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Human behavior in the time of a global pandemic

Abstract

We are in the middle of an unprecedented pandemic and the response lies in politics, responsible leadership but also science, at a local and global level. In this situation, we tend to panic and when it subsides, perhaps we should not go back to what we consider to be normality and we should shape the future we really want. COVID-19 has exacerbated some of the dysfunctionalities in our national and international institutions and has shown the breakdown in and the need for global leadership. We also suffer from a great lack of trust in the global system, and the global order risks turning into a global disorder. Human behavior is central to the pandemic and the way the virus is spread or stopped. That is why global citizenship and responsibility as well as solidarity are key to slow down the pandemic. We also need multilateralism that goes far beyond the UN system, in order to reach a true global response to the health crisis. If COVID-19 is a “global public bad”, then we need a global public good as a response. Finally, we need to be somewhat naïve and to believe in human solidarity.

We will always be confronted by political shocks, climate shocks and health shocks. The question is whether those shocks will necessarily become crises or will lead to catastrophic situations or to an unprecedented pandemic, like the one we are in the middle of. I believe that the answer lies in either preparedness in responsible leadership or lack of it. It lies in active citizenship that must go hand in hand with responsible leadership, in science which should be guiding our analysis, as well as our response in politics, in action and activism or lack of response – we are seeing children on the street reminding us of the importance of the climate. We are seeing people living with HIV/AIDS now telling us that they are experts because they host the virus in their own bodies. It lies in partnership or lack of it, in solidarity, in local action and global action. I would also say it lies in trust, but there will be no trust without accountability.

It is against that context that we see how we respond or react. We ultimately react rather than respond honestly because we find ourselves in what we find the cycle of panic and neglect. When we are confronted by an unprecedented shock, we all panic, and we focus all our attention and resources on one. When it subsides, we seem to go back to whatever we consider to be normal. This time, we are being reminded that perhaps we should not go back to normal because normal has not worked. We now have to move forward and then shape the future that we would really like to see.

COVID-19 has revealed all of that and it has also exacerbated some of the dysfunctionalities that we have seen in our national and international institutions. It has shown that, in the real breakdown in leadership, the world is crying for leadership and we do not have a critical mass of leaders, political or otherwise, at a global level, that could track the way forward. What is dysfunctional in our national and international institutions is mainly caused not by the institutions or bureaucrats themselves but the very members that should be funding, supporting, guiding and, giving the authority to those institutions to do the work they are supposed to be doing.

I would like to be naive. The United Nations had a Charter that started with real people and not with governments. Perhaps then we would put the people back at the center of what we do to make sure that leadership is about delivering on promises we make to people and their wellbeing. If we do not, we should not deliver on those promises. We do not have the trust required and unfortunately, we currently have a deficit in the level of trust in the global system.

The generation I belong to is the one that started studying international relations with the first chapter called “The World Order”. It is about the global order, but we are seeing today or risk seeing the global order turning into global disorder. Why? The member states, partners and members of the institutions that make it work turn out to be the ones who are weakening it. The World Health Organization (WHO) is a good example. Among the biggest funders of the WHO are the non-member states and a private foundation, and those were maybe supposed to lead. We have seen examples of people withdrawing their funding and questioning their membership in the WHO. At the same time, we expect an authority and a guidance from this organization and that will not happen in these conditions.

Human behavior is central, not only the behavior to prevent disease, but also our behaviors and attitudes when we face shocks and hazards and how we respond to those. We can change our behaviors, but what is most difficult is to sustain them. We can compare this to quitting smoking and it is often said ironically: “Quitting smoking is very easy, I did it 10 times”. That is what we are facing now in the time of COVID-19. We are talking about a second wave, but I believe we are still in the same wave because nothing has changed in the overall situation, or in the way the virus is transmitted or stopped. What has changed dramatically is our behavior and when we relapse, it will relapse. We are seeing that happening increasingly in the different situations we are facing.

I also want to be naive to believe that there will be a growing critical global citizenship beyond borders, that it will challenge leadership and then that it will take in that network of solidarity that is required to

put the pressure on all decision-making levels: local communities, private sector, government, international institutions. Therefore, equity and inclusion are not just a wish but at least something we apply to make sure that we are all safe. I think there will be no winners at all in this “competition” because we fail to remember that in a pandemic, none of us is safe.

Multilateralism is far beyond the UN. Of course, we need the UN and international fellowship discussions. We need multinationals that are even becoming subjects of international law and very important factors in international relations. We need pharma and economies too, so that it becomes a true global response. We also have to believe that a national response prevails over a government response. We need communities at the center. We will have to heal the trust that is broken between leaders at national levels and their citizens.

Additionally, we always continue to try to strike the balance that we need science, and we should definitely not take it for granted. Science has been challenged by so many naysayers, anti-vax campaigners and social media amplifying all kinds of fake news. We need politics that are part of the solution, not part of the problem, and we need activism that holds us all accountable. Maybe Utopia, naivety and solidarity I completely believe in will be required to guide us, so that it will lead to local action and a global response.

Finally, if COVID-19 is really a “global public bad”, we may need a response that is called a global public good. It does not matter how we define it, if it is in the spirit of solidarity, equity, or the spirit of just making sure we are all safe. And we use this way of making sure that the investment we are making within our geographic borders will not be challenged by the lack of investment in action somewhere else in the world. Again, none of us is safe and can ignore that.