

## Editorial: Fit for the Future: Learning from the COVID-19 crisis to reinforce democratic governance

The COVID-19 pandemic, the biggest shock to many OECD countries since World War II, has tested the ability of governments to respond to a crisis at speed and scale. For the most part, governments have done a remarkable job in unprecedented circumstances to protect lives and provide financial support to businesses and citizens. From lockdowns to a slow loosening of restrictions as vaccinations gather pace, one of the biggest lessons of the crisis is that governments will need to respond to future crises at speed and scale while safeguarding trust and transparency – and, indeed, the very underpinnings of democracy.

The pandemic has underscored how critical trust and transparency are to maintaining public health amid drastic restrictions in freedom of movement. Trust and transparency are crucial for people to understand and comply with extraordinary measures in extraordinary times. They are also key to a society's capacity to absorb and bounce back from shocks.

Emerging evidence, reported in the Focus chapter, suggests many governments have operated with lower standards of consultation, transparency, oversight, or control in their processes during COVID-19. Governments have introduced thousands of emergency regulations, often on a fast track. Some alleviation of standards is inevitable in an emergency but must be limited in scope and time to avoid damaging citizen perceptions of the competence, openness, transparency, and fairness of government. *Government at a Glance 2021* reveals not only how governments responded to the enormous challenge of the COVID-19 crisis, but also provides recommendations for strengthening the resilience of governments for the challenges of the future, including climate change. 83% of recovery funds announced so far do not consider environmental dimensions or have environmentally negative effects. Green governance, or the 'how to' reach environmental goals, needs to be stepped up significantly.

Governments must learn to spend better. OECD countries are providing large amounts of support to citizens and businesses during this crisis, roughly 16.4% of GDP in additional spending or foregone revenues, and up to 10.5% of GDP via other measures. Eventually, governments are likely to face spending constraints. They will need to review public spending to increase efficiency, ensure that spending priorities match people's needs, and improve the quality of public services. Governments must also ensure that they understand the different effects of policy on different groups in society, and work visibly to ensure that no-one is "left behind".

Three areas, in particular, are crucial for boosting trust and transparency and safeguarding democracy. First, it is vital to tackle misinformation. Even with a boost in trust in government sparked by the pandemic in 2020, only 51% of people in OECD countries trusted their government, and a number of people and groups are dissociating themselves from traditional democratic processes. This has been fuelled by mis- and dis-information.

In 2019, only 11 of 27 Centres of Government in OECD countries had policies or frameworks to guide their responses to mis- and dis-information.

Second, it is crucial to enhance representation and participation in a fair and transparent manner. Governments must seek to promote inclusion and diversity, including in the public workforce, and support the representation of young people in public life and policy consultation. Governments must improve fairness and inclusion in how they consult citizens and make policies, and level the playing field in lobbying. Less than half of countries have transparency requirements covering most of the actors that regularly engage in lobbying.

Third, strengthening governance must be prioritised to tackle global challenges while harnessing the potential of new technologies. In 2018, only half of OECD countries had a specific government institution tasked with identifying novel, unforeseen or complex crises. Most countries for which information is available did not have a single exhaustive data inventory for the central government, and around a fifth relied on *ad hoc* agreements for data sharing between public agencies. Governments were often quick to correct course, by rapidly developing new systems and responses. However, a lack of planning and foresight remains a concern. To be fit for the future, and secure the foundations of democracy, governments must be ready to act at speed and scale while safeguarding trust and transparency.



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