

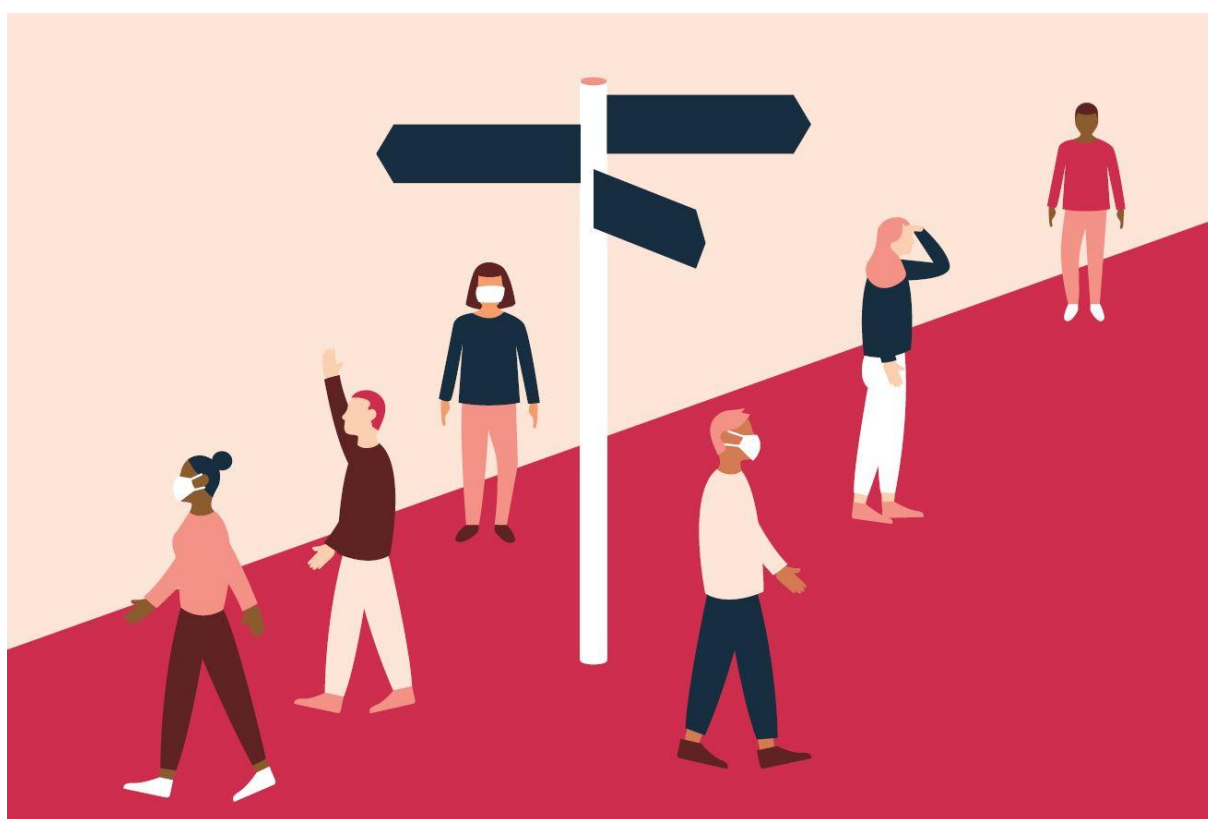
Communication and support for Covid-19 measures

The WRR's contribution to the informal administrative consultation

Will Tiemeijer¹, 12 October 2020

Introduction

How can we ensure that people keep a safe distance from one another? That they continue to work from home as much as possible? And that they continue to do all the other things necessary to bring an end to the current pandemic? “We can only drive out the virus through our behaviour,” Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte insists. Effective communication is therefore essential. This concise document details three fundamentals and seven practical points regarding communication and public support in connection with Covid-19.



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Three fundamentals

1. Legitimacy: be truthful, fair and reasonable

The fight against the virus is a collective undertaking that can only succeed if people can actually see and experience that the values they consider to be important also form the guiding principles of this project. Only then can there be a real and lasting commitment.

