

Great easing? Leaders face a tragic dilemma, but they should not hide behind the backs of experts

*Political leaders everywhere face stark choices that will define the social and economic future of their countries. They must decide if and how to wind-down the societal lockdowns that we have witnessed across the world. They do so against a background of widespread anxieties. Economic collapse awaits should there not be a rapid resumption of economic life. But a relaxation of 'lockdown' measures can have dire consequences: a 'second wave' might stretch state capacities even further than we have witnessed thus far. This is truly a tragic dilemma, argue **Arjen Boin** (University of Leiden) and **Martin Lodge** (LSE).*

Debates about how to juggle competing values (economy, public health, and such) are, of course, common in public management. But the current uncertainty in which policymakers have to make these decisions is deeply unsettling. In a recent press conference, the Dutch prime minister started by explaining how he has wrestled with this dilemma. Earlier he had observed how big decisions must be made with little information. It is the textbook description of a crisis.

Politicians more or less everywhere have sought refuge in the domain of experts and science to reach a verdict. Scientists must provide the desired certainty about this or that policy option: if we open the restaurants, will the R_0 rise (a measure few politicians, let alone the wider public, had heard about a few months ago)? By how much? If we keep restaurants and pubs locked down, how many venues will survive? Politicians are now discovering the truth long understood in this domain: the available science does not provide answers to these sorts of questions. A quick survey of scientific articles – there are not many to read – on the management of pandemics leads to a sobering conclusion: the available science does not allow for 'evidence-based prescriptions' for the exit strategy from a global pandemic. Much of what we know is reportedly 'anecdotal' and based on historical studies of the 1918 pandemic.

This rude awakening has not stopped politicians from pushing experts onto the public stage. They are asked to advise on anything from office space to public transport, from whether professional football players can resume training again, to the dangers of a walk in the park. Some experts may relish their newfound fame, others may understand the reputational risks on the horizon. They would probably all agree that these are *political* decisions that will have to be made in a cloud of uncertainty.

To make these decisions is the essence of crisis leadership. Political leaders will have to step up to the plate, sooner or later. But how to deal with this uncertainty, if experts and scientists cannot (and should not) offer clear-cut answers?



In dealing with deep uncertainty, politicians can choose between two approaches when considering the 'great easing': the principled or the pragmatist route. The pragmatist approach would follow a basic incremental pattern, relying on feedback to either further relax or reassert economic and societal controls. The principled approach selects one dominant principle and designs an approach based on that principle.

In many countries, a pragmatic strategy seems to be in the offing: plans are being put forward for a step-by-step relaxation that will require constant reevaluation. The traditional literature on risk management would find much to say in defence of the pragmatic approach: if done well, such a sequential and information-rich approach can enable the gradual opening of economic and social life (and might give reassurance to frightened populations) while minimising the costs in terms of surplus fatalities and health system overstretch. At the same time, it presumes the presence and sustainability of an administrative infrastructure that 'tests, traces, and isolates.' In short, the pragmatist approach is a cautious, low-risk approach that maximises control while negotiating uncertainty.

But it is not an easy road. The world of crisis management points to the high demands that a pragmatic approach places on decision-makers. It presupposes that 'error' can be corrected without too high a cost. It requires agreement on the indicators that might help to make sense of the evolving situation, good information flows that inform such indicators, and a capacity to maintain stable conditions in order to ensure such a gradual evaluation-based approach. Most of all it requires a capacity not just to 'relax' or restore 'full lockdown', but also to maintain and enforce partial 'lock-down' in the face of inevitable calls for more (and less) relaxation.

A pragmatist approach is prone to many vulnerabilities. For one, choices as to what to 're-open' and which areas to keep 'closed' will inevitably invite lobbying efforts and clamouring for privileged re-starts. Any form of uneven application (across sectors and countries), even if justified by 'consistent' risk management principles, will attract vocal opposition. Inconsistencies in approach will attract ridicule, condemnation by Courts, or provoke outrage, which undermines trust in the measures taken (for example, by letting tattoo parlours trade whilst other businesses remain in enforced shutdown). While these apparent inconsistencies may well be defensible in a pragmatic approach, it will require superior crisis communication to 'sell' the trial-by-error search for the exit.

The principled approach also comes with distinct benefits and risks. This approach is on display in two distinct flavours. We see exit approaches that centre around the precautionary principle (one example being the Netherlands), which dictates that a relaxation of a measure can only happen if there is conclusive evidence that it will not cause a return of heightened infection and death numbers. Being a 'second' if not 'third' mover behind other jurisdictions may, therefore, make political sense, giving reassurance to societal and economic actors that they are unlikely to encounter a further period of severe lock-down. However, such a strategy will be attacked for being overly cautious and harmful, especially if other countries are seen to be moving ahead without detriment to public health. It also requires agreement as to what qualifies as conclusive evidence to justify partial relaxations of the economy. Again, such consensus is unlikely to exist among politicians (and, indeed, scientists).

A completely different but equally 'principled' approach is the one that relies on so-called societal resilience. This approach advocates a quick relaxation of measures, investing trust in citizens and business owners to 'be smart' and 'do the right thing'. It can work if the cost of non-compliance is largely falling on the non-complier (refusing to wear a seat-belt will mostly come at the expense of the deviant driver). In a pandemic, the non-compliers do not just run the heightened risk of being infected, but also increase the risk of transmission to others (potentially exponentially). Most policymakers abhor the loss of control that this approach entails. They can only wait and see what happens, but they will be held accountable for any failure that may occur. And the risks of a resilience-based approach are indeed high: the models suggest it may well lead to a catastrophe.

Time will tell which approach performs better. In the absence of real knowledge or working vaccines, decision-makers will remain stuck in a difficult place: both approaches offer temptations but also huge risks. This makes the 'great easing' even more difficult than the initial declaration of emergency measures.

The way forward may well require a mixture of both approaches. The pragmatic approach can serve as the default, as it minimizes risks and buys time to learn more, even if the political and administrative costs of pursuing such a strategy are likely to escalate. For some economic sectors, the risk of moving too slow might prove fatal. In such arenas, a reliance on resilience may be worth contemplating, although whether customers will flock back to these sectors in sufficient numbers remains to be seen. In some other areas, we may simply not want to take any risks (we must protect those who cannot protect themselves). Here the precautionary principle should perhaps govern decisions.

Whatever the choices to be made, it is clear who should make them. Politicians should not hide behind the backs of experts. They must do what they were elected to do, even if this might require humility, continued re-evaluation and justification rather than sloganeering. Crisis management is a key part of their task. It is probably the hardest task they will ever face.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the COVID-19 blog, nor LSE. Image: [President Trump Delivers Remarks During a Coronavirus Update Briefing](#).

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