

Catalyst for global sustainability

Coronavirus as an opportunity for international cooperation

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The novel coronavirus is keeping the world in suspense. Infection rates are rising exponentially in many countries. The isolated and lock-down measures taken by numerous states are having a massive impact on virtually all areas of economic and social life. They go hand in hand with a growing sense of uncertainty among the general public.

Discussion is revolving around the difficulty of gauging all the impacts of the pandemic. However, we should see the corona crisis as an opportunity. If we learn from it, the pandemic can also offer unique opportunities for promoting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and for stepping up international cooperation.

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3 is devoted to the topics of health and well-being. The current crisis illustrates the value that sound health systems add to the other SDGs. Illness poses a risk to education, political participation, incomes and, by extension, people's livelihoods. While health may not be everything, we have nothing without it. The international community has also explicitly committed itself in the SDGs to fighting infectious diseases such as AIDS and malaria. However, the goal of eradicating them by 2030 seems a distant dream. Of the 38 million or so individuals infected with HIV in recent years, 770,000 have still died annually (2018). And 435,000 of the 219 million people infected with malaria (2017) have also died, most of them in Africa.

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The corresponding figures for the novel coronavirus (around 295,000 individuals infected and 13,000 deaths; 23 March 2020) initially appear less dramatic by comparison. However, the unparalleled attention being given to the pandemic is a result of the particular perception of risk among society and policy-makers. This coronavirus is new to people, can be transmitted very quickly from person to person, is difficult to predict in terms of spread and disease progression, is fast developing as an outbreak event in Europe and easily overburdens even our healthcare systems. Unlike well-known and more predictable infectious diseases, which develop over long periods and at great geographic distances, the discourse on coronavirus also extends to national security, including this part of the world. It is this very kind of treatment of the issue by society that could now act as a catalyst for necessary reforms.

In the past, health crises requiring the most urgent action have served to accelerate innovation and structural change, as seen in the case of the plague (which triggered the first

international cooperation efforts in health) and SARS (reform of infectious disease control). In times of nationalist trends, we need to set a new course towards stable structures for international cooperation. The replenishment summit planned for 2020 by Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, which enables the world's poorest countries to purchase vaccines at lower prices, is one such opportunity to do so. The corona crisis shows once more the disastrous impact of weak health systems at the local and global level. It is therefore an important field of development cooperation to strengthen those systems in fragile as well as middle-income countries.

Germany should capitalise on the present momentum to underscore the value of multilateral platforms. The corona threat shows that isolated measures by individual states are inadequate. They can even have negative impact for the crisis management as a whole. Global cooperation can tackle cross-border health threats more effectively if well-known difficulties in global governance and financing are addressed. The World Health Organization (WHO) should not be dependent for its financing on contributions from non-governmental actors such as the Gates Foundation. In order to develop, stock and deploy vaccines, medication and medical supplies as quickly as possible, international organisations, states and the most capable suppliers need to work together for the common good, regardless of national loyalties. To this end, Germany could also employ the role it has already developed for itself in global health to strengthen global health cooperation during its forthcoming EU Presidency – for instance, to push for expansion of the competences of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC).

The corona crisis also uncovers the tremendous potential of digital platforms (online meetings, video conferences, etc.) for contributing to international cooperation in line with the objectives of the 2030 Agenda. Against the background of the climate crises, it has not been possible to date to shape mobility in such a way as to sufficiently reduce levels of emissions and pollutants. The current health emergency is now compelling companies and public-sector actors to switch rapidly to using modern communications solutions. More than a wake-up call, the crisis provides a reason and legitimacy for a profound transition, which is sometimes lacking in structures with strong path dependencies. In addition to the necessary infrastructure, this also requires a cultural shift to modern technologies and the rehearsal of good practice in cooperation in a virtual environment. In this way, initiatives for achieving the SDGs in the area of health and further fields could benefit from the corona crisis. Even if there is a prevailing sense of uncertainty and threat at present, the pandemic could ultimately benefit international cooperation more than it harms it.