

Public & Social Sector Practice

Collaboration in crisis: Reflecting on Australia's COVID-19 response

Australia's response to the COVID-19 pandemic to date offers valuable, actionable insights for decision makers worldwide.

by Jenny Child, Roland Dillon, Eija Erasmus, and Jacob Johnson



Build trust, use data, collaborate well. As countries the world over face down the health, social, and economic challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, we consider these three principles as key to the success of Australia in its fight against the pandemic so far.

With a population of around 25 million, Australia has experienced lower infection and death rates than many comparable OECD countries, with just 27,912 confirmed cases and 908 deaths as of December 1, 2020.¹ Its economic downturn during the pandemic has also been less pronounced than in many comparable economies, and it is now moving into a “COVID normal” phase of recovery. As we suggest in this article, Australia’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic to date offers valuable, actionable insights for decision makers elsewhere in the world.

Australia’s success in containing the pandemic can be attributed in part to structural advantages that are not necessarily replicable, including the country’s position as an island nation, which makes it relatively easy to close borders. But the country’s response has also been characterized by effective actions, policies, and leadership practices—implemented through strong collaboration between the public and private sectors—that are transferable and repeatable elsewhere.

To distill the lessons for decision makers, we spoke to dozens of public- and private-sector leaders responsible for shaping Australia’s COVID-19 response. Three themes emerged as critical enablers of decision making and action:

1. building trust with citizens
2. data-led decision making
3. fostering effective collaboration across boundaries

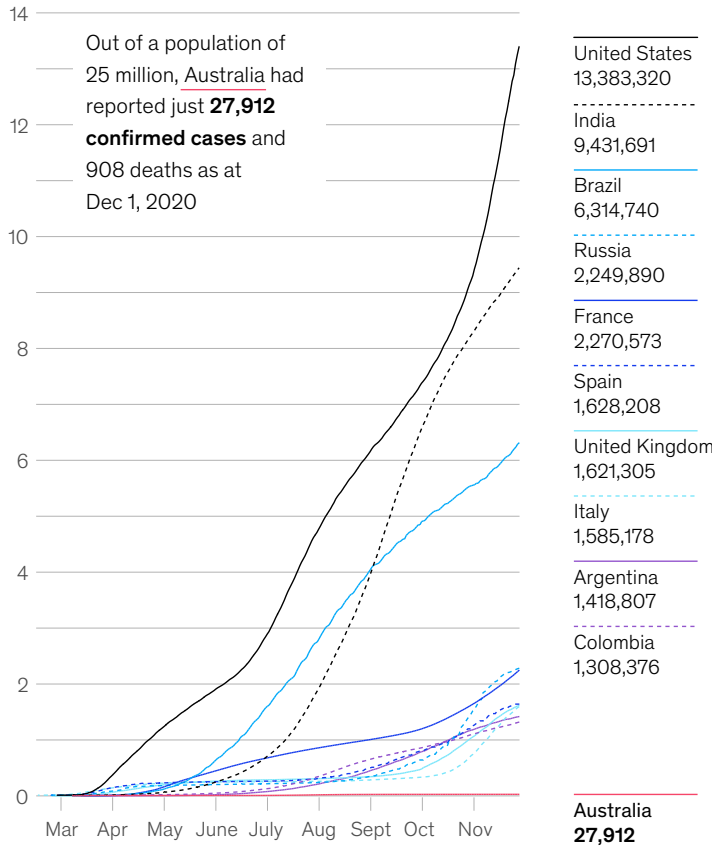
Australian citizens have played a role in the efficacy of the health interventions, and building trust with citizens has been a crucial consideration in decision making and communication regarding the pandemic. A large majority of Australians have, for the most part, adhered to the policies and solutions put forward, such as hotel-quarantine practices, lockdown measures, mask wearing, and rapid testing. While by no means perfect, these approaches proved relatively effective in limiting the infection rate in the early stages of the pandemic, as well as containing subsequent outbreaks in the states of Victoria and South Australia (see sidebar, “Australia’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic: Key facts”) (Exhibit 1).