What are those values? We propose taking the following model as our basis:

- *Truthfulness*. Communication should at all times be characterized by truthfulness: information should be given as honestly as possible, to the best of one's knowledge, explicitly stating the factors taken into account, and openly acknowledging what we do and do not know;
- *Fairness*. People are willing to cooperate to a great extent, as long as they feel they are being treated fairly. That means at least two things:
 - a fair process: when decisions are taken, all parties concerned (or their representatives) must be heard and must be given a genuine opportunity to express their interests and wishes;
 - a fair outcome: the benefits and the burdens of the situation must be distributed fairly and according to people's ability to contribute; no one should be given a free ride, everyone should be expected to do their bit.
- *Reasonableness*. Take strict action against major transgressions and malicious intent, but be flexible about minor transgressions and innocent oversights. Be seen to enforce the rules consistently, but do so fairly and realistically.

The importance of acting consistently in accordance with these values cannot be overestimated. People are highly sensitive to anomalies in this area, and can react with deep indignation if these values are violated (and may well opt out as a result). It is therefore essential for the government to always examine its words and deeds in relation to these values.

2. Effectiveness: be clear and unambiguous

People want and need to know where they stand. If the rules are not clear and unambiguous, or if they differ per region or domain, people soon become confused and start making their own rules. That is why – against the grain of Dutch governmental tendencies – communication and core messages should remain under central control. The central message must also encompass a clear perspective on possible future steps and scenarios, so that everyone can anticipate and plan as much as possible for what is to come.

3. Organization: give behavioural science a permanent place

Given the overriding importance of behaviour, experts in communication and behaviour must be given a *permanent place* at the table in *all* advisory and decision-making bodies, *right up to the highest echelons*.

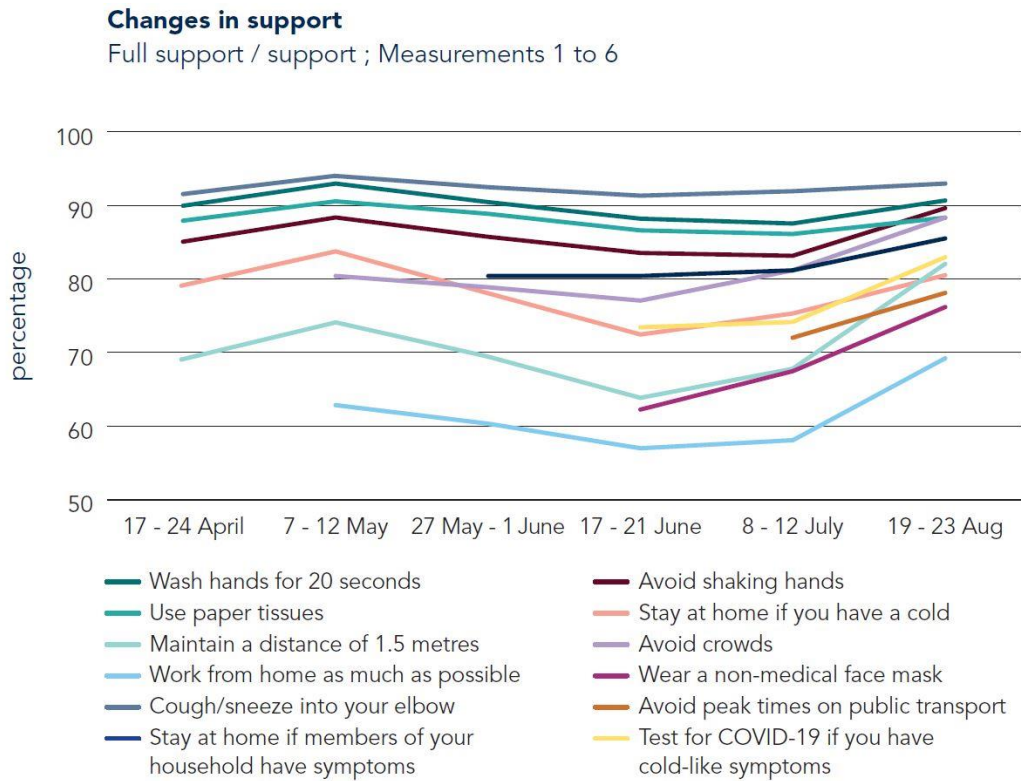
Seven points for a practical approach

1. Know your target group

Every successful strategy starts with a thorough knowledge of the target group: what do they know, what is their attitude and how do they behave? Why do they behave the way they do? Why do they often find it difficult to keep a safe distance? Why do they wash their hands in one situation and not in another? Make the best possible use of existing quantitative and qualitative research, and supplement it with customized research where necessary.

