

Pandemic – A new opportunity?

Recently, it seems, the new mantra for our age is “we are in it together”. In theory, the SARS-CoV-2 virus places everyone in the same petri dish but, of course we know, it does not do so in practice. In that way, the virus is a reflection of ourselves - what we say and what we actually do in practice are different. However, unlike the virus we choose and not protect everyone in the same way and we do not even treat everyone infected in the same way. There is a huge gap between the type and speed of treatment one receives if one is a celebrity, a royal or the PM or a member of the public even if one is a health care worker.

This of course is not surprising – it’s just the norms and structure of our society. The only difference the last few months have made is with regards to fear of the virus and in that “we are all in it together”. Even though more of the poor and vulnerable will die, everyone will be frightened.

Can we not use this pandemic to challenge the normality that went before the Corona virus era? That ‘normality’ was an un-natural state which was not sustainable for humans or for the planet. We can make some changes immediately by reducing the incessant travel to and from work when much more can be done on-line, reduce business and pleasure flights which often are not needed, eliminate disposable fast fashion which creates a throw away culture and we can individually do much more besides. However, can we gain much more from this crisis and develop a new model of cooperation, interconnectivity and some semblance of equality? Turmoil, extremism and violence will surely flourish if we don’t do so, especially in poorer countries and societies which already are incapable of providing basic living standards for their people.

So how do we start to build a model that will be much more sustainable than the one we are seeing creaking and possibly breaking in front of our eyes? I think we need to start from a position of common interest. That common interest is, in the short term and into the foreseeable future, the eradication of this pandemic and the prevention of further pandemics. The frequency of potential pandemics have increased and in the past 20 years the world has come close on several occasions to a pandemic (Ebola, Avian flu, Swine flu, SARS, MERS) but because of mainly biological reasons and some global cooperation through the WHO, the world was spared the spread of these deadly diseases.

The causes of pandemics

A number of general factors help to create the conditions that either give rise to virus mutations and/or human infections that can then spread due to global travel. These need to be addressed at an international level:

1. Sanitation and Hygiene – poor sanitation creates breeding grounds for germs and weakens the immune response of people, making them more vulnerable to infection.

2. Clean water supply – it hardly needs pointing out how easily water borne diseases can enter the human body with devastating consequences to the individual and to those in close proximity. This weakens the immune system making the individual more susceptible to other more contagious diseases.
3. Food hygiene and animal welfare – minimum global standards are needed but successfully implementing these standards will require a degree of cultural sensitivity and adaptation including a ban on the consumption of certain animals. The EU has done much in improving its internal standards but as this pandemic has proven, internal standards are not sufficient to protect oneself but global standards are required.
4. Industrial farming – leaving aside the ethics of industrial farming and husbandry practices, these highly concentrated operations are ideal for close human/animal interaction and virus mutation.
5. De-forestation and loss of habitat – as forests are cleared for farming or industrial use, the wild species' habitats shrink and their proximity to humans increase. This was one of the reasons behind the Ebola outbreak.
6. Food security – undernourishment lowers a person's immune system enabling infection, further transmission and possible mutations.
7. Health care – basic health care is a pre-requisite to preventing the spread of an infection.
8. Climate change – this is probably the most pressing of our global concerns. As the planet changes to a new normal, we cannot predict what viral infections will travel from one region to another and mutate.

These are all interlinked and, of course, exacerbated by conflict.

If rich countries choose to develop their public health systems and economies in isolation from the poorest, then pandemics will inevitably become a way of life as viruses do not respect borders.

A global solution

The eradication of smallpox and polio required the entire world to come to an agreement – all countries were offered the vaccines and rich countries paid for groups of health professionals to go into the remotest parts of every region to inoculate all the people. We will again need such a global effort. However, in this case it cannot just be a vaccine that is given but an entire healthcare system needs to be created. Of course, it cannot just be rich countries giving charity but the recipient countries too will need to prioritise health in their budgets; which may be a cultural challenge for many governments. A global health taxation system is needed, no less, to address these issues rather than just charity; for charity is a

failure of just taxation. A possible immediate start could be reallocating the debt payed by the poorest countries towards a health fund for those countries.

