The Outbreak of Coronavirus (COVID-19) Plagues the World

The new coronavirus (COVID-19), which was first detected in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, has been declared a global emergency by the World Health Organization, as the outbreak continues to spread outside China. The number of reported COVID-19 cases around the world has surpassed 3.1 million, and the number of deaths is almost 220,000 at the end of April 23, 2020 in more than 200 countries, territories and areas. The confirmed coronavirus cases have rapidly increased in the US, and have exceeded 1 million. In Italy, Spain, Germany and France the number of infected people has also increased to 765,000. There is a great variety of confirmed cases in these countries, and in Greece the reported coronavirus cases are reported to be about 2,500. The spread of the virus in Eastern Europe and Russia, and other parts of the world gives cause for great concern. The worldwide spread of coronavirus is severely affecting the global economy; millions of the global population are under some form of lockdown. The coronavirus pandemic, experienced as a severe shock, has caused not only economic difficulties but also social suffering and concerns for the infected individuals and their families, relatives and closest acquaintances. Increased concern, and new thinking about culture, values and norms, in connection with the economic slowdown, have given rise to a new welfare culture contributing to new policies to combat the spread of the new coronavirus never before seen in humans. The policy actions range from social distancing that allow people to work online at home to the closing of borders. In the new emergency conditions, the values and goal orientations emphasize life and health as fundamental human rights. In addition to increased care provisions, other policy actions, such as relief packages designed to ensure economic activities and the welfare and well-being of individuals and families, telemedicine, remote work, and smart devices are used to enable visiting other people in order to return to normal. Although science guided by humanistic principles has provided the knowledge to portray the state of the world and human conditions, the preparedness for combating the coronavirus pandemic and the treatment of people infected with the virus, have been found to vary among nations. International responsibility and solidarity appear as primary guiding principles in connecting all policy actions to combat coronavirus.

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The Rapid Outbreak to a Worldwide Pandemic

The coronavirus, which was first seen in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, has quickly spread around the world. The number of confirmed COVID-19 cases around the world has surpassed 3.1 million at the end of April, 2020 according to statistics from Johns Hopkins University, US. The number of confirmed cases is increasing all the time. About 220, 000 deaths are reported. The World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020 declared COVID-19 a pandemic, pointing to the rapidly increasing cases of coronavirus infections around the world and the sustained risk of further global spread. The
coronavirus pandemic currently spans 200 countries, territories and areas. The
US, Italy, Spain, Germany and France are epicenters of the coronavirus
pandemic (John Hopkins University 2020; Worldometer 2020). The United
States has overtaken China concerning the highest number of confirmed cases.
In the US, New York has been the worst affected state during the coronavirus
pandemic. The worldwide spread of coronavirus is severely affecting the
global economy, millions of the global population are under some form of
lockdown. The International Labor Organization (ILO) further estimates that
25 million jobs could be lost due to the coronavirus pandemic (ILO 2020).
India, the world's second most populous country (1.34 billion) after China, and
the fifth biggest economy, appears to have avoided the full force of the
pandemic. Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) cases continue to rise
rapidly across the African continent (WHO 2020). In these parts of the world,
the structures which characterize life (economic, social political and
ecological) are different requiring well-adjusted policy actions. Of great
concern is the potential for coronavirus to spread to countries with
weaker health systems. Countries in Africa and in Southeast Asia are
witnessing increasing fears of escalating coronavirus cases, as also in Russia
(100,000 reported cases), where Moscow is the epicenter of the outbreak,
while in Romania and Bulgaria Eastern Europe almost 14,000 detected
coronavirus cases have been reported. The outbreak has also reached the
Nordic countries, where the total number of confirmed cases is approaching
40,000.

Coronavirus/COVID-19, transmitted via wild animals, reaches, through a
chain of different stages, a live animal market, where people come into contact
with infected wild animals. The wild animals are to a great extent delivered to
the live animal markets by poachers, who are enticed to poaching because of
poverty. The closing of the live animal markets has been on the agenda of
policy actions, but the problem has to be seen in a wider perspective, i.e. the
need to mitigate poverty and to prevent a diminishing biodiversity (Armstrong
et al. 2020).

