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Policy Council Proceedings
Session no. 17
May 2020

مجلس السياسات
POLICY COUNCIL
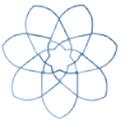
SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS OF COVID19- IN THE UAE:
Designing Healthcare and Well-being Policy Responses by the Scientific Community

About the Council

Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government took the initiative to launch the Policy Council, a round table dialogue program, to promote meaningful dialogues that will enrich shared knowledge within government entities. The Council also aims to highlight vital public topics and policies of high priority within the framework of the renown achievements realized by government entities in the UAE in various fields, positioning them locally, regionally, and globally as leaders within their specializations.

Additionally, the Council strives to encourage the dissemination of expertise, promote knowledge sharing, and ensure that all government entities benefit from the same. In this context, the School aims for participant diversity at every session, so as to include federal and local levels, central authorities, and specialized authorities, in addition to promoting the engagement of influential non-government stakeholders in relevant discussions. This will enable meaningful, comprehensive dialogues and the ability to tackle topics from a variety of perspectives, as the School seeks to restructure the Policy Council with a view to integrating it within comprehensive action agendas that will enable the Council to conduct in depth discussions of topics on the table. This, in turn, will enhance common understanding and knowledge-sharing efforts. The objectives of the Council can be summarized in providing a platform for cognitive dialogue among experts, specialists and stakeholders involved in the government sector with a view to highlighting issues of priority and importance on government and community levels. The Council also aims to document and disseminate dialogue in a balanced, comprehensive and practical manner to enrich cognitive content within government. Additionally, the Council strives to encourage individual and organizational communication and relationships, and to strengthen the cognitive network within government to enhance effective organizational cooperation. Finally, the Council strives to present insights and recommendations that will have an effective impact on joint action and the development of government performance.

Issue Overview

In a period of few months, the world we knew has changed dramatically in ways that would have seemed impossible to imagine before the pandemic. Since the first recorder case of coronavirus infection in November 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic has spread through almost all nations around the globe. Healthcare systems are overwhelmed by the exponentially growing number of patients, with the burden asymmetrically distributed across countries. World economies have been disrupted, leaving millions jobless or at the risk of losing their jobs. The COVID-19 outbreak has forced almost half of the world population to stay physically isolated and uncertain about their future, with children, kept out of schools and almost all other 'normal' activities becoming among the most impacted[1]. Beyond the direct impact on the physical wellbeing of millions of people, there is growing evidence that stress and anxiety induced by this new reality will translate into long-term mental and wellbeing issues. The current scene is clouded by numerous health, economic, and societal challenges, however, if healthcare policy responses and interventions are to be designed based on rigorous research, robust evidence and accurate and timely data, nations can extract numerous opportunities to build momentum for positive change in the future. For them to be sustainable, these responses would need to address the pressing questions both on the short and the long terms.

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[1]   Raja, p. (2020). Experts explain how to manage mental wellbeing during COVID-19. Retrieved from: https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/covid-19-mental-health/.

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Virtual Policy Council: COVID-19 Socio-economic Implications for the UAE

The UAE has introduced various measures to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, such as transitioning schools and universities to online platforms, suspending public gatherings, adapting working from home arrangements and mandating social distancing. The pandemic has also led to a shift in the paradigm of where healthcare delivery takes place. Adopting telemedicine has been accelerated and the shift is already materializing. Government services utilized an already strong technological infrastructure to complete its transition to online platforms.

These changes indicate that probably "back to normal" strategies will not be back to the world we knew before COVID-19. Recently, world governments started debating the right approaches to reopen their economies, and the UAE is not an exception. Local economic departments were tasked with exploring the possibility of re-opening commercial centers, provided that all relevant precautionary and preventive measures will be followed[2]. The main question here is how to balance developmental, economic and growth, while ensuring that people's health and wellbeing is not compromised.

Never before did nations face the urgent need to rely on the scientific community as they do today. To tackle these questions, the Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government proposes leveraging its collective knowledge, expertise and infrastructure to run a Virtual Policy Council to host leaders in the scientific community in the UAE to brainstorm the existing evidence and discuss policy options to better address key questions towards the post-pandemic future of the UAE.

