



## PERSPECTIVES

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# After Coronavirus, Governments Must Promote Health, Empathy, and Solidarity

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Governments need to start planning for the post-coronavirus era. This will have to include more components than economic and social policies. Populations have to be given renewed hope for the future. Empathy, human warmth, and solidarity will be needed to support those whose lives were made more difficult by the pandemic. This will require the involvement of as many civil actors as possible.

The Western world remains in great confusion over the coronavirus crisis. In several countries, many tens of thousands have died, and large numbers of people continue to be infected. Vaccination is only in its early stages. There is no clear time horizon for when the pandemic is going to end or even when it will become a marginal factor in people's lives. Authorities are improvising on an almost daily basis on what actions to take.

Nevertheless, governments must begin to plan for the time when COVID-19 will have faded as a serious threat. This preparation will have to be much more comprehensive than conventional planning, and will have to include important components beyond economic and social policy.

Economic planning will largely consist of officials working, perhaps with the help of outside economists, on priorities, budgets, and incentives for growth. Neglecting basic economic parameters has to end, and financial responsibility has to take over. This must be done in order to stimulate employment and try to reach pre-coronavirus GDP figures.

Governments will have to manage their finances far more efficiently in the post-pandemic era than they did during the spread of the virus. At the same time, they will have to try to at least partially regain the people's trust, as

some of their political capital has been destroyed. There must also be careful social planning to avoid neglecting the new poor. Social plans must be assured that consider such basic needs as food and housing.

One sector that will have to be closely looked at is charity and volunteer organizations. Many were hit hard by the crisis and suffered sharp declines in funding. Their basic skills remain intact, however, and their expertise will be greatly needed after the pandemic ends—probably even more than before it began. Aiding these organizations will be a vital component in the reestablishment of better functioning societies.

Beyond this, there is another key area to which planning must be directed. Populations need to regain hope for the future. Spreading optimism has to start now, not when the pandemic ends. It may sound bizarre, but shoring up morale has to be a conscious government policy and not an informal effort. This will require unprecedented steps that cold bureaucratic authorities cannot primarily develop themselves.

The global health crisis brought with it many other trials, including social ills and widespread mental crises. There are lengthy waiting lists for therapists in some countries. The lockdowns and other isolation measures have made many people turn inward, and some have experienced burnout. To put it in academic terms, part of societies' social capital has been destroyed. This is a matter for thorough investigation. There is much debate about whether "behavioral fatigue" even exists, but the possibility cannot be totally ignored.

After coronavirus there will need to be an attitude reversal. This goes beyond trying to return as soon as possible to the mood societies were in before the pandemic. Above-average levels of empathy, human warmth, and solidarity will be needed to support those whose lives have been thrown into upheaval. There are many people, including the new poor and those who have lost family members, who very much need friendly human input.

Planning for this will take the authorities into uncharted areas. It may be far easier to confront these problems in small communities than in the more anonymous environments of big cities. It will be necessary to mobilize thinking groups of psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, and other behavioral experts to discuss and plan how to tackle the mental crisis. This includes figuring out how to treat the increased percentage of individuals who suffered mental problems during the crisis. The difficulties of many of these people will continue after COVID-19 has faded from the scene.

All of this will require "out of the box" thinking. It could be instructive to consider the initiatives of Bill and Melinda Gates, who launched a charitable

foundation in 2000. Their institution has spent tens of billions since then on efforts in global health, emergency relief, education, poverty, and more.

They followed up in 2010 with the Giving Pledge, which promotes philanthropy among other billionaires by encouraging them to donate at least half their wealth to charitable causes during their lifetime or in their will. A 2018 report from the financial research company Wealth-X predicted that these combined pledges may be worth as much as \$600 billion by 2022.

As a variant on this, Western governments should assemble their wealthiest citizens and tell them, “We are at a critical moment in our nation’s history. We need your help. Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.” These people could also be reminded that in a flat or shrinking economy, there is generally pressure to take away wealth from those who have it. Many other civil actors, as well as religious figures, will have to be involved in turning the mood around in post-pandemic society.

Once the recovery process is underway, many new ideas will be developed. This is in the nature of such planning groups. That does not mean academics should stop thinking about necessary long-term changes in society. At a certain moment, they will again be useful. But the current priority is to focus on practical steps on how to operate at the end of the pandemic.

There are some who should be kept away from government-initiated planning groups. This is no place for either philosophers or radical environmentalists. This is not because climate change is a fiction—there is overwhelming evidence that it is real—but radical environmentalists can slant debates toward changes that could be extremely counterproductive to post-coronavirus societies.

The better governments follow the program set out here, the more successful they will be. Some of the new processes might even become permanent. Some governments will stick with the inadequate modes of operation of the past, and the resulting differences in performance and success will be significant and easy to spot.

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