

The Netherlands thought it was prepared for a pandemic, but was in for a surprise

July 8 2020, by Linda Van Putten



An empty Dam Square during the intelligent lockdown. Credit: Hay Kranen/Wikipedia

Has the Netherlands responded well to the coronavirus crisis? Or are we, as Geert Wilders terms it, the "dunce" of Europe? A group of authors including Leiden professor Arjen Boin have analyzed the Dutch approach and come up with valuable lessons for the next pandemic.

The book *COVID-19. An Analysis of the National Crisis Response* reads like an exciting reconstruction. From the first alarming reports of a mysterious virus in China to the cautious easing of the intelligent lockdown in the Netherlands. The authors—Arjen Boin, Werner Overdijk, Charon van der Ham, Jessy Hendriks, Dionne Sloof—are all Leiden alumni. They admit that with hindsight it is tempting to crow about how the Netherlands could have saved more lives. Carnival, ski holidays, concerts, sport: critics say these should have been canceled weeks before. The question is whether the Dutch population would have been so obedient in the early stages of the pandemic. The authors therefore do not want to focus on the question of guilt but instead want to come up with lessons for the next pandemic. What went well and what could have gone better? A selection of the key lessons from the book.

Spotting a major crisis is surprisingly difficult

At the start of the year, the medical experts and politicians could see how COVID-19 had affected China and soon after that Italy, but appropriate measures were not taken for weeks. People thought it almost inconceivable that the virus would hit so hard in the organized Netherlands. After all, the prevailing opinion was that our country had good action plans, a streamlined healthcare system and a pragmatic population. What the corona [crisis](#) has taught us is that the Netherlands can be affected like any other country. Swift, drastic measures may be needed after all and the government should dare to intervene. At the start of the crisis it was every country for itself, but we now know that international collaboration, or fast EU collaboration at least, is essential because viruses know no borders.

Learn to live with uncertainty (but ensure data is available ASAP)

An important aspect of crisis management is learning to deal with uncertainty. "Sailing through fog" is more or less inevitable in the initial phase, and mistakes are hard to avoid. But as the crisis progresses crisis managers should get a better understanding of the nature and dynamics of the crisis, say the authors. However, for a long time it was uncertain how the virus spreads because the Municipal Public Health Service (GGD) did little in the way of contact tracing and very few corona tests. The lack of data meant there was little room for a sector or region to experiment with relaxing the measures. Conclusion: with the next pandemic the Netherlands should be ready for mass testing and should be able to quickly increase its intensive care and personal protective equipment capacity.

The importance of political leadership

The authors conclude that Rutte's crisis communication worked, even though his message was mixed at times. The large majority of the Dutch population followed the instructions. Questions have been asked about whether the medical experts from the Outbreak Management Team (OMT) weren't too powerful. That would have to be studied in more detail because the OMT's deliberations are not public. It is clear that Rutte and co also considered economic and social interests. The authorities should not view expert advice as "sacred" before the fact, say the authors, particularly now it has become clear that [medical experts](#) regularly made firm pronouncements that were not based on hard data.

Questions for further research

The book ends with "low-hanging fruit for the next mega-crisis,"

including the advice to make more use of the expertise of the Ministry of Defense and the private sector. It also asks questions for further research such as: did the Netherlands perform better than other countries and how do you evaluate this? It is to be hoped that the crisis leaders will heed the clear lessons, so that the Netherlands really will be ready for the next wave or pandemic.

Provided by Leiden University

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