The fight against coronavirus has paralyzed society and the economy. The
outbreak of coronavirus has convinced people that they should follow the
strong directives from the authorities in countries where confirmed virus cases
exist, to reduce the interaction that people have in order to minimize their
chances of picking up the virus. Social distancing as an infection control
method among actions, ranging from, for example, prohibitions on gathering
in larger crowds or crowded spaces to the closing of borders. People are
allowed to work from home instead of in the office, schools are closed or
switched to online classes, and communication with other people or the
authorities is carried out electronically (Johnson et al. 2020). Changed
circumstances with many restrictions have resulted in uncertainty in the
business world; investments are not made or they are postponed. Private
consumption is also changing. People have shifted to shopping online instead
of visiting crowded places, shopping malls and supermarkets. The demand for
health and hygiene products has especially increased, while consumption
attracting attention or conspicuous consumption has no priority, i.e. consumption used to indicate economic status and accomplishments (Veblen 1953). Comparisons can be made with earlier presented ideas whether we live in a “joyless” and not in a “joyful” society, where comfort and pleasure clarify how people in different ways are in pursuit of satisfaction and thus happiness and wellness (Scitowsky 1992, 59).

In the event that a longer period of restrictions is required to contain COVID-19, the damage to the economies would be greater. According to forecasts (e.g. OECD, 2020, 6), economic activities and global growth will markedly decline in 2020. The outbreak of coronavirus has particularly damaged economic activities and growth in the large economies, China and the US, which are the engine of growth, commanding a majority of the global wealth. The gloomy development has caused further fiscal stress because of already expanded welfare commitments, which will even continue because of demographic shifts (Bäckman 2020, 102).

Policy Actions for Securing Health and Life

The coronavirus pandemic, experienced as a severe shock, has been a social burden causing not only economic difficulties but also social suffering for people because of stagnation of economic activities and mass layoffs. Recovery of the economy from the corona pandemic has led to much discussion among different experts and also in social media. The crucial issue is that we do not know exactly how the pandemic will play out. The main task facing the world right now is stopping the spread of the coronavirus. But even when the global public health crisis is under control and the global supply chain disruptions caused by COVID-19 end, many large companies will experience uncertainty because it seems to be difficult to determine when business will return to normal. The idea of social distancing is difficult to realize in populous countries, where a huge number of people live in low quality, semi-permanent structures, slums. Concerning the government and scientific directions it is pointed out that social distancing, for example, in India and Africa is very challenging (WHO 2020). The Indian government issued a comprehensive advisory statement on coronavirus (Covid-19) on 16th March 2020, directing states across the country to take social distancing measures as a preventive strategy (Bhatt 2020).

Until a vaccine is available, there is a need for actions on a broad front. Science, particularly because of progress in advanced technology and algorithmic solutions increasingly portrays the state of the world and human conditions, and reliable knowledge can be received for policy design. Efforts to develop an effective vaccine for Covid-19 are being made. Although a vaccine has already been tested on animals, an effective vaccine to protect people from coronavirus could be produced within a timeframe of at least a year (Ahmed et al. 2020; Higgins-Dunn and Newburger 2020). People who have recovered from infectious disease like COVID-19 are generally left with blood that can
be used to fight off a virus. Preparatory findings show the potential of such a blood transfusion (convalescent plasma) to treat patients with novel COVID-19 (Duan et al. 2020).

As the Nobel prize-winning economists, Abhijit V. Banerjee and Esther Duflo, have emphasized, good economics in hard times require actions on a broad front of social policies (2029, 262, 318; see also Mohan 2015, 125). Health policy and other policy actions to prevent transmission from symptomatic and non-symptomatic cases, are flattening the epidemic curve, changing it to a more normal distribution. The greater the reduction in transmission, the longer and flatter the epidemic curve, with the risk of resurgence because of changed behavior and customs among people or because different policy actions are set up. (Figure 1). Through different restrictive policy actions, aiming to protect people, especially those with diseases like cancer, diabetes, heart problems and old people, cancelling large gatherings, restricting travel, increasing remote work and other measures, the epidemic curve can be flattened. Many countries have the implementation of relief packages on their policy agendas to stimulate economic activities and to contribute to the well-being of the labor force. The strategic preparedness and response plan, released by WHO on 3rd February 2020 outlines the public health measures that the international community is prepared to provide to support all countries to make provision for and respond to coronavirus. The document provides guiding principles for strategic policy actions (WHO 2020).

