

PRE-ANNOUNCEMENT

PRE-ANNOUNCEMENT CALL FOR PROPOSALS - Building an evidence base and lessons learned for future preparedness

BELSPO is launching in the second half of April a call for proposals in close collaboration with the FPS Health, Food Chain Safety and Environment for the Belgian scientific community. The objective is to build up a scientific corpus around the societal consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, that will enable the federal government to draw lessons for the future. The way in which the scientific results will be communicated and discussed with the stakeholders (of which the federal level is the most important) is of crucial importance in this appeal. This call focusses on 4 main themes for which knowledge needs exist:

1. Well-being:
2. Inequalities and Vulnerabilities:
3. Democratic Governance:
4. Pandemic Intelligence:

The exact content of the knowledge needs will be detailed in the information file on the website of the programme (under construction). Pure virological or clinical research are not within the scope of this particular call. This call is open to a wide array of disciplines/research such as; criminology, epidemiology, sociology, economics, communication sciences, political sciences, philosophy, history, pedagogy, psychology,...

An Information session will be held online at the end of April 2023.

Budget: 7 000 000 € (Of which 5 million for the first three themes, and 2 million for Pandemic Intelligence)

Calendar (provisional):

- Launch of the call: second half of April - Provisional
- Information session: 26 April 2023 @10:00
- Pre-proposal: 17/05/2023 @ 14:00
- Full proposals: 06/07/2023 @ 14:00
- Evaluation: July - September 2023
- Communication of results: November 2023
- Start of projects: December 2023

PRE-ANNOUNCEMENT OPROEP TOT VOORSTELLEN - Opbouwen van een kennisbasis en lessen uit het verleden voor toekomstige paraatheid

BELSPO lanceert in de tweede helft van April een oproep tot voorstellen in nauwe samenwerking met de FOD Volksgezondheid, Veiligheid van de Voedselketen en Leefmilieu voor de Belgische wetenschappelijke gemeenschap. Het doel is een wetenschappelijk corpus op te bouwen rond de maatschappelijke gevolgen van de COVID-19 pandemie, waaruit de federale regering lessen kan trekken voor de toekomst. De wijze waarop de wetenschappelijke resultaten zullen worden gecommuniceerd en besproken met de stakeholders (waarvan het federale niveau de belangrijkste is) is van het grootste belang in deze oproep. Deze oproep focust zich op 4 hoofdthema's waarvoor kennisbehoeften bestaan:

1. Welzijn
2. Ongelijkheden en kwetsbaarheden
3. Democratisch Bestuur
4. Pandemic Intelligence

Puur virologisch en klinisch onderzoek behoort niet tot de scope van deze oproep. Deze oproep staat open voor een breed scala van disciplines/onderzoek zoals; criminologie, epidemiologie, sociologie, economie, communicatiewetenschappen, politieke wetenschappen, filosofie, geschiedenis, pedagogie, psychologie,...

Een informatie sessie zal gehouden worden online op het einde van april 2023.

Budget: 7 000 000 € (Waarvan 5 miljoen voor de eerste drie thema's, en 2 miljoen voor Pandemic Intelligence)

Kalender (Onder voorbehoud):

- Lancering van de oproep: tweede helft van april – Onder voorbehoud
- Informatie sessie: 26 April 2023 @10:00
- Pre-proposal: 17/05/2023 @ 14:00
- Full proposals: 06/07/2023 @ 14:00
- Evaluatie: juli-september 2023
- Communicatie van de resultaten: November 2023
- Start projecten: December 2023

PREANNONCE D'UN APPEL À PROPOSITIONS – Construire une base de connaissance pour tirer les leçons pour se préparer pour le futur

Belspo informe qu'il lancera, en étroite collaboration avec le SPF Santé publique, un appel à propositions auprès de la communauté scientifique belge dans la seconde moitié du mois d'avril 2023. Il s'agit de constituer un corpus scientifique solides autour des conséquences sociétales de la crise Covid qui permettra au gouvernement fédéral de tirer les leçons pour le futur. La manière dont les résultats scientifiques seront communiqués et discutés avec les parties prenantes (dont le niveau fédéral au premier chef) prend dans cet appel une importance capitale. Cet appel est centré sur 4 thématiques pour lesquels des besoins de connaissance existent :

1. Bien-être ;
2. Inégalités et vulnérabilités
3. Gouvernance démocratique
4. Pandemic intelligence

Notons que des recherches virologiques ou des études cliniques ne sont pas dans le scope de cet appel. Cet appel est ouvert à un large éventail de disciplines/recherches telles que la criminologie, l'épidémiologie, la sociologie, l'économie, les sciences de la communication, les sciences politiques, la philosophie, l'histoire, la pédagogie, la psychologie, etc.