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¹ “Coronavirus (COVID-19) current situation and case numbers,” Australian Government Department of Health, December 2, 2020, [health.gov.au](https://www.health.gov.au).

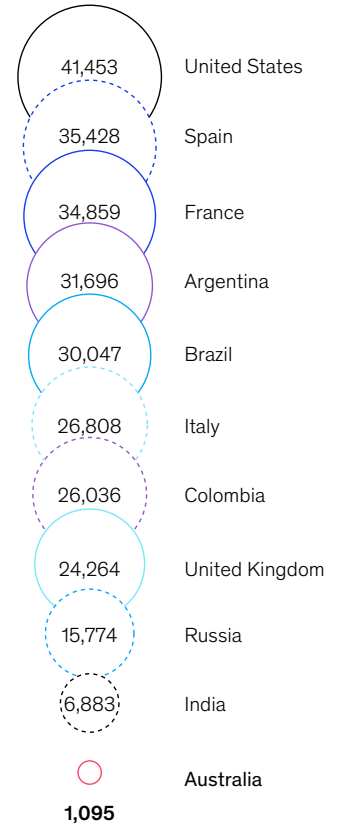
Australia is among a few countries that have experienced lower infection and death rates so far in the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Top ten countries for COVID-19 infections compared to Australia, million (cumulative) to Dec 1, 2020



Source: Johns Hopkins University; McKinsey analysis

COVID-19 cases, number per million to Dec 1, 2020



This article also shines a light on these collaborative actions and the lessons they might hold for other countries. For example, Australia has taken a data-led approach to its pandemic response: it has collated and transparently shared data from multiple sectors to create a single source of truth on which to base decision making. The federal government’s proactive communication and transparency about the data underpinning its decisions helped to build trust between policy makers and citizens. Chief health and medical officers were elevated as trusted sources in the public eye while state leaders were also on the front foot with public-health messaging,

making themselves regularly available for press conferences—often on a daily basis.

Australia also quickly mobilized its best health and economic expertise to advise on decisions at both state and federal levels. Meeting daily, experts developed real-time frameworks and guides for how Australia should respond to the pandemic. On the economic front, Australian financial institutions supplemented government data with anonymized credit- and debit-card-spend data, allowing decision makers to understand and learn from the real-time data the efficacy of stimulus packages.

Australia's response to the COVID-19 pandemic: Key facts

The Australian government moved quickly to contain the spread of COVID-19 by locking down early and closing borders on March 20, 2020. The government imposed a mandatory 14-day quarantine in a designated facility for international arrivals, and by August, more than 130,000 people had returned and been quarantined. The government adopted other measures, such as lockdowns, business shutdowns, physical-distancing restrictions, and investment in telehealth and personal protective equipment. Noncompliance fines for businesses and individuals also played a role, but experience showed that voluntary compliance is ultimately more effective. The measures introduced in

March 2020 had a clear and direct impact on flattening the curve of the first wave, despite the cautions regarding further outbreaks (Exhibit A).

Indeed, just when it seemed that Australia had the pandemic under control—toward the end of June—Australia's second largest state, Victoria, experienced a new outbreak. In response, the state went into a strict lockdown for more than 100 days from July 7. This outbreak resulted in more than 800 deaths, with daily new cases peaking at 687 on August 4, primarily in the main city of Melbourne.¹ After implementing multiple measures in addition to lockdowns—including

