


Sustaining lives and livelihoods: a decision framework for calibrating social and movement measures during the COVID-19 pandemic



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Key messages

- The aim of public health and social measures in the context of COVID-19 is to limit the spread of the virus and reduce the number of deaths. Public health and social measures are often being implemented in combination and it is difficult to measure their individual impact. However, evidence shows that social and physical distancing and international travel-related measures (thereafter “social and movement measures”) significantly decrease individuals’ face-to-face interactions and movement, and thus contribute to reduce the pressure on health services both for COVID-19 and other health conditions, protect the health of the most vulnerable to COVID-19, such as the elderly and people with chronic conditions, and reduce the higher risk of infection faced by workers in contact-intensive sectors.
- Social and movement measures may also have unintended consequence on health if they disrupt access to care and delay diagnosis and treatment of other conditions, adversely affect mental health or increase exposure to behavioural risk factors. They can also exacerbate the economic slowdown induced by COVID-19 itself and can increase socioeconomic inequality, disproportionately harming workers with jobs less amenable to teleworking, those with precarious employment conditions and those with limited or no access to social protection.
- Policy-makers are faced with complex decisions to sustain both the lives and livelihoods of all members of society and to protect the most vulnerable in both the short and the long term. Delay in calibrating social and movement measures in a situation of widespread community transmission or an uncontrolled epidemic with limited or no additional health system response capacity and a risk of overwhelmed health services could result in excess morbidity and mortality and in a need to sustain stringent measures for longer; however, easing or removing social and movement measures too quickly could jeopardize the intended health benefits and the possibility of faster economic recovery. Strong, sustained policies that mitigate the harmful economic consequences of COVID-19 are also necessary to support workers and the viable businesses most affected by social and movement measures.
- Various aspects of health, economic and social welfare may be valued in different ways in different settings, but it is difficult to collect context-specific evidence on multiple dimensions in a rapidly evolving situation. Decisions are often made in conditions of great uncertainty and must be reviewed more frequently than in routine priority setting activities to account for new evidence and changes in the epidemiological situation. Inclusive, transparent, and evidence-based decision-making is therefore necessary.
- A five-step framework is proposed here to support decision-making. It starts from the health dimension, with assessment of the epidemiological situation, health system capacity and potential social and movement measures and is then extended to other dimensions of importance to a given society that may be affected by these measures, such as economic and equity dimensions. Other important considerations may be added according to the context.
- Implementation of the framework may be based on quantitative and qualitative information in concerted dialogue and deliberation among a broad range of stakeholders, including representatives of vulnerable and under-represented groups who may be affected by the outbreak and response interventions.

- The proposed five-step framework begins with a situational assessment and proceeds with identification of potential social and movement measures, assessment of impacts and decisions. The final step includes monitoring, adapting and communicating. This is a dynamic process, as decisions will have to be revised regularly, and clear communication should be an integral part of the process. The framework may also be used for implementing or adjusting other public health and social measures, as relevant.

Table 1. Five-step decision-making framework for social and movement measures

Step	Actions
1. Assess the situational level (as proposed by WHO (1)), and optimize health system response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agree on indicators and thresholds • Assess current epidemiological data, potential scenarios and distributions of transmission and burden (e.g. spatial, demographic) • Assess health system response capacity • Assess and optimize adherence to existing public health measures • Increase health system capacity, where possible
2. Identify possible social and movement measures for each context and possible calibration options, and assess their health impacts	<p>On the basis of the situational assessment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce or build on social and movement measures already in place, identify calibration options to maximize the health impact (geography, demography, occupation, individual discretionary behaviour, stringency, scope, enforcement) • Assess the impact of each option on health using an assessment scoring and/or weighting scheme
3. Develop and populate an “extended assessment matrix” (see Table 2) of important non-health dimensions	<p>For each social and movement measure and calibration option:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extend the relevant impact dimensions to economic, social and equity criteria (or others deemed important according to the context) using the assessment scoring and/or weighting scheme • Include justifications for assessments • Consider all policies that could feasibly mitigate the economic, social and equity impacts of social and movement measures
4. Establish dialogue and a decision-making process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a process to deliberate on the evidence and options derived from previous steps • Deliberate on key elements such as equity, potential unintended consequences of, and uncertainties around social and movement measures
5. Monitor, adapt and communicate regularly throughout steps 1–4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitor indicators, and establish feedback mechanisms every 2–4 weeks • Review steps 1–4 to refine and calibrate social and movement measures • Use communication tools to build trust

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