is produced based on surveillance and research.
2. Guidelines for application of diagnostic tests in the face of limited availability, less than ideal results, or ideal results.
3. Guidance for facilities to be used for testing.
4. Tracing protocols to quickly identify all individuals affected by the virus.
5. Protocols for protection of diagnostic, testing and tracing staff.
6. Regulations for anti-price gouging on diagnostic tools.
7. Incentives for prompt development of accurate testing tools.
8. Health education campaigns to encourage more individuals to seek diagnosis.
9. Protocols to ensure samples used for diagnosis are destroyed safely once they have been assessed.
10. Regulation that ensures the protection of patient information.
11. Security services (e.g. private security guards, police personnel) to protect diagnosis centers.
12. Incentives for laboratories to become involved in testing.

Prevention

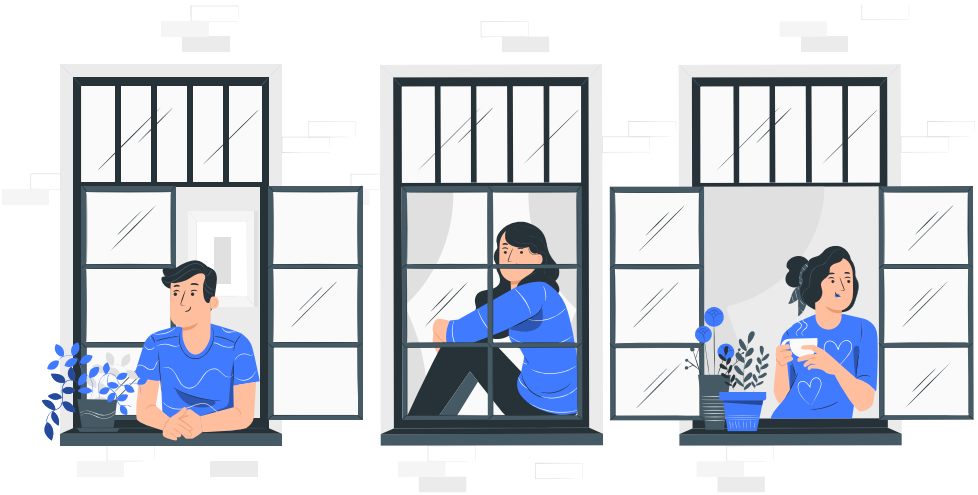


Physical distancing has been identified as the key and most important method to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and has been supplemented by advice such as regularly washing hands and avoiding contact with surfaces that are not thoroughly clean. In the meantime, several academic institutions and pharmaceutical companies are working relentlessly to expedite the development of a vaccine against COVID-19. Funding from governments and private entities is paramount to support this research and ensure that a safe and effective vaccine is developed in the near future that protects people from unwanted adverse events and stops the disease from spreading.

Potential policies:

1. Laws to ensure the use of public and private mass communication channels to inform about prevention.
2. Guidance of health literacy principles for health communications.
3. Guidelines for businesses to help them implement social distancing measures for employees and customers.
4. Regulations (including incentives and penalties) to ensure that businesses enforce social distancing rules as part of their daily operations.
5. Streamlined approval processes for vaccine development.
6. Incentives for vaccine development and deployment.
7. Regulations on how to define order of vaccination and how to prepare and enforce it (including incentives and penalties)
8. Regulations to ensure safety over rapid vaccine development.
9. Laws to increase budgets to health sector and specifically for prevention and national immunization schedules.
10. Laws to combat the spread of false information, including fines and/or prison sentences when an individual or entity is found culpable.
11. Additional regulations for law enforcement to monitor compliance with prevention requirements such as social distancing.

Quarantine



Quarantine measures should be implemented to isolate individuals who present symptoms of COVID-19, in order to avoid contact with other members of the community. However, asymptomatic individuals who may also carry the disease should also be confined, as social distancing may not be enough to avoid spreading the infection on to others.