2. Don't underestimate support

At the time of writing, the view that support for measures to combat Covid-19 is declining has become commonplace in public discourse and the media. Yet although confidence in the Dutch government's approach has indeed declined, there is still widespread support for the behavioural measures *themselves*. And since the summer, there appears to have been a resurgence in this support.



Source: [RIVM](#)

The question is therefore not so much how to increase support for behavioural measures, but how to ensure that the existing support actually *translates* into the desired behaviour.

3. Avoid explanation overkill

When people do not behave the way you want them to, there is often a tendency to explain and explain again. However, it's a tendency that should be avoided in cases like these. When people do not always act in accordance with the rules, in most cases it is not because they do not know or understand them, but because other factors are in play. Perhaps compliance is not always easy or possible, or their attention has waned, or other interests have gained in importance. *The essential thing, therefore, is to tackle those causes.* Simply repeating the rules is ineffective and may even cause irritation.

4. Focus on a broad spectrum of motivations

People differ in their motives and motivations. Some are strongly driven by future rewards, others by incentives in the here and now. Some are strongly motivated by being personally rewarded for their behaviour, while for others the important thing is how their behaviour affects others. In addition, people differ as to what type of communication they are most likely to respond to.

That's why it makes sense to opt for a 'broad spectrum' approach: address all these different motives, not just through words and data, but also with images and stories. Show concrete effects of behaviour with which people can identify, featuring both 'short-term' motivators

(e.g. images of friends and family who are vulnerable now, exhausted nurses who have to go back to work now) and 'long-term' motivators (e.g. images of sports and cultural activities that will be able to resume, physical reunions with friends and colleagues). And don't forget to emphasize the social dimension as well as personal benefits: connection with others, what the measures mean to others, and the gratitude of others.

5. Focus on and facilitate positive behaviour too

At the time of writing, a great deal of emphasis is being placed on the minority who are *not* doing what has been asked of them. It is better to focus on the large majority who *are* behaving responsibly (or who are at least making an effort to do so). Communicate the social norm, i.e. show that most people are doing the right thing, and substantiate that with figures, making sure of course that they are accurate.

And make it easy for people to do the right thing. This can be done using physical interventions, such as arrows on the floor in indoor spaces, separate walking routes, and hand sanitizer at the entrance. But it can also be done by making certain behaviours *compulsory*, so that people no longer have to think or negotiate on the spot; this helps certain actions become habitual.

6. Offer hope, small intermediate steps, celebrate success, acknowledge emotions

Do not simply offer a future perspective, but also formulate small and meaningful intermediate goals in the relative here and now on the path to the ultimate goal. Mark and celebrate the achievement of those intermediate goals. Give space to shared experiences and emotions, both joy and relief when things succeed, and fear and disappointment when they fail. Fully acknowledge the reality and legitimacy of emotions, and express them to an appropriate degree.

7. Ensure proper follow-up for potential patients and their loved ones

While the rules for the general public are sufficiently known, there seems to be less clarity about the rules and advice that apply to people who think they might be infected and/or want to be tested and/or want to know what this means for themselves and their loved ones. What exactly are the rules? What are you supposed to do? For many members of the public, written information on this subject is not enough. They want to talk to somebody.

Question: are the front and back offices working effectively, both in their own right and together? Is the 0800 - 1351 helpline functioning properly? Is the number sufficiently well-known, accessible? Is the help offered on the helpline professional enough? Ideally, everyone should be able to repeat this number in their sleep, and everyone who calls should receive quick and adequate help, and be referred to the relevant party where necessary.

The WRR and Covid-19

In June 2020, [Vulnerability and Resilience](#) was published. In this report, the WRR offers its initial reflections on a situation that is continuing to evolve rapidly. While a great deal of effective action has been taken to weather the current crisis, the WRR has also observed that the vulnerable are being disproportionately affected by the economic and health risks, that businesses are struggling to absorb the shock, and that international cooperation has been far from smooth. In this report, the WRR aims to provide support for the government and for parliament as they tackle the impact of the coronavirus crisis.

This is a crucial task for the government: it has to find ways to strengthen the resilience of society so that the country can both recover from the crisis and prepare for the changes that lie ahead.