

Fundamental Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic

Dennis J. Snower (Global Solutions Initiative)

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We are currently in the midst of a worldwide trial that has changed our lives beyond recognition.

It is a challenge on the global level – for the G20, the WHO and other international bodies – since the Coronavirus does not respect national boundaries. But it is just as much a challenge on the national level, where many of the policy decisions in response to the pandemic are made, and at the local levels, where people decide on whether to comply with government guidelines and whether to support one another in times of need. Everyone one of us – from heads of state to ordinary citizens to refugees – bears great responsibility for the health and wellbeing of others.

Proposal

Billions of people are in lockdown, unable to visit one another, unable to go to work, unable to attend school, unable to meet one another in public places. People around the world are in desperate straights, struggling at home, in care homes and intensive care units, dying of the same cause, separated from their loved ones in their hours of need. At times of existential danger, we instinctively desire to be close to our family and friends, hold their hands and embrace them – but now we are forbidden to do so, for every act of physical contact – every expression of physical loving-kindness and compassion – could bring illness and death.

We are confronted with the true uncertainty of human existence and the true vulnerability of human life. How often have so many of us believed that we are supreme masters of the world around us.

How often have we as researchers ignored the uncertainty of our existence, mistaking it for probabilities generated by our statistical models? How often have we ignored our vulnerability by pretending that we are in control of our destinies? The Covid-19 pandemic shows us how wrong we were.

We are brought face to face with the most basic questions of life. What are we here for? What have we done with our lives? What do we yet wish to do if given the opportunity? Who is truly important on our lives? What is it that we truly cherish? The pandemic leads us to some painful insights: If we know who is truly important to us and what we truly cherish, then why have we spent so little of our lives pursuing

these things?

The Coronavirus shows us how terrible it really is to waste our lives, embroiled in endless battles for wealth and status and power. How terrible it really is not to recognize the value in the people around us – not just our family and friends, not just colleagues and fellow citizens, but also complete strangers. How terrible it is not to give our lives meaning – every hour of every day – by honoring the sacredness of life and according all living things the respect, sensitivity and care that they deserve.

The Covid-19 pandemic demonstrates to us the value of freedom – the freedom to move, to be with those we love, to live in dignity and security – for ourselves and for those around us, from our loved ones to the refugees and the downtrodden.

Above all, it shows us the importance of recognizing the true purpose of all our businesses and economies, our political parties and governments, our local civic associations and our international organizations, our conventions and ideologies, and all our other systems: namely, to serve human needs and purposes.

The needs and purposes not just of individuals, but of societies and of the natural world, in pursuit of not just our individual, self-interested payoffs, but in pursuit of all our overarching communitarian goals that are articulated in our religious and cultural aspirations.

In most of our endeavors, we are interdependent. One individual cannot succeed without the cooperation of others. We cooperate at many different scales – local, regional and national.

The Covid-19 pandemic highlights the danger of ignoring our interdependence and the importance of global cooperation. It shows us with crystal clarity that all of humanity is in the same boat. Since the virus can be defeated somewhere only when it is defeated everywhere, it shows us the terrible folly of pretending that we can achieve security in isolation, within the borders of our nation, culture, class or religion.

The Covid-19 pandemic demonstrates to us that our economic, political and social systems can serve our needs and purposes only when they induce us to cooperate at the appropriate scale.

And all of our systems were originally driven by this aspiration. The nation state enabled people to cooperate at larger scales than principalities and city states allowed.

The entrepreneurial virtues that arose over 400 years ago promoted the hard work, honesty and trust that was required for flourishing market economies. Left-wing ideologies were conceived to protect the poor and disadvantaged from exploitation. Right-wing ideologies arose to highlight the importance of freedom. The corporation arose to help business manage risk in order to serve the public interest. National social insurance systems were developed to help cushion citizens from economic and health shocks. International organizations, such as the World Health Organization, arose from the recognition that the world faced global threats that called for global collaboration.

The religious insight that all people are created in the image of God called us to recognize that everyone on earth is worthy of our respect and care.

Out of these inspirations, however, grew institutions, social hierarchies, ideologies and governance principles that have often tended to become self-serving – exploited by the privileged few for their own personal advantage, to the detriment of the broad human needs and purposes that they were originally meant to serve.