In the US, a $2 trillion coronavirus relief package has been designed to support the economy. The policy actions on a broad front aim to stop the outbreak of coronavirus and get a recovery started (Figure 1). Bias in the models used for calculating the effects of implemented restrictions to address all problems in connection with the outbreak of coronavirus, increases the risk that the policy actions will not work according to the original plans, and a new wave of resurgence will emerge.
During a resurgence period, the new curve is reshaped extending rightwards. After strong policy actions, the coronavirus pandemic will probably level off and the curve (Figure 1) will flatten into a new shape. The way out from the hard times that the pandemic has caused, can either take a V- or a U-shaped form. After a bottom level is reached, a V-curve indicates successful policy actions and that a recovery process is rapidly beginning. A prolonged period of problems at the bottom of the U-curve continues before an upward slump starts again (OECD 2020; Carlsson-Szlezak et al. 2020; Foster 2020).

Advanced technology in a new role

The advanced technology has already made great progress in the developing and designing of thinking and speaking robots to reduce involuntary loneliness and social isolation among, for example, sick children who cannot take part in school education (Sheffield 2017). The use of robots supplementing, or replacing, for example, therapists and social workers, does not perhaps provide the expected values attached to services in the form of human contact and a confidential relationship (Atkinson 2015, 117: Mohan 2018, 43). This development, mostly good but also bad, supports the decisions concerning social distancing during the continuous outbreak of coronavirus. Remote work as a new working style had been on the increase before the outbreak of coronavirus. During the coronavirus pandemic, people are allowed to work at home. Remote work enables a continuation of economic activities and maintenance of welfare.

The progress in the development of artificial intelligence for newer and more advanced applications like emotional communication is entering a new era of computer-mediated remote touch, where it is possible to exchange expressions of feelings, for example, through hugs. The advanced technology
may be ready to provide emotional support and hugs for people who are far
removed from each other (Block and Kuchenbecker 2019; Mok 2018). As a
result of increased education in techno-sciences, researchers have devoted
research capacity to finding solutions to support humans through robot hugs.
Information and ideas are spread like neurons in brain cells, contributing to a
continuing connectedness to prevent idleness and social isolation (Goertzel
2016, 587; Christian and Griffiths 2016, 226). The importance of remote touch
is also emphasized as a tool in therapeutic work, which particularly is
actualized in periods of exceptional times. When artificial intelligence is used to
identify emotions, it can have negative consequences such as misunderstandings
and dissatisfactions (see Purdy and Daugherty 2017).

As a consequence of the rapid and revolutionizing development of
advanced technology, telemedicine, also referred to as telehealth or e-health
will become more common, and information on its potential in care is
frequently shared in social media (Goertzel 2016, 13; Cooper and Matsuzak
2020). Telemedicine allows health care professionals to evaluate, diagnose and
treat patients in remote locations using telecommunications technology.
Telemedicine allows patients in remote locations to access medical expertise
quickly, efficiently and without travelling. Thus, telemedicine provides
convenience and cost-effective medical care. Telemedicine is fast becoming
integrated into the daily operations of hospitals, specialty departments, home
health agencies, private physician offices and the homes and workplaces of
health care consumers around the world. In the globalized world telemedicine
can help match medical care practitioners in the developed world with patients
in the developing world, far from hospitals, let alone medical specialists
(Cooper and Matsuzak 2020). Smart phone applications for “contact tracing,”
i.e. to identify people who by chance are in the same physical place at the same
time with a contagious patient, have been developed for use in some countries
and are reported to be in further development, especially through the
introduction of 5G networks revolutionizing new effective applications in
smart cities (Dave 2020; Weeber 2020). Apple and Google have invested a
great deal in launching a series of updates to their smartphone operating
systems that will use Bluetooth signals to track potential coronavirus cases.