Une session d'information pour les répondants potentiels est prévue fin avril.

Budget : 7 000 000€ (5 mio est réservé aux trois premiers thèmes tandis que 2 moi seront consacrés au dernier thème)

Le calendrier (provisionnel):

Lancement de l'appel : la seconde moitié d'Avril – Provisionnel

- Session d'information : 26 April 2023 @10:00
- Introductions pré-propositions : 17/05/2023 @ 14:00
- Introduction propositions complètes : 06/07/2023 @ 14:00
- Evaluation : Juillet - Septembre 2023
- Communication de la sélection : Novembre 2023
- Démarrage des projets : Décembre 2023

CONTACT - POST-COVID@belspo.be

SCOPE OF THE CALL

Attention: the scope could be subject to (small) changes after the Council of Ministers

COVID is not behind us, but the turmoil of the crisis is. When it burst out in early 2020, it immediately created a wave that shook the world and the Belgian society in all its aspects. This call for proposals will not aim at unravelling all the possible aspects of the COVID crisis but it will focus on 4 main themes.

1. Well-being
2. Inequalities and vulnerabilities
3. Democratic governance
4. Pandemic Intelligence

While a wealth of scientific evidence and data has been generated in many areas of the COVID crisis, these topics present knowledge needs for the federal level. The Belgian research community is invited to produce robust scientific information on these topics (see their full description below).

The OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) has at the request of the federal government worked on an independent audit of the Belgian responses to the corona crisis. This report will reveal key findings and recommendations for future preparedness. This report creates potential for knowledge and/or data exchange. Applicants are invited to take note of this report that is expected by the end of the year.

We insist that it is paramount in this programme that the generated scientific corpus is communicated in appropriate format to non-scientific stakeholders (including the federal level in the first place) and discussed with said stakeholders in order to produce lessons learned and recommendations for federal decision-making, supporting preparedness for the future.

The 3 first themes are closely intertwined. Therefore, applicants can either choose to examine a specific topic within the theme it belongs to or investigate it across the different themes. And finally, note that virological and clinical research topics are not within the scope of this call.

A budget of 7 million € is dedicated to this call: 5 million € for the first three topics and 2 million € for topic 4 (Pandemic Intelligence).

1. WELL-BEING

CONTEXT

The COVID-19 pandemic and the measures taken to combat it, had a fundamental impact on the well-being of the population in many ways. An accurate understanding of the positive and/or negative changes and/or evolution in well-being, the aspects that led to these changes and the consequences of these changes in well-being in the short and especially the long term, is a necessary step to advance our understanding and draw lessons for the future.

SCOPE

Well-being is a very broad concept. We invite the scientific community to specifically focus their proposals on the following dimensions:

The impact of the COVID crisis on the mental well-being of the population in the face of restrictions to freedom (such as lockdowns) requires to be appraised in breadth, width, and intensity by research. The impact of prolonged confinement, in addition to the death of relatives and increased social adversity, might have led, for a portion of the population to psychological adverse effects and intense emotional adjustment reactions that potentially increased the risk of emotional disturbance, anxiety, depression, low mood, irritability, insomnia, and post-traumatic stress symptoms. Substance use (illicit, but also tobacco, alcohol, gambling...) is also an issue that came up during COVID which we need more evidence on. Some of these effects might be persisting still

today. Research can also have a closer look at those who did not (or hardly) suffer(ed) from mental adversities during and/or after the pandemic and showed a resilience capacity.

Beyond individual mental reactions, we are also interested in unveiling the impact of COVID and of the restrictive measures on our interpersonal relations and dynamics, as they had to be recomposed inside and outside the so-called household bubble. What should we learn from restricting the population to a small bubble? Topics such as family reconnection, parental stress, domestic violence, the lived experience of each member of the bubble... need further investigation. Outside the bubble, the restrictions on our social life affected our inter-personal relations. Socialisation and in-person social interactions were deeply affected in ways that we need to better understand. Additionally, many important moments in life such as births, deaths, marriages etc., and the (often) associated rituals usually shared with family, friends and acquaintances, could not proceed or happened in isolation and/or in reduced capacity. In this respect, how has COVID affected the lived experience of loneliness, of dealing with mourning and grief, of changes in socialization, on the impact on friendships and other types of relationships?

