



SIGMA

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Public Administration: Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic

*Mapping the EU member states' public administration responses to the COVID-19 pandemic
(for EU Enlargement and Neighbourhood countries)*

KOREA

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SOUTH KOREA

Centre of Government, policy co-ordination and decision-making process

1. How is the Government (council of ministers) functioning (organisation of virtual meetings, remote sessions etc.)?

South Korea has been widely credited with having one of most effective overall policy responses to the COVID-19 crisis, combining effective preventive measures with the use of technology and fast-tracked innovations to monitor the spread of the disease and better-targeted policy responses. While some measures have been controversial -for example, people who are confirmed to have COVID-19 are tracked by GPS, and a live map of their locations (without their names) is available for anyone wishing to avoid them – overall, the policy has been based on transparency and engagement with citizens and civil society organisations.

Korea's Government has expressed its willingness to share its quarantine and treatment experience in the COVID-19 outbreak as well as relevant clinical data with the international community, and has been contacted by EU members (e.g. Bulgaria, Denmark) for advice.

The Government continues to meet in person, though usually as a restricted Cabinet of senior ministers, all wearing face masks and with an empty seat between each participant. At present, these meetings take place on a daily basis.

2. How are the crisis management and external communications co-ordinated within the Government? What is the role of the CoG in this? Is Korea willing to actively share with the international community its quarantine and treatment experience in the COVID-19 outbreak as well as relevant clinical data. Is there a central strategy/guidance?

Crisis management is led directly by the Prime Minister and co-ordinated by the Office for Government Co-ordination within the Prime Minister's Secretariat. Implementation and roll out of decisions is the responsibility of a cross-departmental crisis team (the Central Disaster and Safety Countermeasures Headquarters) which allocates departmental roles and responsibilities. Korea has long experience with natural disasters and, more recently, financial and public health crises. As such, the crisis management system is highly advanced, particularly with respect to cross-government co-ordination, public-private partnerships and communication with citizens.

External communication was seen from the start of the crisis as a crucial element in the success of the Government's strategy. During the outbreak of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) in 2015, the South Korean Government withheld key information, including where the infected patients were being treated. This created anxiety, even though the disease was in fact difficult to catch through casual contact. Under the Infectious Disease Control and Prevention Act (IDCPA), amended after the MERS outbreak, the Minister of Health exercises wide power to collect private data of confirmed and potential patients. At the same time, the law grants the public a "right to know," requiring the minister to "promptly disclose information" — including the movement paths, transportation means, and contacts of patients — to the public. This bargain was crucial to legitimising the Government's track-and-trace strategy and mobilising the public's co-operation in their fight against COVID-19.

3. Any arrangements (rules, working procedures) which aim to streamline and accelerate the Government decision-making process (as regards deadlines, public consultations, transparency, impact analysis)?

Following strategic guidance from the PMO, the interdepartmental crisis team organises implementation and has the authority to adapt normal rules of procedure to ensure that emergency measures are implemented swiftly. This is particularly visible with respect to interaction between the public and private sectors. The Government has been proactive in working with businesses to help develop clinical products and processes to help contain the virus. These partnerships with the private sector have been facilitated by the Government accelerating the processing of business-related applications for permits etc. and waiving or speeding up regulatory oversight and consultation obligations.

Public service and human resource management

1. What arrangements regarding teleworking? What is the share of civil servants teleworking? What is the share of civil servants still coming to the office?

The Ministry of Personnel Management (MPM) is the main body that oversees strategic HR management. As part of the PMO crisis staff, it has taken some specific measures to ensure the smooth functioning of the public sector in implementing government decisions relating to the crisis while ensuring the safety of civil servants.

The MPM established and enforced guidelines on Flexible Work for Civil Servants and to Prevent COVID-19 Spread. It includes (1) granting sick leave, official leave, and teleworking for the COVID-19 confirmed or suspected cases, (2) granting pregnancy leave for pregnant women who are unable to work from home, and (3) taking advantage of flexible working systems.

Most civil servants who can work from home have been encouraged to do so. However, the country is not in lockdown and, as such, more public services are still operating in Korea than is currently the case in many other countries. It is now compulsory to have a specified proportion of staff work from home or at one of the Smart Work Centers across the country.

The MPM established and enforced a Manual for Preventing COVID-19 and Maintaining Business Continuity. It includes actions to be taken to maintain business continuity in the event of confirmed cases. Especially, while teleworking, the civil servants can use the government remote working portal. In order to maintain human resources development functions, The Korean Office of Personnel Management uses a highly regarded system called E-Saram, which is a standardised electronic personnel management system that supports government-wide personnel operation. Through this system, each government agency can electronically manage a variety of personnel related tasks such as transfer, promotion, pay and leave. This system also manages teleworking arrangements.