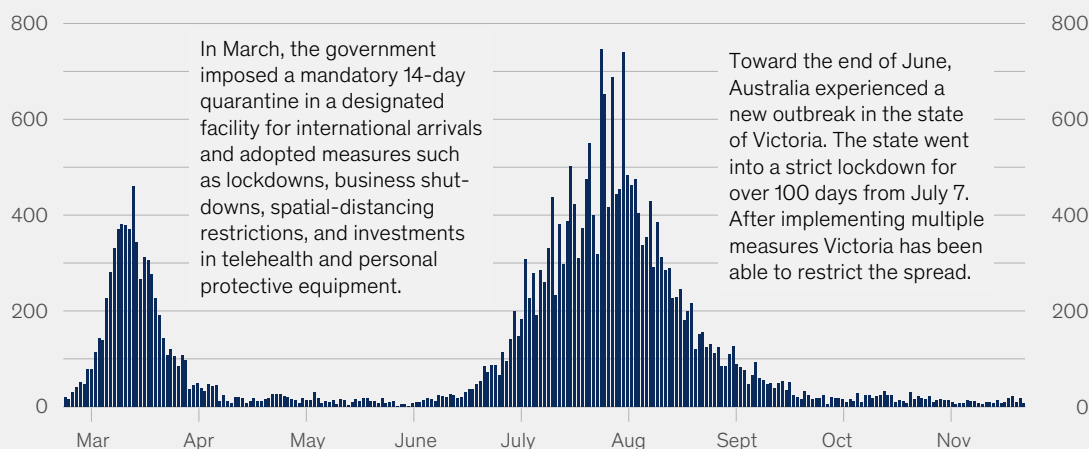
diversion of international flights, mandatory face coverings, and nighttime curfews—Victoria has been able to contain the spread: as of December 1, it had experienced 32 consecutive days with no new cases.²

In mid-November, just as Victoria was experiencing its first weeks with no new cases, South Australia experienced its first outbreak of COVID-19 since the initial wave in April.³ The South Australian government implemented measures to control the spread, including clear communication on at-risk locations and rapid contact tracing, as well as a stay-at-home order imposed on all residents. South Australia also

Exhibit A

The Australian government moved quickly to contain the spread of COVID-19 by locking down early and closing borders on March 20, 2020.

New daily reported cases in Australia, number



Source: Johns Hopkins University; McKinsey analysis

¹ "Victorian coronavirus (COVID-19) data," Department of Health and Human Services, State Government of Victoria, Australia, December 2, 2020, dhhs.vic.gov.au.

² "Coronavirus (COVID-19) daily update," Department of Health and Human Services, State Government of Victoria, Australia, December 2, 2020, dhhs.vic.gov.au.

³ "Dashboard and daily update," Government of South Australia, December 2, 2020, covid19.sa.gov.au.

Australia's response to the COVID-19 pandemic: Key facts (continued)

restricted all inbound international flights, while neighboring states reinstated border closures. Although Australia's eight states and territories are self-governed, and each had different implementation priorities and took different approaches, they were continually able to learn from one another during the pandemic.

To prop up the economy and prevent job losses, the government has carved out AU \$262 billion (US \$190 billion) in total direct support, equivalent to around 13 percent of GDP,⁴ which includes support to individuals and households with extra payments to

businesses, retirees, and the unemployed.⁵ The JobKeeper intervention was established to support business and job survival; as of August 2020, more than 960,000 organizations had signed on to the program, supporting more than 3.5 million individuals.⁶

The private sector played its part, too. For example, the Australian Retailers Association issued guidance to support retailers that were under pressure and ensured the steady supply of essential items to the public.⁷ Banks provided loan- and mortgage-deferral programs directly

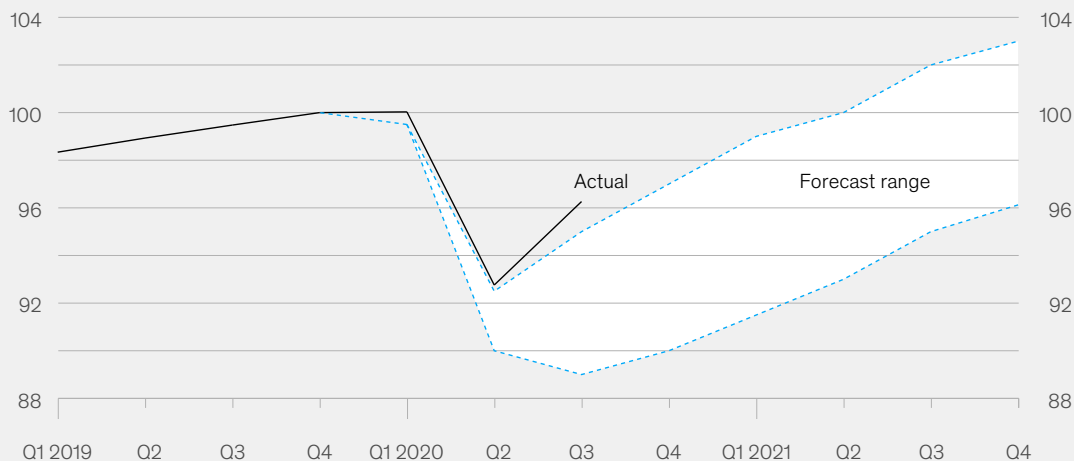
to customers early in the crisis. The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency moved to waive or reimburse fees and charges for registered providers.⁸