Summary and further thoughts

The coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, which began in December 2019 in
Wuhan, China, has via a chain of transmission stages reached live animal
markets where people come into contact with infected wild animals. Wild
animals are to a great extent delivered to these markets by poachers, who are
forced into poaching because of poverty. The closing of the live animal
markets has been on the agenda of policy actions. The key issue is, however, to
mitigate poverty and to prevent a diminishing biodiversity as has for a long
time been on the agenda in international and national social policies.
The outbreak continues to spread outside China. Reported COVID-19 cases around the world have surpassed 3.1 million, and the number of deaths is already over 200,000 in more than 200 countries, territories and areas as of the end of April 2020. The worldwide spread of coronavirus is severely affecting the global economy, millions of the global population are under some form of lockdown. In accordance with the core idea that life and health are fundamental human rights, policy actions have been taken, ranging from social distancing that allow people to work online at home to closing of borders. During the difficult times of the coronavirus pandemic, economic activities are being stimulated by governmental relief packages; for example, the US has announced relief stimulus of $2 trillion amid growing coronavirus fears. In times of crises good policies also include, in accordance with prevailing and preferred values, maintaining an adequate level of preparedness and risk management strategies. Based on advanced technology and algorithmic solutions, science increasingly portrays the state of the world and human conditions, and reliable knowledge can be received for policy design. According to reported plans and decisions from some countries to lift restrictions, the visible signs of the decrease in the severity of the coronavirus pandemic, as measured by death rates, has influenced decisions. The coronavirus death rate, however, takes into account milder cases. These estimates, without enough etiological facts, are therefore crucial to enable countries around the world to best prepare policy actions to curb the global coronavirus pandemic.

In order to stop the outbreak of coronavirus and to protect people and their health, the ever-improving advances in techno-scientific research and development evoke hope of great changes in the world, mostly good but also bad in the form of criminal exploitation of tempting opportunities. The use of advanced technological applications for future goal-setting, has made it possible to obtain large data sets analyzed computationally, revealing trends and patterns of concerns and threats for policy-making. The advance in technology has contributed to the mitigation of unwarranted economic and social suffering, while the progress has been of great help in planning and decision-making for increasing the effectiveness and optimal performance of policy actions. Technological change is widely regarded as one of the main drivers of long-term economic development, while the technological innovations have had far-reaching effects on people’s everyday life. The restrictions, fears and uncertainties have resulted in a changed pattern of contact and relations between people. The private consumption is also changing as people shift to shopping online instead of visiting crowded places. Consumption attracting attention or conspicuous consumption is not given high priority, the demand for health and hygiene products has, however, increased. People equipped with communication devices have possibilities to arrange help in their everyday life, such as having their shopping brought to them. The most important result is that a new view of solidarity as a community connectedness and togetherness, has emerged. This is also a new way to receive social support in the strenuous circumstances caused by the coronavirus pandemic. There are,
however, great differences in access to broadband connections and use of the internet.

The fast-spreading disease is likely to come to a halt as a V- or U-formed curve depending on how successful all the policy actions for “flattening the coronavirus curve” are. Some countries have, however, started to lift restrictions too early, implying risks for a new wave of coronavirus cases. Policies based on algorithmic solutions provide knowledge also for long-term planning. A world where peace prevails, is a basic prerequisite for all changes towards development. World politics and the changing tensions in the world are a reality. Ecological issues including waste-related problems and climate change are much in focus and a matter of urgency. The economy and the technology are embedded in everything when seeking ways to contribute to sustainable social policy and development. Fiscal stress, due to demographic shifts, has already put pressure on the welfare systems. For the governments this means a challenge to adapt policy design within the economic frames. An aging population, with far-reaching economic and social policy consequences, is increasingly apparent in many industrialized nations across the world. Intergovernmental cooperation facilitates the achievement of policy goals for management of diseases and crises. Social justice, solidarity, and equal values are guiding principles. According to forecasts, the global growth is estimated to be weak in 2020. In the advanced economies it also seems to be difficult to boost the worsened economic activities, reflecting the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, as well as worldwide tensions and crises, such as geopolitical tensions and conflicts in trade policy.

The coronavirus pandemic has changed the world, and how to respond with policies of “hybrid strategies” to create differentiation in policy actions and to gradually lift restrictions. Science, particularly advanced technology, provides comprehensive knowledge for new development and human progress. The ability to accept new visions and directions in further policy design of preparedness to meet crises and disastrous diseases is associated with good governance in partnership with all interested parties, both internationally and nationally. There is a wide plea for solidarity in connecting the world and its policies to coronavirus (COVID-19). Policies oriented towards further development must above all be given high priority because today’s decisions will have long-term consequences.

References


