Standing Up for Science: A Voice of Reason

This is an extract from Chapter 18 of Salim S. Abdool Karim’s book, ‘Standing Up for Science: A Voice of Reason’, entitled, ‘Leading the MAC–attaining sufficient consensus’. It deals with the process followed to incorporate different member opinions in the work of the MAC, as well as the change in the composition of the MAC.

I took the view that the MAC needed to produce the best advice it could, and to do this, we needed to ensure that we drew on the knowledge of the best people available. I also felt that giving space to a diversity of views in the MAC was particularly important, given the lack of hard evidence available in the early stages of the outbreak. The irony of calls to ‘Follow the science’... was not lost on us, considering how little science there actually was at our disposal at the beginning of the pandemic. It was in our interests to canvass different views – so as to ensure the decisions adopted were as robust as possible.

Together with the MAC secretariat, I worked on a process for drafting and finalising an advisory that would be as democratic as possible, given the time constraints we faced. After a draft prepared by the relevant TWG or MAC member had been presented and debated in the MAC, the secretariat and I would incorporate the points made during the debate to ensure it reflected the common view. This took hours and often involved contacting individual members to clarify their comments. When I felt that certain views could not be accommodated in an advisory, I would often phone the individual who had suggested the point to discuss the matter, and we would jointly discuss ways in which it might be incorporated in the advisory or somewhere else. The final version of the advisory would then be re-tabled at the next meeting so that if anyone differed with my interpretation of the discussions and the common points of view, they could make their opinions known then or within a comment window of 24 hours. Very rarely would there be problems or errors in the final version, but in the event that there were, we could issue an update.

I adopted the concept of ‘sufficient consensus’, which I borrowed from the 1990 CODESA (Constitution for a Democratic South Africa) negotiations and applied it to our discussions to ensure that the outcomes reflected what most people were thinking and articulating. Still, ensuring that everyone had an opportunity to air their views came with a downside: meetings would sometimes go well over the allotted time.

All of us were extremely busy people and the pressure on us was high, particularly when infection rates were rising, and we had to work to unrealistically tight timelines to map out actions to slow down the spread of the virus. MAC members did have sharply differing views on certain issues; especially when we were time-pressured or, perhaps, it just felt that way. I tried as hard as possible to avoid a situation in which we were split down the middle and a vote was required. In my experience, there is nothing like a partisan vote to harden positions on either side. To a large extent, we succeeded in achieving sufficient consensus. We had only one near-vote—about my continuance as chair—and that was not over a scientific matter. I generally tried to find the areas we could agree on and work from there.

When a new discussion point comes up, I try to avoid polarising points to begin with. This allows everyone to start on some form of common ground and then slowly start to introduce points where they differ through the discussion. In this process, I felt that it was important to acknowledge the essence of all views and, where possible, reflect aspects of those views in the final advisory that went to the Department of Health.

On the whole, this approach served us well and we always managed to find a way to move forward. While some members might have felt my approach was too accommodating, others might have felt that I should have more openly supported a position about which they felt strongly. As chair of the MAC, it was my responsibility to get us to a point where we could provide our best advice, and my credibility as fair chair had to be above reproach.

Six months after the original MAC was formed, while there was a dip in Covid-19 cases, we were faced with a different type of curve-ball. On 14 September 2020, Minister Mkhize