Extensive stimulus has supported the Australian economy to rebound quickly (Exhibit B). But the longer-term economic trajectory remains uncertain, as we are yet to see how the economy will respond to the withdrawal of this stimulus or the reversion of consumption patterns to longer-term norms (for example, borders reopening for international travel).

Exhibit B

Australia's economy is bouncing back faster than initially forecasted.

Australian real GDP, index (2019 Q4 = 100)



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics; Reserve Bank of Australia May Statement of Monetary Policy; McKinsey analysis

⁴ *Budget 2020–21*, Commonwealth of Australia, October 6, 2020, budget.gov.au; "COVID-19 Early Release Scheme - Issue 12," Australian Prudential Regulation Authority, July 20, 2020, apra.gov.au; "Economic and Fiscal Update 2020," Australian Capital Territory, August 25, 2020, data.act.gov.au; Caroline Armour, Lucille Danks, Jacob Johnson, Simon Kennedy, Charlie Taylor, and Eleni Watts, "The next normal for Australian industries and workforces," August 2020, McKinsey.com.
⁵ "Supporting individuals and households," Australia Treasury, December 2, 2020, treasury.gov.au.
⁶ "JobKeeper postcode data," Australia Treasury, October 21, 2020, treasury.gov.au; *The JobKeeper payment: Three-month review*, Australia Treasury, July 2020, treasury.gov.au.
⁷ Graham Jackson, "Protecting your business and supply chain from the effects of coronavirus (COVID-19)," Australian Retailers Association, March 18, 2020, blog.retail.org.au.
⁸ "TEQSA will waive or reimburse fees and charges for registered providers," Australia Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, April 23, 2020, teqsa.gov.au.

Australia's pandemic response is now entering a new phase that is more focused on managing localized outbreaks (though with the ever-present threat of reverting to crisis levels) and building up the economy. We believe the country's experience to date provides lessons that can help shape future actions both in Australia and internationally. Drawing any lessons from dealing with the pandemic is certainly done with humility; Australia, like many other countries, has had periods in which things seemed under control, only to experience a resurgence that set new daily records. We also acknowledge that a robust health response was a precondition to the economic response.

Building trust with citizens

Ultimately, slowing the spread of the virus relies on people adhering to good hygiene and physical-distancing practices. Such adherence depends on people having faith in the policy prescriptions of government, as well as the data and information underpinning them. What helped to build that trust in Australia was the unified response to the pandemic from across the private and public sectors—at all levels.

Across the cabinet table and the boardroom, Australia saw new and preexisting leadership teams and decision-making bodies come together in the same (virtual) room to discuss policy and procedures related to the COVID-19 crisis. This allowed for a single conversation, where disagreements or conflicting opinions could be resolved in real time.

Nonpartisan collaboration between state and federal governments

A key feature of Australia's response has been its ability to coordinate a unified national response, while at the same time allowing states to retain autonomy and decision-making powers—and to learn from one another. A notable aspect of this was the newly established National Cabinet, which was convened to act as the preeminent intergovernmental forum coordinating the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and to facilitate collaboration between different levels of government. It was the first such body established in Australia since World War II, and it created an effective environment in which to make decisions and resolve issues as they arose.