In terms of wellbeing and the associated sub-themes, we should draw a specific focus on situation of populations in specific settings. Retirement homes for instance were particularly affected by the COVID crisis, because of the high death toll, but also because the older residents suffered from isolation and quarantine measures. The impact from being cut off from the regular social and family contact, deserves to be appraised by research. Similarly, to older people, this analysis could also cover other subpopulations living in specific settings (for example children and adults with – severe - disabilities in healthcare facilities for example).

Specific groups of people experienced the COVID crisis and the associated measures differently than other groups, in potentially adverse or positive ways that should be studied in this programme. In terms of gender, women and men might have experienced the same measures in different ways. In terms of age groups, children and youths seem to have been impacted differently than adults. For them, the onset of the pandemic meant a sudden departure from their familiar environment and schedule. This meant a removal and/or break from their typical school routine, free time occupation (sports, music, art, youth movement...), family life, social engagement with peers, etc. These impacts could have influenced their long-term well-being in various ways such as disengagement, learning deficits, altered relationships with family and friends, digital activities, altered mental well-being ...

The relation to work, which massively entered the virtual sphere for a large portion of workers, requires further analysis in terms of the impact on the well-being of the population concerned: aspects such as burnouts, (lack of or changes in) interactions with colleagues, changes in the work-life balance, stress related to remote work, to employment and financial (in)security, and work satisfaction deserve to be considered in research proposals.

We are also interested to know more on the way the COVID crisis might have affected our values, norms, lifestyles and the way we see our own well-being. Have we changed the way we consider our own health, selfcare and the health system in general? What is the impact of COVID on this notion and how has it evolved? Is well-being considered as a collective or more individual concept and has the pandemic altered this idea? What is the importance of well-being relative to other objectives and/or aspects of life and how has it evolved and/or changed? Was the COVID crisis a moment where people revised the way they engage with their family and the balance with work, their community, reconnected to nature, engaged more in sport, reconsidered their lifestyles and ways of consuming (more local, more digital, healthier?), reconnected with their cultural heritage?

The well-being of the health workforce deserves special attention in this call as the COVID has put this category under enormous stress. Their changing working conditions and how they adapted, the stress (inside their family life as well), the psychological impact (e.g. PTSD, anxiety, burnout & stress), job satisfaction need to be scrutinised and lessons drawn for the future.

The effect on mental health services can also be examined with regards to accessibility and availability of the mental health services, the use of helplines, children and adolescent mental health care, and the stigma surrounding mental health care, etc.

2. INEQUALITIES AND VULNERABILITIES

CONTEXT

The closing of large parts of the economy during the crisis impacted to a larger extent on workers with a weaker social profile and working in sectors with a lower quality of jobs. Also, the self-employed were heavily hit by the closure of their businesses. Due to the automatic stabilizers and their bold extension and additional measures, this did ultimately not result in an increase in inequality and poverty. On the contrary, due to the short-time work scheme employment rates remained relatively stable and started to increase again in 2022. Furthermore, data point to a decrease in the at-risk-of-poverty rate in 2020, the first COVID year. Notwithstanding these positive overall outcomes there remain important blind spots regarding the social impact of the COVID-crisis.

SCOPE

Preparing future crises, but also in view of improving social cohesion in non-crisis times, more knowledge is required on:

- Recently data came available on the second ‘COVID-year’, 2021. The overall results point to a rather stable overall level, however, there seem to be some increases in the poverty rate for more vulnerable groups. It would be relevant to explore further the evolution of poverty and inequality during the second COVID year;
- The situation of very marginalised categories such as homeless persons and non-registered migrants and refugees, especially during lock-down periods;
- The characteristics and situation of categories who fell between the mazes of the different – extended-protection schemes. It would also be interesting to explore the (non) take up of the different crisis measures and to assess what can be learned from this (non) take up for actual policy making;
- The transitions between temporary unemployment and work: what was the longer-term impact on job security? and what was the longer-term impact for the self-employed?
- It would also be useful to analyse in more detail the efficiency of protective measures: the support to households (and businesses and companies) has been quick and massive. It is likely that in some respects there might have been overshoots. Identifying ways to target support better in crisis situations would be an important lesson.
- Another area for research is to better understand the way the digital divide has potentially exacerbated existing inequalities between skilled workers (who engaged proportionally more in telework?), and lower-skilled workers (who were more prone to job losses or reduction in hours and adapted working environments – masks, Plexiglas...?). Workers were also divided along new lines: between essential and non-essential workers, teleworkable and non-teleworkable workers. In other words, we want to know whether COVID has increased vulnerabilities on the workplace and whether these might persist.

3. DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

CONTEXT

The management of the COVID crisis has proved how hard it can be for governments (in Belgium and elsewhere) to maintain public trust and to explain democratic governance when taking hard restrictions to civil rights in an emergency situation.

SCOPE

Scientific evidence on the reasons behind adherence to- or desistance from sanitary measures, (dis)trust in public discourse and governmental communication is needed. In this vein, research could also examine the link between temporary derogations from civil liberties and individual rights in the context of emergency measures, and the framing of populist and extremist discourses.

The role of social media in this crisis is also a topic for research. Have social platforms, by trapping people in ideological “echo-chambers”, fostered polarisation, radicalisation and the spread of misinformation and ‘fake’ news to counter official policies and scientific discourse? Has COVID been a moment of acceleration in these processes and were certain people affected more or less than others?

Research can also contribute to understand public opinion on scientific discourse and the public’s perception of its uptake in public policies and in official communication. Furthermore, the (changing) role of the different

government administrations within the context of pandemic uncertainty and public trust in these institutions can be scrutinized.

Overcoming the COVID crisis was also partly the achievement of the collaboration of European member States and the European Commission. However, this was not done without pervasive tensions: while some recognised the need for enhanced cooperation and solidarity across borders, other fall back on a reductionist vision of the nation-state to solve the problem. Research can help build knowledge on the role of international and European cooperation for national governments to overcome the COVID crisis and for other (potential) large-scale crisis in the (near) future.

4. PANDEMIC INTELLIGENCE

CONTEXT

The COVID-19 pandemic shook the world and taught us that a strong government is important to properly address a health crisis. A strong government also implies a strong scientific basis ('evidence-based') to legitimise the policies pursued. The FPS Public Health recently took stock before the House of Representatives and proposes reforms in the management and organisation of our crisis capacity in the health pillar. Thus, the main expertise in crisis management and emergency medical assistance will be brought together within one Directorate-General at the FPS Public Health. In addition, intense cooperation with the federal states will be pursued.

In the framework of further development of the preparedness capacity, the identification of risks, their assessment, and prioritisation is essential. Systematic evaluations of health risks are currently carried out by the 'RAG', with the new Strategic Scientific Committee (SSC) providing strategic scientific advice from a broad public health perspective, which creates a robust basis for the RMG to fine-tune concrete measures.

But this is not sufficient. In addition to the structural embedding of a number of expert groups, training and research should focus more than before on 'public health'. Consolidating and broadening 'surveillance' and developing a broader 'pandemic intelligence' network are also important components of our capacity to cope with future crises.

SCOPE

Further analysis is needed on how to strengthen 'epidemic intelligence' in the context of future pandemic preparedness, and the first concrete steps towards a structural network should be taken. This requires a long-term vision in which (1) the various sub-fields of epidemiology and health crisis management should be given more attention in various training courses; and (2) a network structure between the expertise in government and at universities and knowledge institutes nationally and internationally is created and in which the limited resources for scientific activities in this policy-relevant domain are used efficiently.

Primary and secondary questions have been established related to this theme. Primary questions:

- Based on policy 'lessons learned' and international benchmarking, what are the possible conceptual and structural options for the expansion and development of a 'pandemic intelligence' network or consortium in Belgium?
- Based on a number of criteria, what is the proven expertise at knowledge institutions in Belgium and what are the missing gaps to be developed in this domain (based also on international benchmarking)? How could this be solved concretely?
- What are the organisational, legal and financial aspects that need to be taken into account? This also entails the (substantiated) proposal of necessary scientific processes regarding consensus or decision-making, validation, transparency of levels of evidence and the policy on conflicts of interest and scientific publications.
- What are the necessary structural partnerships with European/international organisations?
- Secondary questions:
 - What governance structure should be used for this purpose, taking into account the division of authorities?
 - How is 'multidisciplinary' scientific cooperation best defined in this domain and what is the role of academia in this?

- Which evaluation and monitoring system is best suited to monitor the performance of such a network?
- Are there good examples of communication strategy? What channels are available or should be developed?