

Four lessons from COVID-19 about change, governance and the role of citizens

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Time will tell if we have learned enough to be better prepared for other preventable high-impact events.

A crisis on the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic reveals the weaknesses and strengths of our systems, structures and policies. Much can be learned, for instance:

A predicted catastrophe

COVID-19 was not unexpected. For years, scientists have been warning governments of the risks of a coronavirus pandemic. As a society, we chose to ignore the risks.

Predictable high impact events like this pandemic, or climate change, share several characteristics:

- Their impact grows exponentially once a threshold is reached;
- They trigger cascading failures. (Failing to contain the pandemic overwhelms the health system, leading to shutting down the economy and massive public interventions.)
- They are regressive events that disproportionately affect the most vulnerable people and regions.

But it does not need to be this way. COVID-19 is a foretaste of what a climate crisis will look like. Reducing the risks of predicted high-impact events means that we pay a price now because the cost later will be unaffordable in human suffering and damage to the life sustaining capacity of the planet.

The irreplaceable role of the state

The public discourse over several years has focused on the importance of a market economy and the benefits of globalization. This discourse has obscured the importance of the role of government and the public sector.

COVID-19 is a reminder that the state is the “insurer of last resort.” It is the instrument society has perfected over time to make collective decisions, deploy collective resources, and align the contribution of the public, private and civic spheres of life in society. A crisis on the scale of this pandemic, or of the 2008 financial crisis, cannot be addressed through individual initiatives.

The role of government is to invent solutions to societal problems that cannot be solved without its intervention, and to generate results that would not exist without some use of the levers of the state.

Countries with well-functioning public institutions, a tradition for collaboration across sectors and a strong civic spirit have out-performed others during this crisis.

This pandemic revealed the importance of public sector leaders at the national, regional, and local levels. We have witnessed the price paid in human life for denial and inaction in some countries, as well as the heavy cost resulting from polarization and a lack of social cohesion.

The irreplaceable role of citizens

Citizens deserve much of the praise for the capacity displayed by some countries to contain the spread of the virus and to mitigate the impact for society. In these cases, people took on board the recommendations of their health authorities. They shouldered a huge burden by working at home, taking care of children, schooling them, and keeping them safe. They reinvented their work through digital means and their lives to stay safe. They found new ways of maintaining some work-life balance to keep their sanity.

Such a civic spirit is on display in the willingness of people to come together for a common purpose and to reconcile the pursuit of their individual interests in ways that also serve the collective interest.

Challenges like the pandemic, climate change or other complex issues cannot be addressed without the active contribution of citizens, families and communities. It requires collective problem solving

The accelerating velocity of change

More changes were introduced in the last few months than during the previous 10 years: explosion of e-commerce; re-configuring supply chains; working from home; e-learning; e-medicine, etc.

Many of these changes were foreseen and would have taken place in any event but over a longer period. A key lesson is that we are underestimating the collective capacity to adapt to a

fast-changing landscape and to invent solutions to the complex problems that stem from living in society.

Governing is a search for balance. The magic does not reside in the efficiency of the parts but in the capacity to align the contribution of the public, private and civic spheres of life to propel society forward. Time will tell if we have learned enough to be better prepared for other preventable high-impact events and to set society on a sustainable human trajectory.