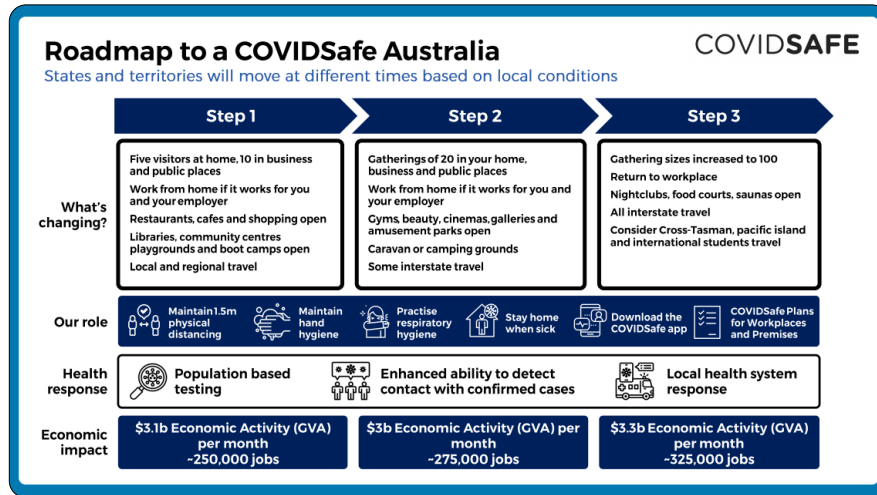
Australia's three-step framework for reopening offers a case in point. While the National Cabinet agreed on the framework, and the federal government set out the general time frame for reopening, exactly what changed and when was at the discretion of the states (Exhibit 2). States have continued to learn from one another, as the federal government has commissioned independent reports published for all leaders and the public to see. These reports, such as the *National review on hotel quarantine* and the *National contact tracing review*, provide a nonpartisan, nongovernmental point of comparison for states so that they can leverage the best practice of others and choose which practices to adopt voluntarily. At the same time, such reports help to instill confidence among the public that the right choices are being made.

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Exhibit 2

Australia’s federal government’s three-step framework sets out a general time frame for reopening.

The 3-step framework deployed in Australia



Source: Reprinted from Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry

As the Australian prime minister said, “There are no blue teams or red teams. There are no more unions or bosses. There are just Australians now ... an Australian national interest and all Australians working together.”²

Australian citizens have embraced that collective effort by acting to safeguard their own well-being and that of their communities. For example, Australians voluntarily reduced movement and tested for the virus in large numbers, despite low prevalence.³ By the time the government ordered nonessential businesses to close on March 25, 2020, movement to public transport stations was already down by more than 50 percent from the baseline across the country.⁴ And, at the time of this article’s publishing, Australia had conducted approximately 10 million tests among the country’s population of 25 million.⁵

Adapting and learning

The urgency of the pandemic response demanded not only fast decision making but, more importantly, constant revisiting and review of those decisions as the situation evolved and more information became available or data changed. As David Thodey, commissioner of the National COVID-19 Coordinating Commission, chair of the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation, and former CEO of Telstra, said:

One of the problems of leadership, political or in large corporations, is that, as a leader, you think you need to have the answers before you start talking and, actually, that’s not true. . . . The first thing is that leaders need to turn up and give confidence that they are working on it. And you need to bring in processes around collection of data to create a single source of the truth. You

² “Press conference - Australian Parliament House, ACT: Transcript,” Prime Minister of Australia, April 2, 2020, pm.gov.au.

³ Jenny Child, Lloyd Colling, Jean-Baptiste Coumau, Rod Farmer, and Dan Feldman, “Emerging from COVID-19: Australians embrace their values,” May 2020, McKinsey.com.

⁴ “COVID-19 Community Mobility Reports,” google.com.

⁵ “Coronavirus (COVID-19) current situation and case numbers,” December 2020.

need to be open and transparent, but you also need to be flexible because sometimes you will see you made a decision where something isn't quite right and need to be willing to say, "we got that wrong," and move on. That whole willingness to be wrong and correct is ok. People don't expect perfect—I think that's a big learning.

