

EVALUATION OF COVID-19 RESPONSES

1. OVERALL OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE

As Belgium seeks to learn the lessons from the COVID-19 crisis and increase its long-term resilience, it will benefit from learning from its approach to:

- **emergency preparedness** i.e., government's ability to anticipate the pandemic and prepare critical sectors (cf. **COMPONENT 2**).
- **crisis management**, in other words the processes, means and mechanisms put in place to manage the crisis and ensure the continuity of democratic life (cf. **COMPONENT 3**).
- **public health policies**, which concern both early containment measures, contact tracing and testing policies and vaccination strategy (cf. **COMPONENT 4**).
- **educational policies**, regarding distance learning, and the design and implementation of educational measures adopted during the pandemic (cf. **COMPONENT 5**).
- **economic and fiscal policies**, aimed at reducing the effects of the pandemic and the economic crisis on citizens and households, the self-employed and businesses and, subsequently, at supporting the recovery (e.g. the recovery plan) (cf. **COMPONENT 6**).
- **labour and social policies**, aimed at reducing the effects of the pandemic on individuals and workers (cf. **COMPONENT 7**).

The proposed project will result in an evaluation report, based on national evidence, as well as on comparative data and good practices from other members' evaluations. As some OECD members have already carried out government evaluations of their measures, the report will seek to draw lessons from the experience gained in other countries.

The evaluation will use an integrated approach to the COVID pandemic, which is based on a systematic OECD methodological framework (<https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/first-lessons-from-government-evaluations-of-covid-19-responses-a-synthesis-483507d6/>). The evaluation will include all entities in Belgium (federal government, regions, communities and municipalities) to the extent that they are relevant for the analysis of Belgium's national policy responses. The evaluation will take into account the measures adopted during the period going from January 2020 to March 2022. The development of subsequent policies and possible future reforms of current competences of levels of government goes beyond the scope of this study.

The assessment will take into account the demographic, social and economic specificity of Belgium. The report will make practical recommendations to build resilience to future crises and inform policymaking in the areas of emergency anticipation and preparedness, crisis management, economic and fiscal recovery, health, education and social affairs.

2. DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

The evaluation is organised in 6 thematic components, which each look at one of the main policy aspects of the crisis response, as well as one introductory chapter, which will provide contextual information on the situation in Belgium preceding the crisis. In addition, the evaluation will also provide transdisciplinary insights into the impact of the pandemic on youth and the elderly, into the impact of measures on the quality of life of citizens, as well as insights into the proportionality of measures on individual liberties.

- **COMPONENT 1: OVERVIEW OF THE GOVERNANCE, HEALTH, ECONOMIC AND PUBLIC FINANCE SITUATION IN THE COUNTRY**

This component is composed of an introductory chapter, which will focus on the health, economic and public finance situation in the country before the onset of the crisis, and will present the demographic, social and economic specificities of the country, likely to affect the impact of the pandemic on the life of the country.

- **COMPONENT 2: EMERGENCY ANTICIPATION AND PREPAREDNESS**

This component covers the 2nd chapter of the evaluation, which will focus on the country's emergency preparedness and anticipation capacities. This chapter will assess the anticipation capacities, emergency procedures, and preparedness of critical risk sectors in the country. In particular, this chapter will, to the extent that the relevant data is available, analyse:

- ✓ To what extent *the assessment and anticipation of risks* and crises, as well as strategic foresight capabilities, have helped the country prepare for the COVID-19 pandemic.
- ✓ *The overall preparedness of critical sectors to pandemic*, including the ability to ensure the supply of health sectors, business sectors and the population with personal protective equipment and medical equipment.
- ✓ *The emergency procedures and mechanisms*, and the measure they have enabled effective preparedness for the acute phase of the crisis and taken into account the cross-border effects of the pandemic.
- ✓ *International cooperation and consular response*, including assistance in the repatriation of citizens abroad.

- **COMPONENT 3: CRISIS MANAGEMENT**

This component focuses on the 3rd chapter of the evaluation, which will focus on the processes, means and mechanisms put in place to manage the crisis and ensure the continuity of daily life in Belgium. This chapter will assess the policies and actions of the government to address the crisis. In particular, this chapter will, to the extent that the relevant data is available, analyse:

- ✓ *The overall governance of crisis management*, in particular the existence of crisis management bodies, the various crisis cells and inter-ministerial and scientific advisory groups, their functioning and decision-making procedures.
- ✓ The ability to adapt the organisation of crisis management to changing challenges.
- ✓ *Crisis communication*, which will explore the different channels of this communication, the coherence of messages, the efforts to combat mis and dis information, and their impact on citizens' trust.
- ✓ *Mechanisms for horizontal and vertical coordination* between central governments, and between central governments and local actors, as well as mechanisms to engage with the *whole-of-society* for crisis response.
- ✓ The impact of the crisis or the state of emergency on the *continuity of democratic life*, whether in terms of the participation and cooperation of stakeholders in crisis management, functioning of legislative bodies.
- ✓ *Evidence informed decision making*, which includes the extent to which the existing *data and scientific advice* systems were agile enough to provide timely, robust and reliable scientific evidence to inform the response to the crisis and allow for real-time lessons to be learned on each of the strategic topics of this project. This will also look at how decision-makers used

this evidence and the processes put in place to rapidly synthesize and assess evidence for decision-making, in particular in light of potential trade-offs.

