

RECOMMENDATIONS

In this first sub-report the Dutch Safety Board investigated how the COVID-19 crisis was dealt with in the Netherlands, through to September 2020. The crisis started as a public health crisis. Within a few weeks it expanded to be a crisis on an unprecedented scale, with broad societal impact. The Board wanted to know: why did it develop in the way it did, and what can be learned from that process?

At this point in time, issuing recommendations requires a degree of restraint because the COVID-19 crisis is still continuing and follow-up investigations are still underway. Nonetheless, the Board has prepared a number of recommendations on the basis of this sub-report so that the approach to the current COVID-19 crisis and future protracted crises with national impact can be improved. Given its responsibility for the approach to crises of this kind, the Board has addressed its recommendations to the Dutch Cabinet.

Protracted crises with an uncertain course: prepare and adapt

Uncertainty is inextricably linked to crises, in particular to crises that continue over a long period of time and have broad consequences. In order to better deal with uncertainties in protracted crises and to reinforce the preparation for large-scale crisis scenarios, the Board issues the following recommendations:

1. Reinforce the preparation for protracted socially disruptive crises by elaborating scenarios with all conceivable consequences and determining the way in which those consequences can be tackled. Then reach decisions on the desired state of readiness and monitor the way in which that state is achieved.
2. Develop the capacity to improvise, including by training this capacity in crisis preparation. Expand the possibilities for improvising by organizing buffers in capacity and a variety of procedures. During the crisis itself, regularly mark, communicate and reflect on interim adjustments to the approach and organization.
3. During a crisis, continue to map out various scenarios, including less likely scenarios with high impact, and anticipate their occurrence. Within the scenario outlines, explicitly identify the degree of uncertainty. Name assumptions made and specify the validity or limitations of the information used, both in advices and decisions.
4. Ensure that high-quality, up-to-date quantitative and qualitative data, as well as less certain information, are included in advices and decisions. In doing so, provide the best possible up-to-date vision on the course of the crisis, and generate insight into the implementation and effectiveness of the measures.
5. Identify (new) vulnerable groups during crises. Recognize the specific risks for these groups in a timely fashion, and respond appropriately. On a structural basis, assess whether the approach for these groups is effective.

The national crisis structure

The uncertainties and - partially unforeseen - problems that emerge during a protracted crisis call for a crisis organization capable of responding flexibly. To ensure effective governance and control, the crisis organization must remain clear to all parties. The Dutch Safety Board therefore makes the following recommendations:

6. Describe in explicit terms the Cabinet-wide responsibility if a crisis shifts from a single department to a national crisis structure. Formulate a department-overarching strategy and make the task of solving the problems a shared responsibility.
7. Adapt the national crisis structure in the following respects, so that it is better equipped to tackle a protracted crisis:
 - Safeguard the unity of government policy by establishing and maintaining close ties with the safety regions during a national crisis.
 - Improve the implementation of strategy and decisions by performing an operational implementation test, in advance, and through continuous feedback about the process of implementation.
 - Organize parallel and separate advice on acute and long term problems. Ensure that both types of perspective are explicitly taken into account in the decision-making process.
8. Adjust the crisis structure for the healthcare field so that the Minister of Health, Welfare and Sports is given authority to effectively tackle problems that go beyond the boundaries of individual sectors, regions or institutions, in any case including directly binding instructions.
9. Monitor the task focus and secure the independent position of administrators as decision-makers and experts as advisors. A clear division of roles contributes to understanding for and traceability of government actions and reinforces the democratic legitimacy of decisions.

Societal support

In a protracted national crisis, support for the approach to that crisis is essential. Crisis communication must reach out to all relevant target groups, and that communication must represent an effective response to the concerns and questions of citizens. To reinforce crisis communication, the Board issues the following recommendation:

10. In a protracted crisis, anticipate a decline in societal support and adjust the communication strategy accordingly. With that in mind, take the following actions:
 - Satisfy the information needs of all target groups and in reaching out to these groups, make use of parties close to them;
 - Encourage government parties and officials to identify uncertainties concerning the crisis and the effectiveness of measures, with a view to avoiding unrealistic expectations;
 - Guarantee the input from social and behavioural sciences in crisis and communication policy;
 - With the support of local parties, seek systematic dialogue with citizens, to ensure that their concerns, questions and needs are given a clear place in crisis and communication policy.