An example was the initial procedure for localized lockdowns set out by the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC), an established team of the chief health officers from states and territories chaired by the Australian chief medical officer. Early tests of this procedure came with outbreaks in a Tasmanian hospital and an abattoir in Melbourne, followed by the wider outbreak in Victoria. The Victorian government locked down ten individual suburbs in an effort to stop the spread, enforced by local police with fines—a different approach from the first lockdown. Each instance demonstrated the continuous learning curve in how to control the spread of the disease considering the local context.

The government bureaucracy was also forced to operate in a far more agile and iterative manner, adjusting its response during implementation. The document in which the prime minister announced the three-step plan for reopening, for example, went through a dozen iterations among different departments before its release to the public, and it has been adapted and revised frequently as states have decided which paths to follow.

Systems to trace COVID-19 exposure and manage COVID-19 outbreaks have continued to improve over time. Over the past few months, states have developed their own COVID-19-tracing apps and businesses have adopted QR-code scanning and manual registration through their websites. "Attendance apps" to enable contact tracing in the event of an outbreak are more likely to be adopted when they ask for only a name and phone number and clearly state that data will be deleted after a set period and will not be sold for commercial purposes. Although a patchwork of apps and

websites may not appear to be the perfect solution, the localized adaptation and learning has enabled tailored approaches to meet business and customer needs. In turn, businesses and customers are more willing to provide the data needed to ensure rapid and comprehensive contact tracing to contain outbreaks quickly.

Data-led decision making

There is no shortage of information during this crisis—both businesses and governments have had to cope with an avalanche of new, and sometimes conflicting, data. Australia has taken a deliberately data-led approach, harnessing expertise and doing important work to filter out the noise and focus on useful, trusted information to shape decision making. Defining the crisis as a health emergency provided a primary lens through which to assess responses and make trade-offs. This enabled early alignment of the most essential information needed to focus on what really mattered and created confidence in the most critical information among stakeholders and the public.

Gathering the right data

One of the first crucial moves by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet was establishing a dedicated data team to compile data coming from commonwealth, state, and territory sources, as well as from the private sector and international sources. The team focused on the prime minister's top priorities, guiding decision making and tracking the impact of those decisions through a dashboard. The team also guided decision making at the National Cabinet, initially focusing on critical health questions (for example, transmission rates, intensive-care-unit capacity and personal-protective-equipment availability) and then expanding to economic and social indicators.

An important question the government wanted to answer was whether stimulus packages were effective in encouraging the Australian public to spend money. To supplement data from Services Australia, a government department, Australian

financial institutions provided anonymized credit- and debit-card-spend data that linked spending patterns to receipt of government stimulus, thereby allowing the Treasury and the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet to understand the real-time efficacy of the stimulus packages, even with nuances among states.

Private-sector organizations also built real-time data feeds, aggregating traditional business and operations metrics with economic changes resulting from the crisis. For example, private banks tracked credit cards and private loans in arrears (by state, across Australia) and the uptake of a mortgage-loan restructuring program.

Sharing information and applying expert-led decision making

Australia quickly convened its best health and economic expertise to advise on decisions at both state and federal levels. The AHPPC took the role as the key advisory body to the National Cabinet. The advice of the AHPPC strongly informed National Cabinet decision making, with recommendations transparently shared with the general public. The AHPPC established 15 precedent conditions for reopening the economy and rated each of these conditions so that the public knew where the country stood on the path to reopening.

Independent reports and enquiries continue to shape the COVID-19-crisis response. The *National contact tracing review* by Australia's chief scientist, published in November, highlights the characteristics of an optimal system for testing, tracing exposure, and managing outbreaks that can be used by states and territories to evaluate and refine their own measures.⁶ Similarly, the *National review of hotel quarantine*, conducted by a former health department secretary, provides an

independent perspective on what has and has not worked across hotel-quarantining programs run by the states.⁷ These timely and detailed reviews by independent professionals, which are available for public consumption, enable transparency and fact-based decision making.

