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- The Cabinet and the House of Representatives of the States General  
CC: The Senate of the States General

**Subject** Overarching lessons of COVID-19 investigation

Dear Ms Bergkamp, Dear Mr Rutte,

The Dutch Safety Board has completed its investigation into the Dutch government's approach to the COVID-19 crisis. Having published the first two sub-reports in 2022, we now send you the final report. The first two reports looked back at specific periods and themes of the COVID-19 crisis. The third report investigates how the government managed risks to public health and safety throughout the crisis period as a whole.

### **Purpose of this letter**

While steps in the right direction have already been taken in response to the conclusions and recommendations of the first two sub-reports, the Dutch Safety Board urges the government to make substantial improvements to be better prepared for another protracted crisis. To this end, in this letter we list five key overarching lessons for handling a future protracted crisis with national impact. We derive these lessons from the conclusions and recommendations of the three sub-reports.

The decision to launch a parliamentary inquiry into the handling of the COVID-19 crisis has been postponed, pending the Dutch Safety Board's third investigation report. This letter contains a number of questions which, in the opinion of the Safety Board, lend themselves well to being raised in such an inquiry, should the House of Representatives decide to conduct one. We will indicate those instances where this is specifically relevant in the lessons in this letter.

### **The importance of learning from the COVID-19 crisis**

Serious incidents occur quite frequently that require a great deal of attention from the emergency services and public administration for a short time and are marked by great intensity. Practical experience – combined with drills, evaluations and scientific knowledge development – ensures that the Netherlands generally knows how to manage a short-term crisis.

But things are different when managing a protracted crisis that has socially disruptive consequences. The COVID-19 crisis was unique in both severity and scale. This crisis that lasted for over two years, flared up repeatedly and for many people still is not over. The crisis affected all of society and many people suffered. The drills and preparedness plans were inadequate for a crisis of this scale and duration, meaning that the approach largely had to be developed during the crisis. All those who contributed to this deserve a great deal of respect. And they also deserve recognition for having been pioneers for a reason.

The Safety Board considers it conceivable that another protracted, society-disrupting crisis will occur in the coming years. The disruption of nature (extreme instances of drought, flooding, heat, storms, fires), our digital vulnerability, the warnings of new pandemics and war on the European continent fuel this thought. Any of these factors could lead to another protracted crisis and once again bring with them the obligation to formulate, interpret and incorporate the lessons learnt from the COVID-19 crisis when preparing for future protracted crises.

### **Five overarching lessons**

Based on our investigation into the approach to the COVID-19 crisis, five overarching lessons relevant to a future long-term crisis with national impact can be identified.

#### 1 - Ensure a broad approach<sup>1</sup>

Almost every crisis emerges from a specific case, for example a health incident, a defence incident or a cyber incident. In traditional crisis management, it is common practice to make major incidents small and manageable as quickly as possible. But in the event of a protracted crisis, this is not appropriate. As a crisis persists and so affects a wider group or region – or even the whole country – more and more sectors of society are affected. Keeping the crisis small and manageable will then no longer work. The crisis will have a wide range of consequences that go beyond the severity of the initial problems. Controllability will decrease with each new development.

It is therefore important that those responsible for crisis management regularly review the demarcation of the crisis in the light of current developments and adjust or broaden it where necessary. Ensure that information and advice contribute to that “broad view” in order to avoid tunnel vision, so that there is always room to get the broader development of the crisis into focus – especially at the highest political or policy level. This could be done by, for example, actively or proactively seeking information and advice based on the scenarios created.

This also entails that the Minister in whose policy area the crisis initially arises will not take and maintain the lead alone, but that the Cabinet as a whole, led by the Prime Minister, exercises broad control over the crisis.

#### 2 - Invest in scenario-based thinking<sup>2</sup>

The COVID-19 crisis has poignantly demonstrated how unpredictable a crisis can be. It takes time to recognize what is going on, what starting points there are to manage the crisis and what expertise and resources are needed. An important tool here is scenario-based thinking, even in situations of high uncertainty.

Scenario-based thinking prevents the crisis approach from being fully directed by a single scenario, which may later turn out to be too one-sided or even a miscalculation. Scenario-based thinking also promotes calm and taking a broader view in crisis management, especially at the policy level. It furthermore helps in making appropriate choices (with regard to measures, resources required, advice to be sought, etc.). Scenarios enable those responsible for crisis management to weigh up all interests and gain insight into what a choice made in the present will mean for the possibility (or impossibility) of making different choices in crisis management later on.

In making these choices, values are weighed against each other. That element specifically lends itself to political debate and accountability. Therein lies a role for Parliament during a protracted crisis. This requires a willingness on Parliament's part to keep thinking about the future of the crisis even at times

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<sup>1</sup> This overarching lesson is consistent with recommendations 2, 5, 6 and 7 from the first sub-report and with recommendations 1 and 2 from the third sub-report.

<sup>2</sup> This overarching lesson is consistent with recommendations 1 and 3 from the first sub-report and with recommendation 3 from the third sub-report.

when the hectic events of the day dominate the social debate. This issue could be raised in a parliamentary inquiry.

### 3 - Opt for an independent information and advisory function (within the crisis organization)<sup>3</sup>

The COVID-19 crisis has shown that a protracted crisis is characterized not only by its duration, but also by the unknown. Sometimes, drastic choices have to be made on the basis of limited information. Sound information (based on data) and adequate expert advice are essential.

Anyone who bears responsibility for dealing with a crisis will tend to seek information and advice that are instrumental to managing the situation at the current time, in the current situation. This means that both information and expert advice quickly take on a pragmatic function, as they start to focus on how the crisis is manifested and must be countered at that time. This creates the risk of focusing on the (limited) issues of the moment, instead of on the breadth and development of the crisis.

