[**Learning from the NCOC**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1656261/learning-from-the-ncoc)

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IN times that are grim, there are things that are less so. With the Covid-19 infection hitting new lows, it may be useful to look back and see what we did right, and whether we can learn the right lessons from the experience of these last two years.

The National Command and Operation Centre has been the nerve centre for the country’s anti-Covid measures. Constituted by the PTI government in April 2020, it has over these 19 months evolved into a forum that is recognised for its success in combating the pandemic. Here are 10 lessons that we can learn from NCOC in order to get better results in our national endeavours:

1- De-emphasise political partisanship. In a landscape sullied by bitter political rivalries, NCOC managed to create an environment in which political rivals sat together and worked together like normal people. No shouting, no bickering and no leg-pulling. As head of NCOC, Planning Minister Asad Umar ran the proceedings like a corporate CEO, not a partisan cabinet member. The presence of senior military officials also helped detoxify the ambience. Lesson: when rivals agree to work for a common cause, they can grow beyond their partisanship and produce impressive results.

2- Smooth coordination between the centre and provinces works. The role of the federal government was key in ensuring that the provinces remained connected to the national policy direction despite the fact that health is a provincial subject. The NCOC was successful in bringing aboard the provincial leadership to work in tandem. In the public sphere the PTI and PPP governments were throwing punches at each other, but behind closed doors, the leadership of the two parties worked fairly effectively. Lesson: If common goals can be set, actions coordinated and resources pooled, the inefficient Pakistani system can also deliver results.

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3- Civil-military done right can work well. In a regime dubbed as ‘hybrid’ NCOC was an outlier in terms of how hybrid does not have to be a failed experiment. Whatever the original intent behind the ‘civ-mil’ mix in NCOC, it evolved into a forum that was led by Asad Umar, co-chaired by the now retired Lt-Gen Hamood-uz-Zaman and assisted by a team of senior and mid-level military and civil officials. While the likes of Asad Umar and Dr Faisal Sultan provided a mix of corporate and medical management expertise, military officials ensured effective coordination and swift implementation of decisions. Lesson: Civ-mil team-play under the right circumstances does deliver.

4- Respect the power of data. NCOC was brutally honest with data and depended primarily on it to make decisions. In contrast to the bureaucratic lethargy that scars the working of government ministries and departments, NCOC worked like a Wall Street firm, preferring exactitude to anecdotal evidence, perceptional observations or politically drenched gut feelings. The video wall in the main NCOC hall would stay illuminated and flicker graphs, charts and video links as information poured in from across the country. Data analysts were at hand to make sense of the numbers and decipher the message they relayed. Lesson: scientific approach, even in a non-scientific government culture, delivers results.

**Read:** [*PM Imran praises NCOC after Pakistan ranked among top countries for handling Covid-19*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1633713)

5- Continuity of command. From the day it was first constituted till today NCOC has not had a change in leadership. Asad Umar has led it ably from the first day and now packs within him the institutional memory and experience that continues to fuel and drive the workings of the forum. Lt-Gen Hamood co-piloted NCOC till the day he retired from the army and was given a send-off at the NCOC. Dr Faisal Sultan, now health minister, has steered NCOC with his medical expertise from the beginning and continues to play a central role. The two- and one-star generals assigned to the NCOC also remain the same except for a few changes. Lesson: don’t reshuffle officials on whims. Continuity of command delivers.

6- Break down red tape. Speed and time was of the essence in combating the pandemic. It was measured in lives lost and saved. Whether the problem at hand pertained to ordering medical equipment and supplies, or allocation of resources to various hospitals, or getting reports compiled from field locations, or even sending teams to track and trace suspected patients, NCOC managed to speed up processes and procedures that would in normal times take an eternity. This illustrated that official red tape and inertia can be broken or bypassed if there is will at the top and an authority delegated for such a purpose. Lesson: Cutting red tape to a significant degree is doable within the official system if the leadership is determined to get it done.

**Read:** [*Inside the NCOC — An eyewitness account*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1550412)

7- Effective public messaging can influence behaviour. Pakistan got off to a slow start on the Covid front and citizens remained in denial of the danger. However by June 2020 NCOC had managed to influence the thinking and behaviour of people through aggressive messaging. Of course the spike in infections and deaths also had a sobering effect on those who were taking the pandemic lightly. Through all media platforms and other ways like phone ringtone messages, [NCOC messaging](https://www.dawn.com/news/1629257/ncoc-launches-video-to-convince-people-for-vaccination) had a major impact on how society began to follow social distancing and mask-wearing. Lesson: official communication delivers when it is focused on a clear outcome and is powered by multi-platform distribution and relaying.

8- Centre is critical even in a devolved system. Many countries, including India, floundered in their efforts against the pandemic because they lacked a central hub for all activities. NCOC showed that a strong central platform can knit the federating units together without disturbing the devolution of powers. Lesson: Don’t be afraid of the centre.

9- Bring in the specialists. The age of generalists should draw to a close. NCOC brought in the specialists to advise the leadership and they made good decisions. It is a model worth replicating in various departments for specific challenges. Lesson: Reforming the bureaucracy is now essential.

10- Governance matters. Lesson: Governance matters.

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