At the time of publishing this article, the health department continues to publish daily, granular epidemiological data that are conveyed to the public in a variety of new ways. The Department of Health website provides daily updates on current case numbers that are disseminated by a variety of methods. A noteworthy example beyond simple case and testing numbers includes communicating about COVID-19 detection in sewage surveillance to the public in affected towns and suburbs as a proactive measure to further increase testing in these at-risk areas.

Fostering effective collaboration across boundaries

The crisis brought the private and public sectors together with greater trust and goodwill than has generally been the case in Australia. The government established the National COVID-19 Coordination Commission (NCCC) to create a structured, open mechanism to enable collaboration between the public and private sectors. This ensured a constant and regular avenue for business input, both in the immediate response and into recovery. Early in the crisis, the government quickly responded to issues raised by businesses, such as lifting curfews for trucks, to ensure consistent supply chains and stock in grocery stores.⁸ The NCCC has proactively established guidelines for safe, COVID-19-ready workplaces before lockdowns eased and have worked with businesses to refine them over time.

⁶ "Press conference - Australian Parliament House, ACT: Transcript," Prime Minister of Australia, November 13, 2020, pm.gov.au; *National contact tracing review: A report for Australia's National Cabinet*, Australian Government Department of Health, November 2020, health.gov.au.

⁷ "National Cabinet: Media statement," Prime Minister of Australia, October 23, 2020, pm.gov.au; *National review of hotel quarantine*, Australian Government Department of Health, October 2020, health.gov.au.

⁸ "COVID-19 response and recovery," NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment, planning.nsw.gov.au; "Truck curfews," VicRoads, October 7, 2020, vicroads.vic.gov.au.

Many private-sector organizations proactively reached out to state and federal governments to help them respond, particularly in the early days of the crisis. Large corporates and the public sector shared similar goals—to help the Australian economy weather one of the biggest storms the country had ever faced. Qantas Airways and Virgin Australia Airlines brought stranded Australian citizens home through international repatriation flights. The technology company Atlassian, as another example, helped the government develop a COVID-19-tracing app and a WhatsApp-message service to disseminate information to citizens.

Australian companies have shown a real desire to work together and put aside competitive pressures in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. As the group managing director of an Australian multinational company said:

What was different [about the Business Council of Australia during the COVID-19 crisis] is the breadth of engagement of members and the direct mobilization of members into [its] policy suggestions. It was very heavy on member engagement, which was different. And then the more iterative, much more “feed it through” approach: everyone, [even] the treasurer, was very keen for ideas and created a very open and receptive environment, so [they allowed] just feeding things through that are not necessarily complete or buttoned down, but every week [had] new ideas coming through.

This has been the case in essential industries like grocery retail and logistics, where food producers connected with their end-to-end supply chain, including logistics and distribution partners, to develop contingency plans in the event of a supply-chain disruption.

The Supermarket Taskforce, an example of business collaboration early in the pandemic, brought together the leaders of Australia's biggest supermarkets—Woolworths, Coles, and Aldi—to coordinate and collaborate by special authorization of the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, the competition watchdog. The group shared plans and best practices around issues such as in-store cleaning and physical distancing to ensure a consistent standard across Australian retail. These industry-led efforts have been recognized by the government, shared within and across industries, and have shaped the guidelines for COVID-19-safe workplaces.

What comes next for Australia and other countries is hard to predict with any precision. Leaders across the public and private sectors will continue to face enormous challenges in responding and reacting to an ever-changing situation. The lessons learned from Australia's response to the COVID-19 pandemic thus far can be applied through the next phases of this crisis—and indeed, for other national crises, including future bushfire seasons.

As this article goes to press, we have some positive signs of COVID-19 vaccines becoming available in the next few months; however, as we wait for the rollout of vaccines, we shift from emergency response into “living alongside COVID-19.” Although context and implementation will vary, we hope that the decision-making approaches honed in Australia's response to the COVID-19 crisis can provide valuable lessons for decision makers across the globe as other countries continue to flex their response to the pandemic.

Jenny Child is a partner in McKinsey's Sydney office, where **Eija Erasmus** is a research manager and **Jacob Johnson** is an associate partner; **Roland Dillon** is a partner in the Melbourne office.

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