Some may oppose and resist any change from the previous status quo as it undoubtedly requires a cultural change. To return quickly to normal some may even want to excuse the response of many democratic government ministers who failed to act on scientific advice and in a few cases actually contradicted such advice. These ministers will not face the forms of punishment that company directors face for negligent corporate manslaughter. Others still, will balk at the idea and say that the cost is too high. The current pandemic has already cost several trillion dollars and changed our way of life and we are still at its beginning. If nations were offered just a couple of months back, relief from all of this, what would they have paid? Of course, the heartless alternative is to accept that millions will die yearly and we accept that as the price of doing our normal business but live in fear that we might also get infected!

We already have several international institutions, created following previous adversities, which are capable of addressing these issues and delivering basic human needs but they lack the political will of their government sponsors and ultimately, within democracies at least, the will of the populace. These institutions need strengthening and empowering, but sponsors and their population will also need political endurance to meet these challenges. In addition to the measures stated above, a global medical bank will also be required to enable supplies to be sent immediately to an affected zone before a virus spreads, something akin to the UN disaster relief. Another aspect of this global medical bank must be the close collaboration of medical research without a profit motive. This should include diagnostic, vaccine development, testing and manufacturing and distribution. Of course, this will require unprecedented cooperation between governments and most importantly corporations. Only then can a speedy response be achieved in developing the kinds of novel drugs needed to curtail the spread of new diseases and allow the public to have confidence to return to the dynamic innovative work processes so characteristic of free economies.

The welfare of all

I believe that now there must be enough political will and urgency to create the systems needed and to spend money on things which actually improve the well-being of people and protect the population. I wonder how many generals can fire their very expensive missiles to stop this virus from spreading and if that was possible then the hundreds of billion spent yearly on bombs and missiles may be money well spent.

Such a will of purpose can only occur if we truly understand the global nature of our relationships and lives, our interdependence and that equality of human beings is not just a phrase for a charter. This purpose will, I believe, also help to challenge the inequality that we are so opposed to within our own countries and help to nurture a new mentality as to how we treat people within our society. The current pandemic shows that for the relatively rich the pandemic is a slight nuisance and tedious, unless you catch it. However, if you are poor the lockdown has very severe consequences and even 'social distancing' is difficult. Of course, social distancing, not in the arithmetic sense, is one of the reasons why we are in this predicament. It has been practised for far too long and has given rise to inequalities and a sense of otherness which can be seen both here and abroad. It has reached such

grotesque levels in India that even in the midst of a pandemic that will, like the 1918 pandemic, affect India most acutely (up to 5% of India's population died in the 1918 pandemic) the main focus of many media outlets and politicians is to continue to create hatred and blame towards minorities. This of course is an old technique, ultimately doomed to failure but after causing death and damage, ironically also to the majority population themselves. This was practiced with ultimately devastating effect by Nazi Germany, prior to the Holocaust, where Jews were blamed, amongst other things, for spreading Typhoid. India maybe on a steep trajectory but, of course, is not alone in this type of short-sighted radical ultra-majoritarian ideology for we have seen glimpses of it in the Middle East, USA and in Europe too. If we are to develop international structures of cooperation then such ideologies must be fully confronted and eradicated like a virus.

A civilized society is judged by how it treats its most vulnerable people and we seem to be failing certainly at a global level but also at a national level but with the right will we can succeed. As Gandhi said:

"I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man [woman] whom you may have seen, and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him [her]. Will he [she] gain anything by it? Will it restore him [her] to a control over his [her] own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to swaraj [freedom] for the hungry and spiritually starving millions?

Then you will find your doubts and yourself melt away."

Achieving the full extent of Gandhi's talisman, of course, needs a new economic model, an understanding of the structural inequalities that exist and a higher level of "enlightened self-interest", as so elegantly phrased by Bertrand Russell. That, unfortunately, may be several pandemics away but we can at least make a start now.

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