- **COMPONENT 4: PUBLIC HEALTH POLICIES**

The analysis will, to the extent that the relevant data is available, assess the relevance, timeliness and proportionality of the strategies in the country has adopted to strengthen the response of its health system, including:

- ✓ *Covid-19 control in the country*, including monitoring, surveillance and data analysis systems, the ability to detect and investigate clusters and contacts of positive cases as part of containment efforts, the screening and testing strategy as well as the role of laboratories.
- ✓ The *direct health impact* of COVID-19 (epidemiological data, hospitalizations, morbidity, mortality), as well as the measures put in place to ensure the treatment of patients with COVID-19 and care of patients affected by long COVID-19.
- ✓ The *indirect health impact* of COVID-19 (hospital deprogramming, delays in diagnosis and treatment for routine care), as well as the measures put in place to ensure the continuity of primary care and to respond to the long-term impacts of delaying or renouncing care on health needs.
- ✓ *Efforts to promote the mental health and psychological well-being and quality of life* of the population as well as the impact of the health crisis on the different socio-economic profiles of the population.
- ✓ A particular focus will be placed on the *health impacts of the crisis on vulnerable groups, including youth, older persons and the unhoused*, where information is available.
- ✓ The *resilience and adaptability of hospital and outpatient structures* to the pandemic to support health, but also in terms of organisation, particularly on the management and occupancy of beds.
- ✓ The *resilience of the health workforce* during this period.
- ✓ The vaccination strategy and its implementation.

- **COMPONENT 5: EDUCATIONAL POLICIES**

This section will focus on the responses of the country's education systems to the COVID crisis at school levels and on the lessons to be learned for greater responsiveness and resilience in the future. These analyses will be carried out mainly in the context of the OECD's work in the field of educational innovation and relevant elements of the Framework for Responsiveness and Resilience in Education (developed by the OECD in the context of the pandemic). In particular, the chapter will, to the extent that the relevant data is available, analyse:

- ✓ the availability of digital distance learning resources
- ✓ the measures proposed to ensure pedagogical continuity, particularly during school closures
- ✓ the preparation of teachers and learners to teach and learn remotely,
- ✓ the process of designing and implementing the educational measures adopted for the reopening of institutions during the pandemic (engagement, consultation, collection of information and data to inform decisions and actions to support implementation in schools).
- ✓ the impact of COVID on the national education systems, on educational responses, by assessing the effectiveness and equity of the national education system during the recovery phase.
- ✓ The impact of COVID on student and teacher mental health.
- ✓ the effectiveness of decisions such as closing schools, proposing educational alternatives, and other measures to contain the spread of the virus.

- ✓ the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on educational outcomes, learning and success rates and assess the initiatives taken to address possible school delays.

- **COMPONENT 6: ECONOMIC AND FISCAL POLICIES**

This component focuses on **Chapter 6 of the evaluation**, which will focus on the economic and fiscal policies put in place to mitigate the effects of the crisis on citizens, workers and businesses, and support the recovery. This strand will assess the economic impact of COVID-19 and the respective bottlenecks on the country's economy and public finances, as well as the impact of measures to reduce the economic effects on citizens, the self-employed and businesses and to support the recovery. The chapter will analyse in detail the economic support measures chosen and the impact of policy design on the speed, targeting and impact of these measures. In particular, this chapter will, to the extent that the relevant data is available, analyse:

- ✓ The mix of *budgetary measures to support the economy* chosen by the country compared to the experiences of other European countries and good practices.
- ✓ *Beneficiaries receiving support measures*, in particular comparing the allocation choices made and the intended scope of the measures with the audiences actually able to benefit from them, and highlighting the differences in effectiveness between the policy measures.
- ✓ The *budget implementation* of support measures, whether in terms of the speed of settlements, the adequate targeting of measures.
- ✓ The impact of policies on economic growth, firm survival and bankruptcy rates, employment levels and composition and, where data are available, on firm productivity, investment and business strategies.
- ✓ The impact of the measures on *the tourism and catering sector*.
- ✓ The impact of policies on the *stability of the financial sector*.
- ✓ The impact of policies on *public finance aggregates in the short and medium term*.

- **COMPONANTE 7: LABOUR MARKET AND SOCIAL POLICIES**

This component focuses on Chapter **7 of the evaluation**, which will focus on labour market and social policies put in place to protect jobs, support businesses and workers, and mitigate the effects of the crisis on households.

This chapter will assess the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the labour market and social outcomes in the country, as well as the measures taken by national authorities to prevent large-scale job losses, support household incomes, and cushion the negative social consequences of the COVID-19 crisis. In particular, this chapter will, to the extent that the relevant data is available, analyse:

- ✓ *Trends in key labour market and social outcome indicators* during the crisis and the onset of recovery, including changes in the employment rate and hours worked across sectors and occupations, the use of telework, unemployment and inactivity, and – depending on the availability of data – wages, household income or other social outcomes.
- ✓ *Inequalities in the impact of the crisis on different groups in the population*, including women, young people, workers in atypical and low-paid jobs, the self-employed or migrants.
- ✓ *Policy response to protect jobs and incomes and support households* affected by the crisis, including the extension of short time working, leave for family reasons, and income support for workers affected by job or income loss.