

What the UAE is Doing to Leverage Health Agility: the Case of COVID-19



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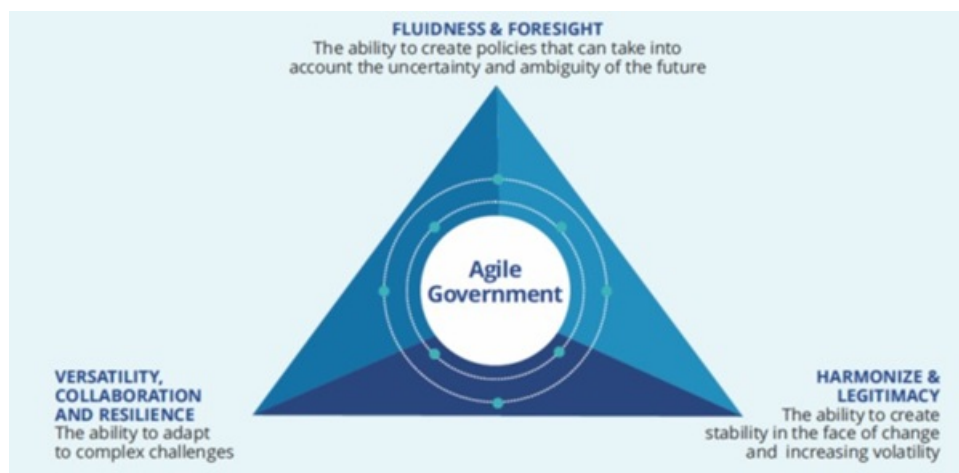
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According to global reports, from an operational point of view, there is extreme pressure on capacity due to the outbreak of the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19), affecting mainly inbound air freight and domestic road haulage in addition to production in China. As the ripple effect, similar pressure is observed in Hong Kong, Singapore and the United States. The Hong Kong government has requested that public/civil servants work from home while sports facilities and museums are closed indefinitely. While quarantine mechanisms have been put in place for cross-border passenger traffic between Hong Kong and China, none have addressed the cargo movement. In Singapore, there is no operational impact, but government has widened travel restrictions to visitors who have recently visited mainland China. In the United States, air freights and ocean freights continue to be under scrutiny. The numbers of case of COVID-19 has been increasing day by day in the last eight weeks.

There are 59 cases diagnosed of COVID-19 in the United Arab Emirates. At a time like this, it is paramount for governments, private sector, funders and citizens to seize this opportunity to be more vigilant and agile. In the latest research conducted by Professors from the Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government – Dubai, three main elements were identified as the Agility Government Structural Tension Foundations including:

1. Fluidness and foresight.
2. Versatility, collaboration and resilience
3. Harmonisation and legitimacy.

This has been further discussed at the United Arab Emirates Public Policy Forum 2020 #UAEPPF2020 themed 'Agile Government: Becoming Future-Proof.' It brought to light the term 'agility,' which refers to 'the ability of an organisation to react to changes in its environment faster than the rate of these changes.' Furthermore, it is vital for the health sector to leverage this opportunity to become more agile given the current dilemma caused by the COVID-19.



Adopted from Stephens et al. (2019)

The concept of agility has widely spread in the past few years, becoming more and more commonplace in more service-oriented and traditional industries. Agility can assist healthcare providers, whether private or public, to become more adaptive and resilient to a dynamic global market where status quo is no longer the norm. It is crucial for such a strategic sector to possess the ability to create sound health policies that can encompass the inevitable uncertainty accompanying such dynamism. This sort of adaptation will further enhance policymakers' foresights and visions.

With respect to the sudden outbreak of the recent coronavirus, the UAE healthcare sector acknowledged how some capacities – be it human resources or capital – rendered themselves indispensable. These included:

1. Transparency and ubiquitous inter-industrial connections.
2. Mobility of human resource capacity.
3. Timely responsiveness to market demands.
4. Flexible organisation structures and contingently.
5. Management endorsement (Tolf et al. 2015).

According to the model proposed (Stephens et al. 2019), one of the three pillars of agile government – and sectors within – is **fluidness and foresight**. As for the UAE, the country has dealt with the unexpected outbreak well in advance – as early as in 2017 the Dubai Health Authority (DHA) announced that it would set up a citywide Emergency and Crisis Management Nerve Centre, where a memorandum of understanding (MoU) was signed with Avanza Solutions to implement the project.

The MoU ratifies the presence of Aanza's Smart City Medical Management Platform 'Acuity' as a smart platform and application that will help to save lives. The application has been providing the DHA with timely data about what is happening across the city.

The project has been meant to address clinical emergencies and aims to fully utilise available data to take timely evidence-based decisions. With the support of artificial intelligence, prompt reception of patients in critical conditions in proximity-based healthcare centres will help mitigate the impact of a contagious virus that may cause panic to spread even faster than the virus itself. With the fluidness such an initiative provides, the UAE project somewhat satisfies one of the crucial aspects of agility in the healthcare sector.

Collaboration and Resilience

"If healthcare industries are to maintain agile structures, they need to prepare for persistent pressure from customers who are continuously seeking improvement in quality levels, efficiency of services offered, and overall satisfaction" (Moonesar et al. 2020). With the possibility of having a widely spreading virus around the corner, it is only logical to anticipate fluctuations in demand and supply of the necessary medications.

In line with one of the multiple precautionary measures the UAE has adopted, Health Minister confirmed the country had stocked sufficient medicines to deal with any outbreak of the virus. The Ministry of Health and Prevention (MOHAP) declared that more than 500 staff members are on board, working round the clock to deal with any emergency situation regarding Coronavirus.

This employee deployment required collaboration of numerous entities and service providers, from both private and public sectors. Such collaborative standpoints that endorse the agility of the sector, necessitated the creation of transparent and reliable communication channels across all stakeholders involved and deployed medical investigations and logistical support to combat the virus, according to the country's officials.

The collaborations assisted providers from both sectors to be better prepared and enhanced their alert levels to the highest possible. Partnerships with laboratories from both sectors were invited to participate in the containment of the outbreak along with the contributions from medical suppliers, which provided the market with sufficient protective gear. The efforts by the National Competitiveness and Statistics Authority connect the diverse actions of all stakeholders through a centralised database of information that makes decision-making processes yet more agile.

Harmonisation and Legitimacy

"This area is concerned with creating stability in the face of rapidly changing environments and disruptive markets. A truly agile healthcare sector is always prepared to deal with unpredictable volatility by steering away from chaos while at the same time breaking bureaucratic restrictions to reach a much-needed state of flourishing stability" (Moonesar et al. 2020). Having said that, the MOHAP confirmed its active rapport with the World Health Organization keeping track of the latest developments and changes taking place in light of the crisis. Such rapport guarantees the proper management of any sudden events, and sustains the harmony and legitimacy required amongst all stakeholders involved.

In the UAE, the health sector is leveraging this opportunity to become more agile and continuously improve and strengthen the health systems given the current dilemma caused by the COVID-19.

References

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