Potential policies:

1. Laws that define authority to define and enforce quarantine (penalties to be imposed for not complying).
2. Clear guidelines articulating what criteria need to be met to classify someone as high risk and requiring quarantine.
3. Not everyone has the conditions at home to isolate, if deemed necessary by the scientific evidence, laws are needed to set up dedicated quarantine centers.
4. To prevent wider spread of the infection, protocols and guidelines to shut down infected areas (homes, apartment blocks, suburban towns, cities or regions) if an infection is identified.

Treatment

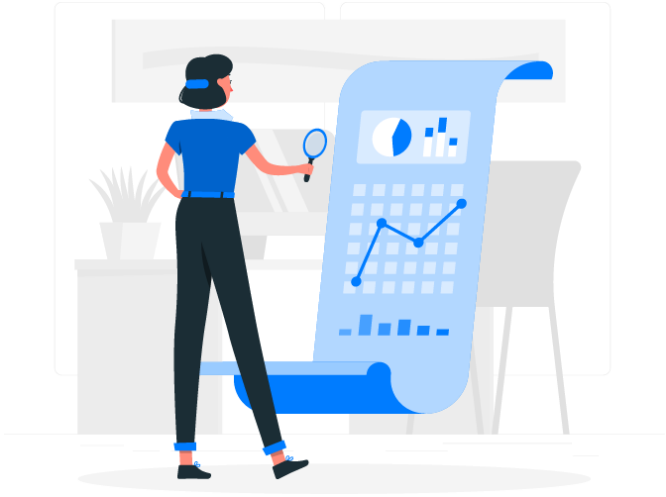


Early evidence suggests that COVID-19 affects mostly elderly people over the age of 60 years old and those with pre-existing chronic health conditions, who may experience more severe symptoms of the disease and may require treatment due to complications. However, as countries go back to opening businesses, the disease is spreading among younger groups. The treatment for more severe cases requires medication or the use of complex hospital equipment (e.g. ventilators). This poses a challenge for individuals living in rural areas where access to specialized treatment is very limited, as well as for those with no insurance and low socioeconomic status.

Potential policies:

1. Financial support to help hospitals, specialist clinics and their staff members to deliver treatment services.
2. Streamlined procurement processes to help treatment centers to source new equipment whenever required.
3. Regulations that enable high-risk individuals (e.g. those aged over 60 years or with chronic health conditions) to be prioritized to receive treatment.
4. Incentives for transportation companies that can help people living in rural areas to overcome geographic barriers to treatment by taking them to and from treatment centers.
5. Streamlined approval process for new and emerging forms of treatment to ensure that they can be accessed by healthcare providers and patients as quickly as possible.
6. Ensure that all treatment services are covered under the public health insurance system regardless of an individual's ability to pay.
7. Public education campaigns to prevent stigmatization and discrimination against: (a) people under treatment for Covid-19 treatment; and (b) healthcare workers providing Covid-19 treatment.
8. Security protocols and staff to protect treatment facilities.

Assessment of impact



The widespread significant impact of COVID-19 must be evaluated to document lessons learned for the future, including policies that allow to compare the impact of the disease in a standardized manner, and involving research and private institutions with a research and development division (e.g. pharmaceutical companies) to review and evaluate surveillance data to accurately understand the impact.

Potential policies:

1. Develop a standardized template that can be adapted at a city, state and national level to compare the impact of Covid-19.
2. Involve researchers and private institutions with a research and development division (e.g. pharmaceutical companies) to review and evaluate surveillance data to accurately understand impact.

Pandemic preparedness



The current pandemic has provided learning opportunities to prepare for potential future pandemics and should be formally documented and shared with policy makers around the globe, as well as health care providers, researchers, private companies, and institutions.

Potential policies:

1. Develop dedicated government agencies/divisions that focus on preparing for pandemics.
2. Develop regulations that mandate certain locations can be converted into mass quarantine and/or treatment centers if required (e.g. stadiums, conference centers, schools) to house large numbers of people.
3. Increase the numbers of emergency care beds and facilities available to be prepared for future pandemics.
4. Incentives for laboratories to develop pandemic preparation plans that allow them to assess medical samples quickly in the future.
5. Develop long-term pandemic preparation plans, including scenario planning, that can be enacted by government agencies, healthcare providers, transport companies (airlines, trains, public transport providers) quickly to shut-down areas that are found to be infected in the future to prevent pandemics from developing.
6. Develop formal platforms to communicate across geographic locations so that future infections can be identified quickly to stop their spread.

