



# Principles for a policy response to COVID-19



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# Principles for a policy response to COVID-19

In addition to the pressing public health crisis, Australia, like so much of the world, currently faces an unprecedented public policy challenge. Few of the specifics of the response to that challenge are yet clear and it would be foolhardy of anyone to pretend otherwise.

Nonetheless, it is crucial that as policymakers make the key decisions over the next few weeks and months that they are guided by the right principles. Otherwise decisions will be made which might be extremely difficult to row back from and which might render the situation worse both in the short and the longer term.

As such, it is vital to engender clear-minded public debate as to what those principles should be and for us all to play a part in assisting decision-makers in these moments of deep stress.

Here we outline our own five core principles.

We put them forward both in the hope that they can guide policymakers now and that they can stimulate widespread discussion about the best way in which to take Australia forward.

## Five Principles

1. **Fair and equal access to healthcare:** Public health systems around the world are coming under astonishing stress, with heroic work being done everywhere by those on the frontline. As pressures mount, there may also be calls in coming days to prioritise needs. It is crucial to remember, therefore, that everyone deserves the best treatment possible in these difficult times independent of their personal circumstances. Particular attention must be given to maintaining access to healthcare for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the homeless, those with uncertain migration status, the elderly and disabled and assisting those groups and others do what is required to keep themselves and their families well. Furthermore, although effective triage is a vital part of any health response, it is also crucial to design systems that avoid discrimination and prejudice in every possible way during these processes.
2. **Shared economic sacrifice:** The economic and social harm potentially wreaked by the virus knows virtually no equal in modern Australia. It is crucial as we struggle to protect lives and livelihoods in the months ahead that the inevitable sacrifices that are required are distributed fairly across the whole community. Those on the frontline of the struggle against the virus and its consequences require immediate support. It is also not acceptable that people working in particular sectors, such as retail, hospitality and the arts, are expected to carry a significant part of the burden of the economic shock. As such, we urge government to investigate further measures akin to those taken in the UK and other parts of Europe which aim to protect wages and keep unemployment low. We also need mechanisms that will allow every sector of the economy – private, public and not-for-profit – to play their part. Similarly, all efforts must be taken to guard against profiteering and to ensure that nobody unfairly benefits from the ongoing crisis.



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3. **Enhancing social relationships:** For reasons of public health, people must maintain strict social distance and even isolate within their own homes at this time. Nonetheless, it is well established that many people will suffer significant difficulty in so doing. The mental health dangers implicit in social isolation and loneliness are well-recognised and those who live in abusive households or at personal risk of domestic violence are particularly vulnerable at this time. It is vital that public policy addresses itself quickly to these concerns, outlining methods of maintaining social relationships as far as is compatible with the public health fight against the virus. It is crucial in this regard that Australia tackles the deep digital divide, which allows some people to access social connection through technology while others are left effectively cut off. It is important too that charities and other civil society organisations are protected, not least because they remain closer to people experiencing hardship than most government agencies. The rapidly expanding grassroots mutual aid movement also deserves all the support that it requires.

4. **Protecting democracy, rights and liberties:** Periods of shock of the kind that we are now going through often lead to calls for emergency measures and the tempering of long-held political conventions that protect democratic accountability and civil liberties. That is entirely understandable, but it is also dangerous and the risks of over-reach are real. It is vital that measures are taken to ensure that short-term restrictions on accountability and liberties remain short-term and are only deployed where absolutely necessary. This can be achieved by maintaining strict democratic scrutiny throughout the crisis period and by legislating for the time-limited nature of individual restrictions clearly and effectively. It is vital too that Australia maintains its tradition of transparency, free press and debate throughout this period and its commitment to truth over falsehood.

5. **Building a sustainable future:** The immediate crisis is intense, but it will pass. Australia needs to prepare for the aftermath and to do so with urgency. This means building programs of social and economic renewal that can overcome the immediate negative impact of the virus and at the same time turn attention to tackling some of the chronic challenges that were already besetting us as a nation before the virus hit. Programs for economic recovery, for example, should place the challenges of both climate change and systemic inequalities at their heart. This is a moment for the divisions between different Australians to reduce rather than increase. We encourage all policymakers to use this moment as an opportunity to set a better course for the future.

## Applying these principles

None of the principles above are designed to generate specific, individual policy responses. They are intended instead to act as a set of criteria by which such proposals for such responses can be judged and debate initiated.

This document has been prepared with the help of the experts associated with the Sydney Policy Lab, including Associate Professor Anna Boucher, Dr Gareth Bryant, Associate Professor Amy Conley Wright, Professor Rae Cooper, Associate Professor Anika Gauja, Associate Professor Kurt Iveson, Professor Marc Stears, Dr Amanda Tattersall and Professor Tim Soutphommasane. They are each available to assist policymakers and others with these discussions and eager to play a part. Please contact us at [policy.lab@sydney.edu.au](mailto:policy.lab@sydney.edu.au) for more information.

We hope these principles are received in the spirit they are intended and look forward to the debate that they engender.

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