

Reflections on the Covid-19 Pandemic

Covid-19 is a virus, it is a natural phenomenon, it is spread by natural causes. The pandemic, too, has natural causes, it is a natural phenomenon, a medical event. The virus is no respecter of social, economic or religious differences. All people are susceptible to it regardless of their social class, nationality, race or religion. Rich and poor, Europeans, Asians and Africans, Christians, Buddhists and Muslims, can all be infected by it. In this respect it seems to be a great human equaliser, a great social leveller. That is how it was sometimes spoken about in the early days of the pandemic.

And yet it has become clear that it is not so, the virus has a very unequal impact. The poor are much more likely to suffer from it than the wealthy. Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority people are far more likely than White people in Europe and America to catch the virus and to die from it. The health statistics about the pandemic have revealed enormous differences and inequalities.

Experts in the field of public health have not been surprised. Such inequalities are not specific to Covid-19. There are similar social inequalities in the incidence of many other illnesses. The Covid-19 pandemic has merely shone a spotlight of publicity on the great inequalities which exist for many health conditions.

Large differences in the ways different countries have been affected by the virus have also been revealed. Some countries with efficient public health services and effective governments have done well in controlling the spread of the virus and limiting the number of casualties. They have got through the worst of the crisis and life in them is returning to normal. Others have been far less successful in containing the virus: it has spread widely, deaths from it have multiplied, and restrictions have had to be maintained longer. The countries with the highest numbers of deaths from the virus and the least effective measures to contain it are USA, Brazil and Great Britain – countries run by right wing populist governments that are more concerned with their political popularity and business interests than with the health of their people; they are countries which have failed to develop effective testing and tracking arrangements, and with privatised and fragmented public health and social care systems.

In short, the way the virus has spread is not a purely natural phenomenon. It has not been a great leveller. On the contrary, it is primarily a social, political and economic phenomenon that has accentuated inequalities. The response to it also needs to be social, political and economic.

Many of those most immediately affected work in poorly paid jobs in services that are essential for life in modern society: nurses, doctors, and also porters and cleaners in hospitals and care homes, bus drivers, taxi drivers, shop assistants, teachers, and many others. These have been the most seriously affected groups and have suffered most severely.

However, the way the virus has spread makes it clear that we are all connected and bound up together. Everyone's life has been touched. Although the wealthy and the privileged have been less severely affected, they have not been able to escape the effects of the virus altogether. They cannot separate and isolate themselves. Rich and poor, white and black are

bound together and inextricably connected in the conditions of modern society. Ultimately, the virus can only be controlled effectively if social and economic inequalities are tackled and eliminated.

The same is true at an international level. We are all interconnected. This has become clear by the way the virus has spread. No country has been immune. The pandemic is an international phenomenon. It requires an international response. It can only be brought under control through joint action and international cooperation. Narrow and divisive nationalistic policies and refusal to cooperate in international health measures will only perpetuate the virus and prolong the suffering.

There are other large lessons that we can take from recent experience. Economic activity has been massively disrupted and a severe economic crisis is likely to follow. However, some good could also come of this. The shutting down of cities has made people aware of how much better life can be with less traffic, pollution, and constant noise. The streets have been calm, the air clear and birds can be heard singing again. The crisis provides a unique opportunity to reconsider how we live our lives and to make radical changes.

Will that opportunity be taken? The danger is that life will eventually resume much as it was before. For radical changes to be made people not only need to be aware that they are desirable, they must also exert the political pressure to bring them about.

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