The critical questions to be addressed during this policy council are the following:

1. Short-term Policy Focus:

   - Wellbeing in the UAE During the Pandemic: What are the immediate measures that can help sustain people's health and wellbeing during COVID-19 pandemic?

   - Transitioning 'Back to Normal': Once social and economic life goes back to normal, what are the interventions needed to restore public wellbeing and 'heal' the negative impact of social distancing and economic shutdown?

2. Long-term Policy Focus:

   - Post-pandemic Healthcare and Societal Policy Options: What are the long-term implications of COVID-19 on healthcare and society? And what are the policy options available to help mitigate their impact?

   - Strategic Preventative Policy Responses: How can we design local policy responses and initiatives that can help the nation avoid facing a similar scenario in future pandemics?

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[2]   https://gulfnews.com/uae/covid-19-local-economic-departments-in-uae-to-explore-possibility-of-re-opening-commercial-centres-1.1587621614579

Policy Council Objectives

Reopening manageable and calculated windows for economic recovery is essential for the country's growth. However, the key point to address is the mechanism in which economy can be nourished, while keeping people's health and wellbeing at the heart of its pursuit. Careful planning and evidence-based decisions have to be the engine that drives any initiative to re-open the national economy. Moreover, it is vital to move beyond mere economic lenses when looking at the matter and consider different aspects of healthcare and wellbeing to avoid relapses and detrimental consequences. The main aim of this policy council therefore is to engage stakeholders in a policy dialogue to discuss ways for re-opening the national economy during COVID-19, while keeping people's health and wellbeing as a core element. In more details, the objectives are:

1. Gather policymakers and experts in the field leverage their expertise and gain deeper understanding of main challenges pertinent to healthcare and encountered when restarting social and economic activities, and what policy solutions can be used to mitigate their impact.

2. Identify opportunities in the current situation that can help revive the national economy, while sustaining and advancing healthcare and social policy.

3. Discuss policy recommendation and options to help policymakers develop informed policy decisions.

Participants

The Mohammed bin Rashid Academy of Scientists (MBRAS) is the primary body representing the UAE's science community composing of the UAE's top researchers from several institutions in the country. Collectively, it possesses expertise in the fields of natural sciences, engineering and health and medical sciences, and aims to establish bridges across the science community, government and industry through supporting evidence-based policies, solutions to challenges, and creating opportunities. The council invited 10 participants from the ASO team in the Mohammed Bin Rashid Academy of Scientists (MBRAS) members and affiliates, alongside key stakeholders active into the healthcare and wellbeing policy ecosystem.

Discussion Points

Short-term Policy Focus:

Since the identification of the first case of COVID-19 in the UAE, the government has initiated a series of policy responses addressing rapid changes imposed by the pandemic. Nationwide responses such as extensive testing, social distancing, and injecting the country's economy with financial stimulus contributed to combating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on people's health and livelihood. However, because of the pandemic's far-reaching effects, more effort is needed to counter a host of challenges, including discontinuity of education, public awareness and mental health issues.

Data sharing and transparency:

The UAE has so far conducted thousands of tests to identify cases and keep the infection rates at bay. Testing data can be utilized in multiple ways to inform the public, policymakers and scientific research. First, testing data can provide valuable insights into infection patterns and hotspots which in turn can be selectively released to the public. The purpose of selective information disclosure is empowering citizens to make informed decisions about their mobility and avoid infection hotspots. However, this policy option should be utilized with caution, as releasing information on infected areas can trigger mass panic or social stigma against individuals from those areas leading to social inequalities on the long-term. Second, when up-to-date testing data feeds into databases

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tasked with mapping patterns of infection, the government will have at its disposal a tool for making timely public health decisions. Lastly, data collected during the pandemic, including testing data, can be partially shared with relevant agents, such as researchers and academics, who are able to aid in developing research and facilitating evidence-based policy responses. A prerequisite to implementing data sharing ethically is addressing ethical concerns such as patient data protection and other considerations of privacy and confidentiality.