The COVID-19 crisis has shown that the information and advisory function must be organized in such a way that the breadth and future development of the crisis also remain in view, especially for those who oversee the whole from an operational and policy perspective. In such cases, it will help if information and advice are created and provided by persons and agencies that are free from those who are steering the crisis management (or a part thereof). An independent information and advice function will increase the likelihood that unfavourable or contradictory advice and information will also be accorded room across the crisis management.

The Cabinet would be wise to explore how, including in the event of a protracted crisis, an independent information and advice function could be incorporated in the Ministerial Committee for Crisis Management.

### 4 - Ensure a sharp distinction between policy-based management and operational management<sup>4</sup>

Several organizations contribute to a crisis organization. There is an important distinction to be made between operational management and policy-based management of a crisis. It is important to distinguish clearly between these roles when fulfilling them.

Well-trained professionals “on the street” or “at the bedside” can fulfil their roles in tackling the crisis in practice. Those who are responsible politically will – as part of the democratic process – steer the crisis management in broad terms and make adjustments where necessary. While it is vital to keep in touch with each other (for example, to be able to base policy choices on implementation dilemmas and voices from the field), those with political responsibility would be wise to keep a certain distance from operational management. Too much interference in the execution, too many decisions at a detailed level, too much accountability for everything that goes right – and especially for what goes wrong – can lead to a hefty time commitment, displacement of the professionalism of those operationally involved and a lack of oversight and time for thinking in scenarios.

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<sup>3</sup> This overarching lesson is consistent with recommendations 4 and 9 from the first sub-report, with recommendations 3 and 7 from the second sub-report, and with recommendation 5 from the third sub-report.

<sup>4</sup> This overarching lesson is consistent with recommendations 4 and 5 from the second sub-report.

If there is too much hands-on action by political administrators, Parliament may be tempted to scrutinize the Cabinet at the same level of detail. Too much discussion at a detailed level can cause other issues, which particularly require political dialogue and decision-making, to fade into the background. Think of the quick resolution of important dilemmas in the crisis approach (for example, discussions on privacy or on fundamental rights), prioritization of specific (population) groups in the crisis approach (for example, in vaccination campaigns or evacuations) or validation of scenarios and policies applied by the government, including any value positions taken.

The relationship between the Cabinet and Parliament, the nature of parliamentary scrutiny (especially its level of detail) and the provision of information by the Cabinet to Parliament are topics that lend themselves to further investigation during a possible parliamentary inquiry.

#### 5 - Include people when difficult choices are made<sup>5</sup>

Unlike during a short-term crisis, during a long-term crisis every Dutch resident turns into an expert by experience. A protracted crisis manifests itself in so many areas of life that everyone experiences exactly what the crisis means for them in one way or another. Based on their daily experiences and perception, people develop their own insights into and opinions on crisis management, which they take into account in their actions. These actions have an impact not only on themselves, but also on those around them and as such on the course of the crisis as a whole.

During a short-term crisis, where human lives are at risk, communication is often direct and one-sided, with those countering the crisis saying what needs to be done as they quickly need to provide people with clarity in the concrete danger situation. In a protracted crisis, this does not work and may even be counterproductive. As people's knowledge and involvement in the crisis increases, new measures or decisions – which may sometimes contradict earlier measures and decisions – will require additional explanation. This is because, over time, people themselves have accumulated information, experiences and expectations, which need to be adjusted or abandoned when new measures are proclaimed. This requires more extensive – and different – communication than merely providing information.

Support for crisis policy is essential to the mental resilience required to weather a protracted crisis together. To maintain support, it is necessary to include people in the considerations made, the goals pursued and the dilemmas underlying a choice in addition to their own experiences and opinions. People want to hear the complete story, even if it is less attractive. This contributes to their support.

#### **In conclusion**

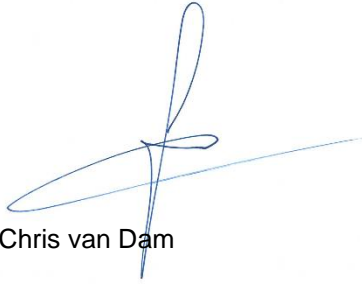
These are five key overarching lessons that the Dutch Safety Board wishes to share with you, based on the investigation into the handling of the COVID-19 crisis. These lessons are drawn from the conclusions and recommendations of the three sub-reports. We believe it is important for the Cabinet to act on these lessons and the recommendations on which they are based. The Netherlands must prepare better for another protracted crisis with nationwide impact. There is no time to put this off any longer. We hope that the contents of this letter will aid the House of Representatives in the decision-making process concerning conducting a parliamentary inquiry. Of course, we would be very happy to provide further explanation of this letter.

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<sup>5</sup> This overarching lesson is consistent with recommendation 10 from the first sub-report, with recommendation 4 from the second sub-report and with recommendation 4 from the third sub-report.

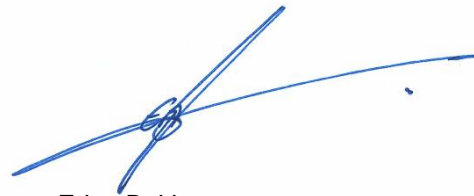
To this day, many people suffer from the medical, social and economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many people all over the country have made tremendous efforts to contain that crisis – in healthcare, in education, by entrepreneurs, by young people, in ministries, in Parliament and in the Cabinet, to name but a few. Everything the Safety Board brings up in its reports on the COVID-19 crisis must be considered against the backdrop of that enormous and admirable effort and the suffering done.

Respectfully yours,



Chris van Dam

Chairman,  
Dutch Safety Board



Erica Bakkum

Member,  
Dutch Safety Board