MPM has replaced collective training or education programmes with e-learning or individual task learning.

2. What other flexible working arrangement (part time work, distribution of working hours over 7 days...)?

Civil servants who are to take care of their children during the day due to lack of childcare or schools are able to work from home or take child care leave or annual leave as part of the Government's parental protection.

3. If civil servants cannot telework, how are they paid?

There has been no adjustment to the civil service law. As such, there is probably no basis for alteration to pay. The decision to telework is largely on the basis of function not the technological capacity to telework.

4. Are civil servants being sent on mandatory annual leave? If not, is use of annual leave recommended? Any other special arrangement on absence management?

No. Civil servants continue to work normally in most cases.

5. Any new, special regulations for working overtime (removing limitations to overtime work e.g. for medical staff)?

Yes, as part of the guidelines on Flexible Work for Civil Servants.

6. Arrangement for paying for extra workload (health care)?

The MPM streamlined recruitment of and improved compensation for specialists and experts, including epidemiological investigators, responding to COVID-19 at the frontline.

7. What measures have been introduced to create fiscal space to fund health care, economic measures etc. against COVID-19 (salary cuts, freeze of recruitment, promotions...)?

Senior civil servants, including the Prime Minister, have taken a voluntary pay cut of 30% until June 2020.

This is not the first time that state officials have voluntarily cut their salaries. In December 1997 at the height of the Asian financial crisis, Korea's prime minister returned 30% other ministers 20% of their pay. The Government is considering extending the pay cuts further down through the civil service, as in previous crisis periods. During the 2008 financial crisis, the salaries of all civil servants were frozen for two years from 2009 to 2010.

Accountability

1. How did you keep the national parliament operational? Any simplification of parliamentary procedures?

In the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak, the National Assembly held a series of extraordinary sessions in order to prepare its legislative business before a recess planned in advance of new legislative elections set for April 15. While some commentators questioned the prudence of going ahead with the elections, the Government decided to keep to the schedule, with voting stations equipped to minimise personal contact and voters encouraged to vote in advance. Special arrangements will also be made to people to vote from hospital or from quarantine.

The Parliament has set up a special Committee on the coronavirus to help expedite new legislation and regulations over the period up to the election. This Committee has been working in close co-operation with the executive in order to speed the adoption of new measures, without giving up legislative oversight. In addition, the Assembly's Budget Committee has been working to review the Government's supplementary budget in order to have the budget passed before the elections.

In late February, after a virus outbreak among Parliamentary staff, the Parliament building was evacuated and had to be disinfected before it could be used again by Assembly staff and committees.

2. How about the Ombudsman (e.g. overseeing the situation in prisons)

No information

3. Does administrative justice work? Have deadlines changed?

Yes, deadlines are extended but all administrative procedures including administrative justice are continuing as normal.

4. Any public debates on respect of principles of good administration (legality, proportionality, predictability) of protective measures?

From the outset, the Government was concerned to avoid mistakes from the past, which were largely related to a perceived lack of transparency and insufficient communication regarding risks. As a result, the Government and agencies such as Disease Control were active in engaging with the public to explain preventive measures, notably the expanded access to medical data and GPS information.

Service delivery

1. Which services are being delivered (all, some, only the essential)?

Most public services are online and still fully accessible. Only those services requiring physical presence or use of facilities are not available or have reduced opening hours.

The main concern at the moment is the start of the new school year on April 9. Education is a high priority for Korean families, and the Government has announced an "all-out effort" to support digital education ahead of the first day of school.

In order to ensure equal opportunity, the Government will offer free rentals of a combined 316,000 smart devices, including 230,000 from schools and education offices, 50,000 from the Ministry of Education and 36,000 from Samsung Electronics and LG Electronics. Students will also get online data for free when using education-related homepages. The unlimited data program will run through May for students when they use digital textbooks and online educational materials and content provided by the Korea Education and Research Information Service via their smartphones.

In practice, most proximity or daily services are provided by local governments. Local authorities are very active in providing support for particular groups in society to help them through the crisis. These services include help with completing forms online, financial advice by telephone, delivery of goods, etc. Many local governments are also offering entirely new services, such as pet-sitting and dog-walking for people who are ill or delivering board games for children. For example, Seoul is sending do-it-yourself bean sprout kits to elderly people who live alone and have nowhere to go due to the epidemic. The kit includes a pot with bean sprouts that need watering three to four times a day and can be picked and eaten in a week. A volunteer visits the homes of the elderly to deliver and set up these kits, checking on their health in the process.