Support for educational institutes:

School children and university students are among those who have been impacted the most by the pandemic. In addition to how their education is disrupted, students face increasing financial challenges affecting their ability to pay tuitions. Students from economically less privileged families are especially vulnerable to the consequences of educational inequalities. A very important question emerging from this situation asks how can the government aid these students to prevent educational discontinuation? Nationwide gaps in education and skills can reflect negatively on UAE's future economy. In particular, disruption in medical education and medical science research can lead to talent shortage, particularly because the need for fresh medical graduates and up-to-date medical research is indispensable for dealing with the current pandemic and future ones. Social distancing and lockdowns created an educational challenge for students of applied fields, as their access to campus facilities was restricted. As a result, there has been a drop in productivity experienced by students coming from majors where laboratory work and practicums are essential to their education.

In regard with employment, many fresh university graduates are facing employment challenges as the economic impacts of COVID-19 materialize in subsequent years. Fresh graduates and senior-level students usually get internship opportunities allowing them to build their professional portfolios and secure a small source of income to pay their expenses and student debts. However, internships are becoming increasingly scarce or at least less attractive than before.

Youth's motivation and mental health:

Besides financial hardship, the COVID-19 pandemic introduced a range of detrimental consequences for youth's mental health and wellbeing. As mentioned earlier, educational disruption and employment challenges can lead to plunges in student motivation. There are mainly two groups of students who are particularly vulnerable to stress caused by uncertainties: fresh university graduates and high school graduates. University graduates, especially those who are seeking employment or post-graduate studies, are experiencing increased levels of anxiety due to future uncertainties. Similarly, high school graduates, along with their families, are faced with anxiety-inducing concerns regarding final exams, university admissions, and available learning methods (i.e. online, face-to-face, blended, etc.).

Raising the public's awareness:

Fluctuations in levels of public panic and psychological distress caused by the pandemic can be mainly attributed to lack of awareness. Raising people's awareness of latest updates on COVID-19 and educating them on how to avoid infection are crucial to contain public fear. Relevant entities should provide continuous support, informing people on how to protect themselves and their families from COVID-19. Also clear and easy to follow information should be provided to the public on what steps to take in case of contracting infection.

So far, general public discourse has drawn a line between public health and economy. However, the pandemic had repeatedly proven that the two are closely connected. People who are under economic pressures are most likely to suffer health consequences due to their inability to access and afford health services. In a similar way, those who suffer from underlying conditions that put them in risk groups will experience difficulties maintaining their jobs if no special arrangements were set in place. Therefore, the pandemic should be approached as a major challenge that impacts different aspects of public life. Only through such a holistic approach, economic reopening will not be perceived by the public as a direct threat to their health.

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Digital Wellbeing

During and post COVID-19, people's interaction with and reliance on digital technology is expected to grow exponentially inviting more opportunities and threats. As many businesses and educational institutions have shifted to distance online modes, children and adults might start developing side-effects from over-reliance on digital platforms. For example, cyberbullying was a growing problem even before the overwhelming majority of people moved online during the Pandemic. Cases of bullying might intensify in regard with children who recovered or recovering from COVID-19. In addition to increased digital activities and cyberbullying, there are several aspect of digital wellbeing expected to suffer, including increased screen time, digital addiction, threats to online privacy, cybercrimes and mental fatigue.

In a short poll, the policy council members were asked to vote on the most critical policy challenge discussed in the session. Figure 1 below shows the results:

Which challenge is most critical from the points raised in this session?

