Chapter 2
Strengthening Public Health Response to COVID–19 through Policy Learning and Policy Transfer

Walaa Atif Mansour

Nasr City Health Insurance Hospital, Egypt & City, University of London, UK

Omkolthoum ElSayed

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1011-7889
Ministry of Health and Population, Egypt

Wesam Mansour

Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, UK

ABSTRACT

Disruption of the public health systems was an inevitable result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which put governments under severe pressure to make quick decisions in response to the policy challenges they faced. The virus created a state of confusion not only among countries and their governments but also across other organizations, including the international community and its organizations. Cross-country learning by sharing experiences and tacit knowledge was one critical approach for governments across the world to learn from and to follow, since the pandemic requires a deeper understanding of policy processes to be able to face those challenges. This chapter, therefore, focused on the 'policy' implications of different countries' responses, with a special focus on WHO policies and guidelines and how they have been used and adapted in different contexts. The overall aim was to draw lessons for governments and organizations to strengthen the public health system during and post COVID-19 and any future pandemics.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted public health system and imposed several policy challenges to countries across the world. It revealed the fragility of health systems in response to a crisis and their inability to coordinate these responses in many countries. Particularly in low-and-middle-income countries (LMICs), it showed the fragility of health systems and vulnerability of these countries in competing against global purchase powers to save essentials such as the personal protective equipment (PPE), or to purchase the vaccine and more importantly to distribute it (World Health Organisation (WHO), 2020; Ibn-Mohammed et al, 2021).

In many countries, the governments rapidly responded with a number of adaptive social and public health measures to fight the pandemic, such as lockdowns, social distancing, travel restrictions, enforced infection and prevention control (IPC) measures together with mass testing and tracing and some countries managed to keep transparent information and trust in their national measures (WHO, 2020). Some countries successfully adopted and implemented those measures, whereas others failed to use the same measures, and could not, in turn, control the community transmission of the virus. How countries adopted those interventions and effectively implemented them can be considered as examples of success in facing COVID-19.

There is a global need for a learning process. Cross-country learning by sharing experiences and tacit knowledge is important since the pandemic requires a deeper understanding of policy processes, and what could be achieved by using crisis management concepts in a more resilient perspective. There is an increasing call to take the pandemic as an opportunity to essentially rebuild public health systems in a more sustainable, equitable and resilient way. This calls for policymaking using agile and active learning across health systems, critically analysing governmental actions, discussing, reflecting, and learning through actions (Kantamneni, 2020; University of Illinois Chicago (UIC), 2020).

While there could be different approaches to examine governments' responses and actions, and promote cross-country learning during crises including pandemics, this book chapter focuses on the 'policy' implications of such responses across different countries, with a particular focus on WHO policies and guidelines and how they have been used and adapted to various contexts. This chapter brings together the literature on policy transfer and learning and lesson drawing with the current crisis learning to draw lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic and generate insights for future public health policy responses to further crises. The overall aim is to examine and better understand how different countries responded to the COVID-19 pandemic in the initial stages of the pandemic early in 2020, and what lessons could be learnt to improve governments' responses during and post COVID-19 pandemic and any future crises. It recommends some practical actions and recommendations for policy and practice that promote changes drawing on the Dolowitz and Marsh policy transfer framework to assess lessons drawn.

BACKGROUND

Since 2020, governments around the world have had to make radical and system-level decisions to protect people from the novel coronavirus. Different types of social and public health measures have been introduced and implemented worldwide, such as social distancing, self-isolation, travel restrictions, lockdowns and quarantines, imposing the use of PPE and some IPC measures, and other several policies and interventions (WHO, 2020). Unarguably, cross-country learning, transferring successful policies

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