Public-private partnerships



Both the public and private sectors have their own unique capabilities to gather and analyze data, as well as to develop treatments and solutions. Thus, public-private partnerships would entail benefits for both sectors, by optimizing those benefits and allowing them to focus on different areas. In time-sensitive situations such as a pandemic, where prompt solutions are required, dividing and conquering on tasks will ensure that public and private agencies are not duplicating each other's work, while allowing them to share the best knowledge and tools from both worlds with each other.

Potential policies:

1. Incentives (e.g. tax benefits, funding) for private institutions to partner with government agencies and share resources (people, tools, knowledge).
2. Frameworks that can be used by public and private agencies for collaboration.
3. Regulations that protect intellectual property, so that private companies do not hesitate from sharing proprietary information with government agencies for fear of losing control of their IP.

Protect frontline workers

Frontline workers are individuals who provide an essential public service, including paramedics, allied health workers, police, cleaning crews, sanitation workers, and workers that support the elderly and disabled population. As they are often the first point of contact for many people affected by COVID-19, it is essential to provide them with all the necessary equipment and support to enable them to continue their vital role so that society can continue to fun ction effectively. Special attention should be given to healthcare workers, who experience a double burden by treating patients not only with COVID-19, but also with all other health conditions such as chronic and infectious diseases and accidents that continue to occur.



Potential policies:

1. Provide personal protective equipment (PPE) for all frontline workers.
2. Provide mental health support and counselling services when required.
3. Ensure there are sufficient staff members so that no one is overworked.
4. Provide accommodation and meals to frontline workers who come into contact with Covid-19 and are required to be quarantined away from family members.
5. Provide transportation services and/or reimbursements to support frontline workers during this time.
6. Public education campaigns to prevent stigmatization and discrimination against frontline workers.
7. Additional security measures to help frontline workers continue their work without being attacked by the general public.
8. Continue enforcing occupational health and safety regulations that ensure frontline workers can work effectively and safely.
9. Incentives to reimburse healthcare workers that work overtime.
10. Develop and disseminate guidelines to help healthcare workers treat COVID-19 patients using the best available medication and equipment.
11. Incentivize telehealth services which can be used by healthcare workers to deliver diagnosis and treatment services virtually (e.g. to those living in remote rural communities).

Reorganize the health systems to address pandemic and non-pandemic health services in a safe manner



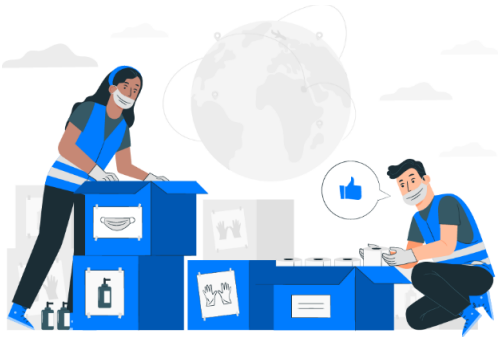
As health systems are required to deal with existing challenges related to preventing diseases through treatment and health promotion, while simultaneously having to deal with a rapidly increasing number of individuals that need acute and immediate treatment for COVID-19, most countries have been facing health service shortages, with the demand exceeding their existing capacity. Consequently, it is of vital importance that health systems prioritize limited health resources, while at the same time develop policies to strengthen the area.

Potential policies:

1. Develop a standardized framework or guideline that can be used by healthcare providers to identify patients that have the greatest need for resources so that services can be delivered in an efficient manner.
2. Develop new funding and reimbursement systems to fund health services, such as value-based funding patterns.
3. Protocols that prioritize treatment for acute health services and emergency departments, delaying non-essential treatment for as long as possible.
4. Increase the numbers of emergency care beds and facilities available to treat Covid-19 patients along with other people requiring emergency care (e.g. patients that experience heart attacks, strokes, respiratory attacks, road traffic accidents, etc.).

