

## THE BIG PICTURE ABOUT A TINY VIRUS

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The data and analysis on Covid-19 bombard us on every platform. The information comes with a ferocity equalled only by the virus' frightening impact on those who suffer its worst effects.

With this avalanche of scientific information, evolving knowledge and conjecture it is easy to mistake the wood for the trees. The Covid-19 pandemic is an unprecedented 'black swan' event. Although signals were there in recent decades, and although some did warn of the possibility of such an affliction, no one seriously planned for it.

As we start to climb out of lockdown, hopefully for good, we cannot avoid the question why humanity is so helpless in the face of a tiny virus! Current global systems of innovation are dazzling. Artificial intelligence and big data, the large hydron collider in search of the 'god particle', tiny insect-mimicking robotic weapons and sonic warfare, biotechnology, genomics and nanotechnology – all these created the false sense that we had it all figured out.

Now, watching penguins strolling on paved boulevards, rare animals coming out of hiding, and blue skies cleared of poisonous fumes, the imagery of civilisations that collapsed, for a variety of reasons, haunts the mind: the American Machu Picchu citadel of the Inca, the North African pyramids, the Panathenaic arena of old Athens, Mapungubwe and Dzimababwe, among others. Is this generation headed in the same direction?

When this story about the beginning of the third decade of the third millennium is told to future generations, they may roll around with laughter. Not because they will be heartless. But because they will not understand how this generation with sophisticated institutions, weapons, appliances and gilded palaces ended up cowering in terror, having failed to direct scientific inquiry towards protecting the global commons.

The Covid-19 tragedy is not a failure of science. Unlike other plagues of past centuries, it does not reflect underdevelopment; but how resources are not optimally directed towards solving the most critical human threats.

It is commendable though that scientific effort is being joined up across the globe to find a vaccine or even a cure. The leadership role of the UN World Health Organisation should be commended. There may have been missteps along the way; but these cannot subtract from the importance of multilateralism. Geopolitics or not, the common interests of humanity should in time render the selfish and the self-indulgent irrelevant.

What are the lessons emerging from global management of this pandemic, and what is their relevance for South Africa? Natural scientists are better placed to explain the pathology of Covid-19 and its propagation. What is also critical, though, is an understanding of the polity, the political economy and the social psychology. This is where the sciences meet and why research organisations such as the

Mapungubwe Institute – set up ten years ago – have made transdisciplinarity a principal methodology of research undertakings.

South Africa is not out of the woods, and epidemiologists warn that the worst is yet to come. Any sense of exceptionalism is a fool's errand.

But there is that unique character of South African society that makes it a global social experiment: the coexistence of the 'first' and 'third worlds' in a situation of extreme inequality. Africa's so-called richest square mile, Sandton exists cheek by jowl with one of its poorest, Alexandra. The skier and high-flier live in mutual dependence with the shack-dweller and Limpopo migrant worker. This creates its own complexities.

The early interventions were therefore necessary. From recent data, it does seem that the lockdown helped flatten the curve. There may be challenges of strict adherence to the rules in areas where it is just impractical to observe appropriate physical distancing. But, at the level of social psychology, earlier opinion research pointed to wide appreciation of even the strictest lockdown measures.

What this points to, is that success during crises depends on two critical attributes in a polity: legitimacy of, and trust in, the leadership and capacity of the state to implement desired measures. There of course are weaknesses galore, including instances of security force brutality and micro-management of easing of economic restrictions. Government needs always to demonstrate clear logic behind its decisions on the risk-adjusted strategy, lest societal trust is squandered.

Over the past fortnight, the data coming from the Western Cape suggest that there may be a parallel epidemic at play. Its infection numbers have rapidly climbed beyond 50 percent of the national aggregate. Some of its daily increases have been around ten times those of Gauteng, the province with the second-highest total. The explanations about testing, contact tracing, focus on cluster hotspots and better reporting systems do not adequately explain this worrying trend. It is quite possible that the virus arrived there much earlier than current estimations.

What, though, are the possible social psychological scenarios at national level in the coming months?

The first one is that we may be fortunate enough to contain infections at levels with which our systems can cope. While this may help further unite society, the poor will rightfully continue protesting about increased poverty. Secondly, we may have a relatively high peak in the coming months, which may lead to social instability when lockdown measures are re-introduced. Thirdly, we may end up with a meltdown of the Italian variety, leading to mass helplessness, scapegoating and social uprisings. At worst, we need to aim for a mildly high peak.

Discussion on the risk-adjusted process out of lockdown should continue, and it should be robust. But, as we manage the immediate challenges, and beyond the current economic interventions, we need to start reflecting on the recovery strategy. The implications of this are as South African as they are global.

The corona virus is reminding us again about the political economy debate on the power balance between the state, the market and the citizen. Somehow, even after massive state interventions during the recent global financial crisis, economic orthodoxy drifted back to celebration of a minimal role for the state. Its redistributive and regulatory responsibilities are presented as an inconvenience. The powerful turn a blind eye to worsening inequality; they apply plaster on a festering wound; and they direct research towards military ambitions and narrow corporate interests.

This has to change. But what does it concretely mean for South Africa?

Interestingly, the phrase 'social compact' has rarely featured so intensely in South African discussions. But the question is whether the current crisis is sufficient of a burning platform to inspire actual implementation. Many details will need to be ironed out. But an organising framework about the strategic posture is required, with emphasis on major catalytic interventions to speed up growth and development.

Government will need to prudently manage fiscal debt. But, in dealing with the debt-to-GDP ratio, we should, as a matter of principle, focus on adding steroids to the denominator (GDP) rather than overzealously targeting the numerator.

This means, firstly, that the debt should be used primarily for investment in both social and economic infrastructure. A well-calibrated acceleration of the NHI process with focus on improving the public health system, education infrastructure, housing as part of informal settlement 're-blocking', dams, rail, broadband and energy generation – all these and more will have huge multiplier effects.

Secondly, many economic sectors, including agriculture and infrastructure supplies will need to be promoted. The same applies to low-end manufacturing which is appropriate for unskilled and semi-skilled unemployed workers.

Thirdly, the systems we have now introduced to register micro-enterprises provide an opportunity to ramp up support for a segment that represents individual and community initiative. Fourthly, the African free trade agreement could not have come at a better time. South Africa's growth is going to depend more and more on partnerships especially in sub-Saharan Africa.

Financing mechanisms for such a strategy will need to incorporate development finance institutions such as the Industrial Development Corporation, as well as appropriate interventions by the Public Investment Corporation and the Reserve Bank. Public-private partnerships that include the financial sector will also be critical. Lest we forget, some of these funds are needed to stabilise Eskom's balance sheet. For now, we can only hope that the utility is taking the gap to ramp up maintenance, so that it does not throttle the economy through load-shedding as society sheds the corona virus.

To paraphrase, we should not allow a good corona crisis to go to waste. This means that society's leaders across the spectrum must be prepared to lead.

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