2. Are there any modifications done to the obligations of:

- i. *the administrations towards citizens/businesses (e.g. freezing of deadlines)?*

Although these are handled by individual departments, most deadlines relating to financial and reporting obligations have been postponed. Businesses have also been encouraged to relax repayment schedules for individuals.

- ii. *citizens/businesses towards public administration (reporting, payments of taxes, contributions, fees...)?*

The broad economic packages already published include a wide range of measures that are designed to reduce short-term financial burdens on both citizens and businesses, with respect to taxes and other contributions.

Most recently, the Government announced on 2 April that it would defer or exempt payment of the four major social insurance premiums and electricity bills for low-income families as well as SMEs, microbusiness owners and the self-employed that are below a certain size. These measures are particularly aimed at people who have had to take unpaid leave, the contract-based self-employed, freelancers and day labourers

A key element of this burden reduction is the active participation of key private sector enterprises (utilities, LG, Samsung, etc.).

3. Has the crisis initiated any simplifications or enhanced the use of alternative tools:

- i. *in the internal procedures of the Government (e.g. acceptance of formal approvals over e-mail)?*

Internal procedures are already highly digitised.

- ii. *in the administrative procedures with citizens and businesses (e.g. replacement of handwritten signature with scanned copies or simple exchange of mails)?*

From the outset of the crisis, the Government has actively sought to engage with businesses to obtain their support and invest in producing equipment and in developing innovations or solving technological problems. This has involved fast-tracking permits and licences and patents and partnering with companies to accelerate testing and trialling of systems and products. For example, the public sector has organised sampling of the population for clinical trials and testing, which means that private companies avoid lengthy processes of sample validation and verification.

Public financial management

1. Are COVID-19 response measures being introduced within the framework of or with reference to existing fiscal rules (budget deficit or public debt ratio limits etc.)?

Direct measures amount to 0.8% of GDP (approximately KRW 16 trillion, including a supplementary budget for KRW 11.7 trillion).

Health care measures: prevention, testing, and treatment costs, and loans and support for medical institutions. Measures for households: transfers to quarantined households, employment retention support, consumption coupons for low-income households, and emergency family care support. Measures for firms: loans and guarantees for business operation, and support of wages and rent for small merchants. Measures for local communities: local gift certificates and local government grants for costs of responding. Revenue measures: consumption tax cut for auto purchases; tax cuts for landlords who reduce rent for commercial tenants; VAT reduction for the self-employed; and tax payment deferral covering a broad range of taxes for small businesses and the self-employed in medical, tourism, performance, hospitality, and other affected sectors.

The Government announced an additional KRW 50-trillion rescue package for small businesses and self-employed workers hit hard by the virus. The assistance includes the expansion of financial support for small businesses to KRW 12 trillion, making them eligible for loans with 1.5% interest from any domestic financial institution. A special loan guarantee program worth KRW 5.5 trillion and debt rollover by all registered financial institutions are also included. In addition, financial institutions will

give small and medium companies and small business owners extensions on their loan payments and allow delayed payments for loan interest.

2. Are the cost of these measures being published?

Yes, the Government is publishing detailed breakdowns of the costs of its economic package.

The Government has monitored the progress of the fiscal measures by converting Regular Fiscal Management Inspection Meeting, which are held twice a month, into an Emergency Fiscal Management Inspection Meeting. A goal from the supplementary budget is to execute 75% or more of the response measures in the next two months. In addition, the Central Government has urged the Local Government to prepare supplementary budgets as soon as possible. The Government is to prepare a further package including a second supplementary budget to help boost the economy after the election of members of the National Assembly on 13 April.

3. Have budget users been asked to identify cost-saving measures to partially offset the cost of the response measures?

The Government is considering ways to reduce the public sector budget. In the past, this has meant pay and hiring freezes (lasting two years in the case of the financial crisis). Senior civil servants and government officials have already offered voluntary pay cuts, as have senior officials from other government agencies.

4. Are internal controls continuing to operate smoothly (electronic signatures)?

Yes, administrative procedures are unaffected.

5. Does each budget user or at least ministry have a risk management strategy that envisaged emergency measures in response to a sudden crisis? How is staff and customer safety balanced against the need to deliver required services?

Yes, all major government departments have a risk management strategy and contribute to the national crisis co-ordination system. This is the result of accumulated experience with natural and other risks over the past two decades.