Supply chain

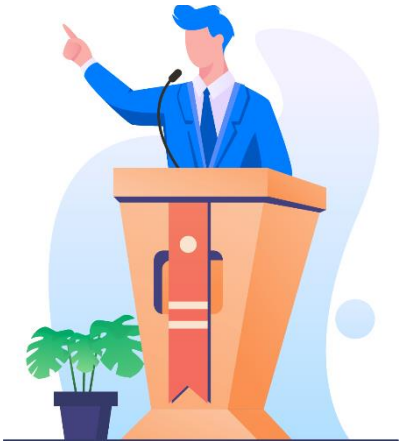
It is important for established supply chains to continue functioning effectively so that goods, including vital medical supplies, can continue being delivered to meet people's needs in an organized and equitable manner. Disrupted supply chains will result in unfair competition, mismanagement, and an unmet need for essential services, including medical supplies, food, water, fuel, groceries, and homewares, which may then create other health problems.



Potential policies:

1. Provide incentives to support transportation and freight companies to continue operating (e.g. tax breaks, financial benefits).
2. Develop regulations that protect transportation company workers.
3. Develop frameworks that help goods identify the most efficient route to get from manufacturing and development through to the consumer.
4. Develop policies that encourage and incentivize transport companies to collaborate with each other to streamline the movement of good (e.g. one company transport goods over land by truck from the factory to the port, another company transports the goods from the port overseas by ship to another port, and another company transports the goods from the port of arrival to the consumer by truck).
5. Provide security services (e.g. police and army) to protect existing supply chains.

Governance responsibilities (national, regional and city governments distribution of responsibilities)



Although national, regional and local governments at municipal levels have different responsibilities when it comes to protecting their respective populations, it is of vital importance that they convey a unified message to the general population regarding the measures to be taken, in order to avoid contradictory statements, which can cause division among the society, and thus, lack of compliance.

Potential policies:

1. Frameworks that enable messaging to be delivered in a standardized manner across national, state/provincial and local setting.
2. Protocols that can be adapted at a national, state/provincial and city-level to provide consistent diagnosis and treatment services.
3. Standardized reporting templates to ensure all states/provinces and cities are collecting and reporting the same type of data.
4. Platforms to enable collaboration and communication between different cities and states/provinces.
5. Legislation to allow local health agencies to source funding and equipment to meet demand.
6. Legislation that allows local governments to request more funding for essential services when required.
7. New debt limits to enable government borrowing during the pandemic, but in a sustainable manner.
8. New protocols to restructure debt for private companies to allow them to continue functioning through the pandemic but without borrowing unsustainably.



Investments on health

While the pandemic is costing billions of dollars in healthcare service delivery and stimulating economic growth, it is important that long-term investments continue to be made in the health system to ensure that it continues to meet demand once the pandemic is over. For example, research and investment into new and emerging forms of treatment for chronic conditions, infectious diseases and mental health must continue, to ensure that development does not fall behind.

Potential policies:

1. Incentives for academic institutions and private companies to continue research and development on preventing, diagnosing and treating chroni c conditions and infectious diseases effectively.
2. A formal platform enabling collaboration between researchers, healthcare providers, funders and policymakers to ensure long-term investment in health.
3. Regulation that enforces the protection of intellectual property.
4. Identify new sources of funding for investments in health.
5. Develop new frameworks for reimbursing health technology based on value delivered.

Potential health threats

There are a variety of threats to health, from chronic conditions, non-COVID-19 infectious diseases, mental illnesses, and accidents. These potential health threats must continue to be explored to ensure that appropriate mitigation strategies can be implemented.



Potential policies:

1. Develop a risk framework that allows threats to health to be identified quickly and allocated correctly based on common characteristics.
2. Develop frameworks that allow a standard approach to be used to develop risk mitigation strategies.
3. Develop formal platforms to share ideas and knowledge about risks from different geographic locations.

In Summary

Despite the impossibility of turning back time, lessons can be learned from our mistakes, and now is the perfect time to do so and concentrate our efforts in the development of policies that will allow us, in a planned, responsible and committed manner, to deal with a second or third wave of the disease. We owe it to ourselves, to our communities, and to an interconnected world! **There is time to make good policy synonymous with good politics.**