- Need for investment in medical and health research
- Mental and psychological implications
- Lack of educational support
- Health implications (obesity and diabetes)
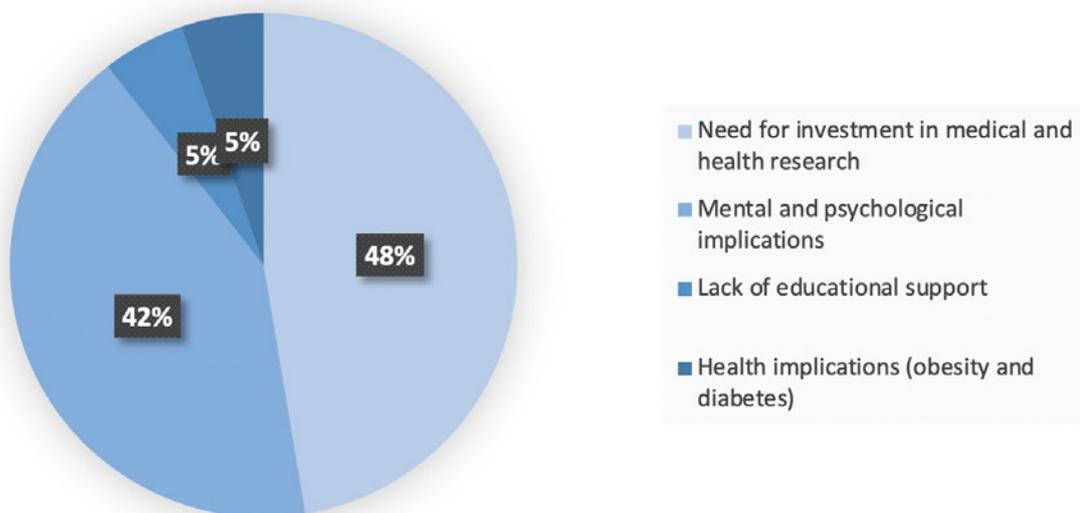
Figure 1: Policy Council Poll Results (n=19)

Long-term Policy Focus:

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented many health and socio-economic challenges, however, it has also offered various opportunities for change and in some cases facilitated trajectories of change that have long suffered of stagnation. Governments around the world have started to consider long-term policies aimed at reaping positive outcomes of present changes and preparing their nations for future pandemics. The UAE government is facing an unprecedented opportunity to learn valuable lessons reflecting on its long-term policies in education, public health and scientific research.

Future of education:

Education is one of the areas where the pandemic is expected to lead to major changes. There are ongoing discussions on how the pandemic has initiated a complete transformation of educational systems, pushing educational institutions to compress undergraduate degrees, make internship fundamental part of students'

educational journey, and re-channel resources spent on extended university degrees into employment support for students. The pandemic has accelerated online learning and the use of technology to address individual educational needs. This can form a foundation for resilient education on the long run where threats of future pandemics on education continuity can be minimized.

Sustaining public health:

The UAE has high diabetes and obesity rates. There are growing public health concerns that these rates will increase significantly because of the various health safety measures, such as social distancing, studying and working remotely, and limiting access to public spaces. The majority of UAE's population were forced to stay at home during the pandemic which impacted their activity level or led to cultivating unhealthy habits. Through educational programs, policymakers should address pandemic health challenges and educate people on how to lead a healthy life during these exceptional circumstances. If these public health policy areas are left untreated, there will be long-term implications on people's health and wellbeing posing additional burdens on the health system. Valuable insights can be learned from COVID-19 to encounter future pandemics and public health threats. Policymakers can educate the public on how to find alternatives to healthy eating and active life during lockdowns or situations characterized by limited mobility.

Capacity building in healthcare sector:

The UAE health system experienced increased pressures during the pandemic. Medical professionals from all fields were called to aid in the battle against COVID-19, including those from the dentistry field. Many dentists and other medical workers experienced disparities in knowledge and skills needed for coping with the healthcare demands imposed by the pandemic. This has revealed a major gap in healthcare systems, namely the lack of medical training in managing and responding to communicable and infectious diseases.

Telemedicine infrastructure

Telemedicine has been heavily utilized during the start of the pandemic and it is still operating as an alternative to hospital and clinic visits. Telemedicine offered a quick solution to healthcare delivery during extreme measures imposed by the pandemic and continues to provide much needed services to those in high risk categories. Through the usage of telemedicine, initial screening can be done to determine whether or not office visits are required, and consequently protecting many from unnecessary exposure to risky environments.

Policy Recommendations

Data Collection and Transparency:

- The UAE government can utilize testing data to provide color-coded maps of infection areas with live feedback pouring from across the UAE and selectively release it to the public. These regularly updated maps will provide better information to people to make better mobility choices and avoid infectious hotspots.

