

Meeting of Senior Officials from Centres of Government

Virtual meeting
11 March 2021

SUMMARY



THE GOVERNMENT
OF THE GRAND DUCHY OF LUXEMBOURG
Ministry of State

Summary

Meeting of the Senior Officials of the Centres of Government Network

Leading a resilient recovery: risks and challenges

The 2021 March meeting of the OECD Network of Senior Officials from Centres of Government (CoG) was hosted by the Government of Luxembourg and chaired by Jacques Flies, Secretary General of the Government. The meeting was held virtually, with the participation of senior officials from 31 countries. The meeting explored the issues being addressed by governments in planning for the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, with a particular focus on the main risks that the centres of government need to be aware of.

The opening from His Excellency, Xavier Bettel, Prime Minister of Luxembourg, set the tone by emphasising the need to be ambitious in the recovery plans, recognising the pressures that come from public scrutiny and from comparison with other countries. The Prime Minister acknowledged that we cannot control everything and we do not have all the answers. He pointed out that governments primarily depend on information that is also available to the public, and noted the impact of disinformation on trust between the government and its citizens.

The Prime Minister also discussed the need to review government working methods after the crisis to ensure that democratic principles (such as consultation with parliaments) are upheld. He concluded that trust levels can change from one day to another, so governments need to be careful about risks while not losing time or ambition.

The Secretary-General of the OECD emphasised that we cannot afford to return to how we governed before the pandemic. Referring to an OECD survey of centres of government, he noted that the most frequently mentioned priority is to return to pre-pandemic levels of growth, and cautioned that longer-term priorities such as climate change must also feature prominently in governments' recovery plans. Given people's low satisfaction with the functioning of their democracies, he noted that governments can tackle a number of challenges to reinforce trust in government, including: addressing risks posed by the divisive role of mis- and dis-information and the role of social media; demonstrating government's capacity to tackle global, transboundary issues, such as climate change; and responding to calls from citizens for government representation and decision making to be more representative. He reaffirmed that the centres of government have a unique role to play in understanding and explaining policy trade-offs that need to be managed in the recovery and beyond, and that the management of spending decisions will be particularly important.

Finally, he called for the centres of government to keep the good co-ordination practices that emerged and maintain them outside the crisis period. This need for better co-ordination also applies at the international level. He emphasised the need to build our capacity to think globally and co-ordinate domestic actions internationally, and invited delegates to think about the global competences in our centres of government.

Session 1: Roundtable on key risks and challenges for the centres of government in the design and implementation of recovery plans

The Chair opened the session with a reminder that a year ago we did not have a "handbook" for government policy in this crisis. Now we can draw on much more relevant experience. As centres of government, it is our responsibility to avoid falling back into old habits. We should anticipate dangers and risks in the plans ahead.

The roundtable discussion was introduced by the OECD Secretariat with a focus on some of the key results of the recent survey of centres of government, which highlight the important role that the centre will play in co-ordinating the recovery plans and the need to focus on ways to 'decide better'

in achieving recovery priorities. The majority (57%) of the surveyed countries report that the Prime Minister's or President's office will assume the primary responsibility for co-ordinating strategic planning for the COVID-19 recovery. Centres of government will have to navigate both organisational and policy risks. Violations of integrity standards – ranging from conflicts of interest to corruption, fraud or the exercise of undue influence on policy-making – remain among the challenging issues confronting governments during the recovery phase. Disinformation and misinformation can further undermine citizens' trust in government and hamper engagement with citizens on public policies for recovery. While many efforts have been made to react to misinformation, data suggest that several OECD and non-Member countries lack the necessary capacity to effectively respond to misinformation and disinformation. Governments in 80% of OECD countries have sought external support for dealing with mis-information and dis-information, and only one-third have guidelines for handling misinformation.

Better decision-making processes can help prioritise efforts during the recovery. The majority of the centres of government in surveyed countries are in charge of identifying priority areas, shortlisting and selecting priority policies and programmes. However, this process also raises the need to build practices and capacities for dealing with competing priorities and trade-offs, both domestically and in the international arena. Pressing policy challenges, such as domestic economic recovery, might clash with more long-term (and global) priorities, such as building a greener economy. Only a quarter of countries reported green recovery as being one of their top three priorities for recovery. Data from the OECD Green Recovery Database suggests that OECD Members and Partners are pursuing environmental objectives as part of their recovery plans, although these actions are largely outweighed by measures with a negative or mixed impact on the environment.

During the roundtable, countries highlighted the current governance risks they face in leading and managing the successful design and delivery of recovery plans. These risks include delays in opening up new programmes, higher dissatisfaction among stakeholders who do not benefit as expected, as well as new long term costs for the public sector. A common element of these risks is that they can be largely mitigated with capable management by the public sector and with effective stewardship from the centre and in international collaboration. Delegates noted the role that the CoG Network could play in supporting international co-operation in the recovery phase and sharing lessons on implementing recovery plans.

Delegates highlighted the need to review how the government administration is organised to support significant funding streams and to ensure it is sustainable over the long run. Delegates also emphasised the importance of better explaining decisions to the public, for instance by reporting openly about the expected impacts of major decisions. Delegates mentioned the need to capture both the economic and social impacts of the crisis and to be transparent about the results. They noted that implementation should be focused on a bottom-up approach with a citizen perspective. A number of countries shared their experiences in terms of engaging with citizens during the crisis.

