

Health Communication During COVID - Scandinavia

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Collaboration with
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Daily Confirmed COVID-19 Cases per Million People
Rolling 7-day average, logarithmic scale



Source: Our World in Data based at Oxford University

During the peak of the pandemic in spring, Northern European countries have enjoyed relative success in their pandemic response. While Denmark and Norway were quick to initiate stringent lockdowns, Sweden moved forward with a much more lenient response, only advising people to stay home and physically distance without enforcement.

How did these countries communicate health policies during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and how did these national strategies facilitate the country's successful or unsuccessful response?

Democratic Health Communication during COVID-19: Rapid Response

This larger project involved an analysis of health communication policies in Taiwan, Canada, South Korea, Senegal, Germany, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark to seek overarching principals for a democratic rapid response.

[Read the Report Here](#)



The Danish Response



The Danish government's decision to **lock down on March 17** largely contributed to stopping the spread of COVID-19 and greatly boosted its popularity. Despite mixed messages around the initial decision to lock down and on mass testing, the Danish pandemic response has been well-received.

Denmark's top health official Søren Brostrøm has become one of the country's **most prominent figures in communicating around the pandemic**. His clear and concise communication during press conferences has increased public compliance and understanding of pandemic protocol.

Messaging has been centered around calls for Danes to be socially responsible, which were accompanied by **stern warnings** by both government officials and police of the consequences if individuals did not follow physical distancing protocol.

Communicate clearly and consistently

The clear description of guidelines and regulations have been key to the success of response strategies. These attributes are exemplified in Denmark and Norway's strategies, where both countries have provided extensive communication materials explaining their response strategies on multiple digital and physical media channels. Conversely, the inability to communicate consistently coupled with seesawing on policy decisions have led to confusion regarding the government's stance, which was exemplified with earlier instances in Denmark, as officials stated mixed positions on lockdowns and mass testing. However, the Danish strategy was able to correct past mistakes through the leadership of Søren Brostrøm, the Director-General of the Danish Health Authority, who has become a household name domestically due to his professionalism and calm demeanor during press conferences.



The Norwegian Response



With a cautious policy approach, the Norwegian government enjoyed renewed popularity with its decision to **quickly lock down on March 12**, although it has admitted in hindsight that its imposed measures were too harsh.

Camilla Stoltenberg and Bjørn Guldvog are the **public health professionals taking the lead in communicating** during the pandemic. They are supported by Prime Minister Erna Solberg who has focused her communication on empathy and unity. Twice the Prime Minister has also held press conferences for children, which have become an effective method of connecting with youth.

International watchdogs criticized Norway's version of its coronavirus tracking app due to its lack of open-source code and its constant collection of users' location to be stored on private servers. The controversy has led to health authorities voluntarily shutting down the app.

Respond quickly to pushback in decision-making

A swift response to poor policy decisions has also contributed to successful communications. Such is the case in Norway's launch of the infection-tracing application *Smittestopp*, which has received international backlash for its lack of privacy measures and open source code. As criticism grew, the Norwegian Institute of Public Health immediately discontinued the app and deleted the stored data.

Divide communications based on expertise

By separating official communications into government and public health briefings, Sweden further exemplifies effective communications during the pandemic. Government press briefings, which are led by political leaders such as the Prime Minister and Health Minister, focus on policy issues, while public health briefings that are led by health and safety professionals focus on infection trends, the state of the Swedish health system, and research on the pandemic. This format clearly shows viewers that leadership during the pandemic is a shared effort, with researchers and scientists receiving their own platform to disseminate information. While press conferences in Denmark are only led by government officials, they do employ a similar approach to Sweden's division-of-labour method. Representatives from various government bodies all make consistent appearances in these briefings providing updates.



The Swedish Response



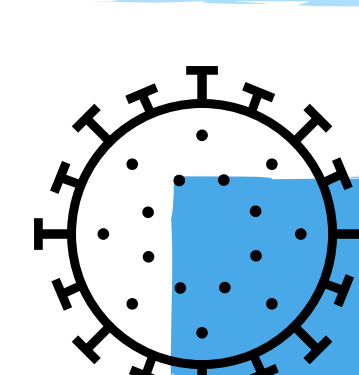
Compared to other European countries, Sweden implemented a **more relaxed protocol of limited lockdowns and unenforced physical distancing**. Reception to the strategy has ranged from outrage over the increased number of cases to praise over prospects of better economic recovery, a more sustainable policy in the long term, and better public immunity in the future.

Anders Tegnell, Sweden's top epidemiologist, has become a household name in Sweden. He has been the leading figure during press conferences and has been known for his straightforward communication—**opting to present facts and figures more often than appealing to emotion and values**. Swedish politicians played a limited role in communicating around the pandemic.

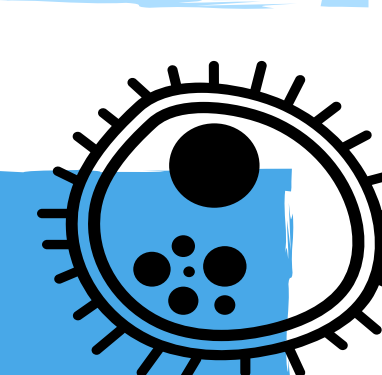
The Swedish response has also been criticized for **the disproportionate amount of deaths from COVID-19 in senior care homes**, where healthcare workers argue that the cause is a combination of ineffective measures and the institutional reluctance to admit seniors into hospital.

Autonomy over orders builds trust

While authorities have implemented restrictions such as limits on gatherings and travel bans, Sweden has mostly opted to introduce advisories and guidelines on behaviour over enforced rules as the government expected that the populace would make the responsible decision to comply. This approach, amid other factors, has resulted in a considerably higher rate of COVID-19 cases and deaths in Sweden compared to the rest of its Northern European neighbours, which has generated domestic opposition and incorrectly portrayed Sweden as a poster child for inaction during the pandemic among the global community. 'Sweden's relaxed measures have stayed popular through early fall, but the recent uncurbed rise of infections and overcapacity of emergency care spaces have prompted officials to consider a full lockdown.



Covid-19 Impact



The COVID-19 situation in Northern Europe is also **constantly changing**. Research for this project was conducted, and therefore relevant, from the beginning of March to mid-September 2020.

Other observations found outside this time period may affect the findings discussed in this project.

Depending on the continued spread of COVID-19, **governments may suddenly change course** on their policy decisions or communicate differently, while public behaviour may change as well.

Policy Relevance

Emotions and values build connection

Another element of successful response plans in Northern Europe has been leadership through invoking emotion and values. Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen introduced Denmark's new pandemic regulations alongside statements of her faith in the resilience of fellow Danes. Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Löfven also had similar words in his addresses, who affirmed his confidence in the Swedish people to protect each other. However, attention to values and emotions can be most exemplified in Norway, where Prime Minister Erna Solberg called on fellow citizens to use their creativity to help each other. The separate press conferences she led that were specifically for children have also received international attention.