- Through coordination with medical centers reporting medical data, the UAE government can identify future pandemic as early as possible. Data collected from patients can feed into a database that tracks emerging medical symptoms reported from healthcare institutions across the UAE. This database can function as an early warning system to prevent spreading of future communicable and infectious diseases.

Educational support

- To help students who are struggling financially, policymakers are advised to consider delivering financial aid to educational institutions as part of its national economic stimulus which can go directly to supporting students.

- On the level of higher education institutions, opportunities for employment within university campus such as teaching or assisting academic staff can be made available to students who need financial support.

- In future pandemic responses, policymakers are advised to address the unique needs of students whose majors depend heavily on laboratory work and practicums. Future policy should allow these students some flexibility in order to avoid losses in skill attainment, while maintaining preventative measures such as screening, testing, wearing protective equipment, social distancing and educating students and staff regularly on how to prevent infection.

- Within educational institutions, researchers who are working on projects related to the pandemic should be allowed some flexibility to operate while ensuring that protective measures such as social distancing is followed.

Students Wellbeing and Mental Health

- To address student anxiety, policymakers should consider the possibility of providing clarity on future education roadmaps. Moreover, professional and career student counseling could offer relief to student anxiety related to future uncertainties.

- In addition to providing financial aid packages, students should receive mental health support to help them cope with COVID-19 anxieties and fears, especially those in vulnerable groups.

- Considering the rapid transformation to online education, it is imperative to understand how the UAE population's interaction with digital technology is evolving and what implications it has for their wellbeing. Policy interventions are needed to mitigate the negative impacts of the pandemic. These interventions should be targeted and evidence-based to tailor solutions for the UAE population in general and its various segments, especially the most impacted groups, such as children and elderly. For school children, counsellors should be ready and trained to intervene when needed to deal with cyberbullying or any cases negatively impacting students' mental health.

Telemedicine

- The UAE's telemedicine experience during the pandemic should be considered by policymakers as an essential step in the road to develop effective telemedicine systems for the future. The experience of medical staff and patients with telemedicine should be captured in research and public surveys to glean insights into long-term health policies

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Public Awareness

- Because public health and economy are interconnected, policymakers should revisit the way they address the pandemic and bridge the gap between public health and economic hardship. By doing so, the public will be less likely to perceive economic reopening as a direct threat to their health.

- COVID-19 recovered patients might encounter stigma associated with being infected with the virus leading to their isolation and consequently to detrimental impacts on their mental health. The main reason behind social stigma is lack of public awareness on how the infection spreads. Policymakers should educate the public on how to deal with recovered patients and to practice conscious compassion.

Research and Capacity Building

- A possible measure to be considered by policymakers for preparing efficient "future pandemic" caliber is introducing training and certifications aimed at medical professionals who are not immediate health-crises respondents. Such training programs can prepare healthcare professionals to deal with communicable and infectious diseases. Training can be introduced at graduate levels or institutionalized as reoccurring training for medical professionals which can be updated every few years.

- Investment in medical research and other fields relevant to sustaining public health should be prioritized by policymakers. The UAE government should collaborate with the scientific community to set research agendas related to pandemic relief and building resilient societies. Funding opportunities should be made accessible to researchers working in priority areas.

Author(s) and Citations

This Report was authored and produced by:

The Department of Research and Advisory,

Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government

Acknowledgements

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Research at The Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government

The Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government (formerly Dubai School of Government) is a research and teaching institution focusing on public policy in the Arab world. Established in 2005 under the patronage of HH Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates and Ruler of Dubai, in cooperation with the Harvard Kennedy School, MBRSG aims to promote good governance through enhancing the region's capacity for effective public policy.

Toward this goal, the Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government also collaborates with regional and global institutions in delivering its research and training programs. In addition, the School organizes policy forums and international conferences to facilitate the exchange of ideas and promote critical debate on public policy in the Arab world. The School is committed to the creation of knowledge, the dissemination of best practice and the training of policy makers in the Arab world. To achieve this mission, the School is developing strong capabilities to support research and teaching programs, including:

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