Delegates highlighted that it was important to use this moment to show that change is possible in government decision making – and that lessons will be learned for the future by building forecasting and analytical capacity. Delegates shared views on the need, in some instances, for the centre of government to take a step back after the crisis and give responsibilities back to ministries and agencies. Countries asked that a future session of the Network be dedicated to the challenges related to communication and the role of experts. Dis-information was a recurring theme, along with the quality of public discourse.

The session underlined that countries faced many similar challenges in the crisis response, particularly in terms of balancing different needs, such as: accountability and legal requirements vs. the need to act fast; potential variations in response depending on the focus on health or the economy; and the

need to centralise decisions vs. respecting local government decision-making processes. Brazil thanked the OECD for the work it is currently undertaking through a CoG review and highlighted that it provided an excellent vehicle for cross-country sharing of experiences. The Public Governance Committee (PGC) Chair offered to take the lessons learned from the CoG Network to the PGC.

Session 2: The role of the Centres of Government Network

The second session confirmed a forward-looking role for the CoG Network that can inform strategic discussions at the OECD and guide the work of the OECD Secretariat for 2021. In advance of the meeting, the Chair had proposed a draft statement for the Network to agree upon. Members agreed to the proposed draft with one proposed change: adding an explicit reference to trust in government – a recurring theme in the meeting – which was included in the text of the statement during the meeting. The delegates highlighted that the statement was particularly helpful in capturing the challenges of the times, highlighting common issues across countries, and enabling collective learning. The Chair emphasised that it would help to guide the Secretariat’s work in supporting the CoG Network so that it best meets with the countries’ needs.

Statement by the OECD Network of Senior Officials from Centres of Government

The 2020 OECD Ministerial Council Statement recognised the need for governments to focus on restarting hard-hit economies by boosting growth, income and employment while promoting cleaner, more inclusive and sustainable economies. Ambitious recovery plans and programmes will need to address both pre-existing and emerging challenges (e.g. climate change) and transform economies using the tools provided by new technologies. The resilience of the recovery will critically depend on the factors and processes driving policy choices and on the capacity of governments to deliver. With massive government interventions in the health, economic and social sectors, the COVID-19 pandemic has been a test case for governments’ capacity to “decide better” by making the right decisions at the right time and to collaborate to address global challenges. In some cases, the pandemic has highlighted the flexibility, agility and strength of public actors and institutions; but, in others, it has exposed weaknesses as countries have struggled to respond to the speed and breadth of this global crisis. At the same time, we see emerging risks related to growing mistrust in some parts of our populations, and a need to focus on reinforcing democratic processes, including by tackling misinformation and fake news.

The OECD Network of Senior Officials from Centres of Government recognises the vital role that strong public governance and leadership will play in the recovery. With this in mind, and in line with its mandate, it will support governments in their efforts to ensure effective decision making through strategic planning, priority setting, policy co-ordination, monitoring of policy implementation and strategic communication. Members call on the OECD Secretariat to assist in this goal by capturing lessons learned from the crisis; identifying through government-led evaluations and peer learning good practices in OECD countries, in particular relating to tackling climate change; and responding to the digital transformation and other cross-cutting challenges that can promote sustainable and inclusive growth. Members ask the Secretariat to analyse the key governance risks to the effective delivery of recovery plans and provide evidence-based advice on how to strengthen our capacity to overcome them, including through good examples and strategies for better decision making. This should include a focus on “spending better”, managing trade-offs among policy areas, taking advantage of the best available science and data in decision making, and building trust by tackling dis- and misinformation, as well as limiting undue influence in policy-making and ensuring integrity and solid accountability processes. The success of the recovery will depend on the trust people have in the capacity of governments to deliver and to safeguard long-term interests.

Contributing to the 2020-2024 mandate of the Public Governance Committee to improve trust in government, this work should be co-ordinated with other OECD Committees working for inclusive and sustainable recovery. Members encourage the OECD to engage with its members in the design and implementation of recovery plans. The OECD Network of Senior Officials from Centres of Government agrees to reconvene towards the end of 2021 to review the available analysis and to consider the next steps in the recovery phase.

Conclusions

In his conclusion, the Chair thanked members for their support of the CoG statement and mentioned that he would be bringing the key messages of the statement to the next OECD Global Strategy Group meeting.

In his concluding remarks, Jeffrey Schlagenhauf, Deputy Secretary-General of the OECD, welcomed the agreed statement as an important contribution to the Global Strategy Group and the Ministerial Council of the OECD. He highlighted the importance of the “spending better” initiative to ensure that recovery plans are as effective as possible, as well as the “deciding better” initiative, with a request from countries for a compendium of good practices and a checklist of decision-making processes to help steer the recovery effort. He mentioned the intention of the OECD Secretariat to call upon experts from the centres of government to work with the OECD Secretariat to deliver what is most needed.

The Chair concluded that the OECD and Centres of Government Network could continue offering this unique platform for a frank exchange among peers from the centres of government and build further on its role in reviewing and sharing practices in the management of the recovery, in particular as they relate to the governance challenges that were highlighted during the meeting.