

South Korea's COVID-19 Success: The Role of Advance Preparations

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South Korea has been successful in the containment and management of the spread of the first wave of COVID-19. An early surge in the number of cases in Daegu briefly made South Korea the country with the second largest number of cases back in February. Five months since news of the COVID-19 pandemic emerged from China in late December 2019, however, South Korea is widely seen as a model for dealing with this crisis. Advance preparation has been key in this success. What steps has South Korea taken over the years to prepare itself to deal with pandemics and other emergencies?

The story of South Korea's preparations to deal with COVID-19 goes back to two recent failures. In 2015, South Korea suffered an outbreak of the MERS coronavirus. Initially, the country was unable to control it. Eventually, 38 people died – the biggest toll outside of Saudi Arabia, where MERS originated. One year earlier, the *MS Sewol* ferry had sank, killing 304 people. Seoul's failure during the MERS outbreak led to a rethinking about how to prepare for a future outbreak. Meanwhile, this failure together with the *MS Sewol* tragedy resulted in a reconsideration of how to prepare for emergency management more broadly.

One of the key changes introduced by Seoul was the re-structuring of the emergency management and communication institutional setting. The multi-layered nature of South Korea's political system meant potential clashes between the central,

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provincial and local governments. It was unclear who was responsible for what in case of emergency. Equally relevant, communication with the medical services, police, fire services, coast guard and, if necessary, the military was poor. It became clear that it was necessary to develop a clear chain of command centralised communication system.

Focusing on pandemics, South Korea introduced changes to the Infectious Disease Prevention and

Control Act and updated its counter-pandemic playbook – the *Infectious Disease Disaster: Crisis Management Standard Manual*. Among others, these changes made clear the need to establish a central government task force in case of a potential pandemic and, crucially, gave full authority to Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) to centralise control. KCDC is an agency under the Ministry of Health and Welfare. It was heavily criticised in the post-MERS investigation. But it was reformed rather than disbanded. The rationale was that the KCDC would be best placed to address any future pandemic. This approach has been vindicated during the COVID-19 outbreak. As a result, KCDC is to be upgraded to the Disease Control and Prevention Administration – with greater independence and expertise.

The Emergency Operation Centre (EOC) was set up as part of KCDC in January 2016; i.e., only a few months after the MERS outbreak. The EOC is in charge of information gathering and dissemination, and, in case of an outbreak, emergency response. As soon as news of a new infectious disease started to come out of Wuhan in December, the EOC started to assume command and control of the situation. KCDC thus became the focal point of South Korea's response to COVID-19, including management, communication with health centres, disease control, epidemiological investigation or disinfection. In other words, KCDC is essentially managing South Korea's response to COVID-19. Its director, Jung Eun-kyeong, has even become a celebrity in the country thanks to her daily briefings.

In terms of communication, Seoul started to install the Korea Safe-Net in 2018 – a disaster and safety communications network managed by the Ministry of Interior and Safety. Korea Safe-Net started to be activated earlier this year. Making use of wireless technologies, Korea Safe-Net is an intra-net allowing real-time communication between all layers of government, medical services, the forces in charge of dealing with an emergency, and utility companies. Korea Safe-Net has allowed

for smooth internal communication among these institutions, in sharp contrast to poor communications during the *MS Sewol* ferry and MERS crises.

Another key change introduced as a result of the MERS outbreak was to boost the resilience of the healthcare system. One of the biggest failures of South Korea's response to MERS was that medical centres served as transmission hotspots. As a result, the South Korean public became wary of going to medical centres in case they became infected there. Also, healthcare professionals became infected themselves. Had the MERS outbreak become bigger, this could have incapacitated a substantial number of healthcare professionals just as they were most needed. The clinical response to MERS would thus have become more difficult.

Following from MERS, South Korea boosted its stockpile of PPE and surgical masks to protect healthcare professionals. The number of ICUs was increased, as was the number of negative-pressure isolation rooms. Importantly, Seoul also launched a training programme to develop an infectious disease expert network. And preparations were made to temporarily boost healthcare and administrative professionals in case of pandemic, to strengthen the clinical response. The objective was to ensure that the pandemic did not overwhelm the healthcare system as well as, crucially, to allow for other medical procedures and treatments to continue.

These measures have served South Korea's healthcare system to continue to operate without major problems during the current coronavirus pandemic. The Moon Jae-in government has introduced other measures such as allowing phone and by proxy medical services or engaging in cooperation with private hospitals to boost capacity. But the seeds for the healthcare system's resilience were planted following from the MERS outbreak.

The last key change introduced following from the

MERS, and *MS Sewol*, crises was a move towards greater transparency and communication with the public. The central government was accused of poor communication during these crises. This has changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. President Moon, Director Jung and other government officials and specialised agency managers have been giving regular information to the public.

Furthermore, technology has played a crucial role in enhancing transparency during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was another lesson learnt from previous crises. Considering that South Korea is one of the most connected countries in the world, there was a realisation that there was scope for using technology to communicate swiftly with the population. Thus, during the current pandemic, contact tracing app

Corona 100m has served to inform the population if they have been close to a confirmed COVID-19 case. Meanwhile, the Public Distributed Mask Information system has been used for mask availability information dissemination – this way avoiding mask panic buying. Therefore, technology has served to boost transparency.

South Korea, in other words, started to prepare for the next pandemic as soon as the MERS outbreak came under control. What is more, it has spent years preparing to manage emergencies, following from the *MS Sewol* ferry sinking. Advance preparations have been key to explain Seoul's success in managing the current coronavirus pandemic. With the real possibility of a second and potentially more waves of COVID-19 in the coming months, these preparations should continue to serve South Korea well.

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