Out of the successes of free market enterprise in generating material prosperity, empowering local communities and promoting peace grew a blind reliance on the “Invisible Hand” as primary guide for the allocation of resources. Out of the successes of entrepreneurship within the free market system grew the blind support for the principle that “the business of business is business.” Out of the social and environmental excesses of the free market system grew a blind attachment to central planning. Out of the successes of the nation state arose the blind “me-first nationalism” that undermines a globally effective response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

It has always been thus. Humans are social creatures, who are suited primarily for cooperation in social groups of limited size. When we need to cooperate at larger scales, we frequently form groups of groups or “imagined communities” – such as the nation state – with whom we feel affiliated, though we are unable to meet all their members. These imagined communities are supported by value-driven narratives

and institutions of multilevel governance. But every attempt to establish cooperation at a larger scale is always vulnerable to being undermined by the selfish behavior of groups at the smaller scale.

This is a fundamental problem that will never go away. All we can do is be aware of it, remain vigilant, adjust our narratives to the magnitude of the challenges we face, and continually adapt our institutions of multilevel governance accordingly.

Covid-19 highlights the need for vigilance, for new narratives and reformed governance institutions.

When nation states are successful in addressing national challenges, they create national identities and institutions that are compatible with local identities and institutions. Within successful nation states, citizens know when they should cede their individual sovereignty to groups of larger size.

The global pandemic restates this challenge forcefully at the global level. It implores us to construct new narratives in which our national affiliations are supplemented by a global affiliation – the affiliation to our common humanity that must overcome this pandemic together. It also implores us to keep rebuilding our structures of multilevel governance, within which nations know when to cede sovereignty to international institutions. While our international institutions are themselves vulnerable to being undermined by the privileged few who seek their narrow advantage, the pandemic implores us not to abandon these institutions, but reform them to serve human needs and purposes in response to global challenges.

This realization forces us beyond our existing schools of economic and political thought. It affirms neither unfettered free markets, nor central planning; neither pure individualism nor pure collectivism. Instead, it encourages the mobilization of our efforts – individual and social – at the scale that our challenges demand. It affirms neither left-wing nor right-wing politics. Instead, it seeks to empower each and every one of us to contribute to the fulfillment of our fundamental ends, many of which are social. It means giving us the freedom to create a prosperous, secure, inclusive and sustainable world.

Covid-19 forces to confront the most brutally honest and vitally important questions: If we know what must be done to overcome this pandemic – along with other challenges that lie ahead, such as climate change, cyberwar, financial crises and more – then why do we spend so little time and effort pursuing these things? Why, at this time of global threat, do so many countries retreat into populist nationalism? Why is the pandemic described as a “Chinese virus” (promoting nationalistic conflict) or “the plague of the snobs” (promoting class war) or the “urban virus” (promoting conflict between town and country)?

While the socially responsible behavior the many within a reasonably well-functioning social order is always vulnerable to being undermined by the selfish few, why have the many not been more vigilant? Why have the responsible many not been reaching for universal narratives highlighting our common humanity? Why, at this time of global threat, have responsible politicians around the world not rallied around our institutions of multilateral cooperation and ensured that national and multilateral goals complement one another?

These are the burning questions that the Coronavirus sears into our conscience. Once this threat has been overcome and we awaken in the post-Covid-19 world, these are the questions that the next generation will level at us.

The Covid-19 pandemic lays our lives bare and forces us to appreciate our most essential needs and our highest values. It forces us to appreciate the true value of many people whose roles in society tend to be undervalued: the nurses, the hospital orderlies, the people sitting at the checkout counters in supermarkets, the delivery personnel, the many nameless strangers who suddenly offer help to the old and vulnerable.

The pandemic has revealed a vast sea of kindness and benevolence in our communities around the world. It has led to countless acts of selfless heroism in hospitals and care homes. It has impelled many of us to use our greatest strengths to serve our greatest purposes, suddenly giving our lives new, inspiring meaning.

This is the lesson that we must take into the post-Covid-19 world: The time has come to mobilize this goodness in our midst, rather than drive it to the sidelines through institutions and incentive systems that reward selfishness and predatory competitiveness. The time has come to re-evaluate the appropriate goal of business; the goal of our economic activities; the goal of our ideologies and social conventions; and the goal of our local, national and international governance structures. The pandemic shows us that the goals of all these domains must always

the same: contributing to the fulfillment of human needs and purposes. This requires us to cooperate locally when we face local challenges, nationally when we face national challenges, and globally when we face global challenges.

The G20 has a towering responsibility to support a broad public discourse in which national bodies and various engagement groups all contribute in accordance with their local conditions and needs, participating in the rules that they co-create, monitoring each other's behavior, being accountable to one another, and thereby creating the groundwork for global cooperation in response to the pandemic and setting the stage for global cooperation in response to other global threats.

May the G20 rise to this epic responsibility in this historically important time, and may we – in the Global Solutions Summit and in the T20 – make fruitful contributions to this end.

Existing Initiatives & Analysis