

We are all in this together ? More than you think

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“We are all in this together” has become the mantra of many policymakers in the first wave of the coronavirus around the world. They are not always acting accordingly, but Washington has seen a rare bipartisan moment this last week and many people at all levels build up a large effort at supporting one another, such as multiple “[kindness groups](#)” on social media around the world (see also [here](#)).

This crisis is a moment of reckoning. We need to [rethink](#) the way globalization, lean stocks and just-in-time management principles were making us all vulnerable to a shock in any part of the stretched-out supply chain, the way stock buy-backs and financial pyramids have been enriching the few and endangering the many, the way winner-take-all economies, austerity policy and ragged safety nets have been undermining public health, and the way egregious development gaps and failed states keep reservoirs of diseases, terrorism and refugees.

The most interesting lesson this crisis is bringing in a punch-in-the-face way is how interdependent we humans are. We depend on the good health of the others, and are safe only if everyone is protected from certain diseases. We ignore the deficient public health situation in poorer countries and provinces anywhere in the world at our own risk.

Historical moments, such as wars, natural catastrophes and pandemics, by forcing us to see that our collective resilience is determined by the least resilient among us, generally impulse movements of solidarity. Such compassionate attitudes, unfortunately, tend to later fade, when difficulties recede. It would be great if we could not only remember these moments of lucidity about our mutual dependence, but also come to understand, at long last, that our interdependence is much broader and deeper than in basic security domains like public health.

What is particularly impressive about a pandemic is the exponential growth of cases and deaths. If every contagious person contaminates two other persons, the number of cases doubles quickly and repeatedly, until a large portion of the population has been infected and enough immunized persons who have recovered ultimately slow the spread. But domino effects and cascades happen in many human interactions. The other example that immediately comes to mind is the financial system, the stability of which depends on the weakest financial institution, as the last financial crisis illustrated vividly.

But there are many more, and much more important, examples. The strength and quality of the growth and flourishing of a human being depends on a nurturing, positively

reinforcing environment. And our desire for belonging and being accepted and recognized triggers powerful imitation effects. And all of this produces pandemic-like cascades, in [multiple domains](#). Some are positive, others are harmful.

On the negative side, we have been going through a pandemic of hatred, racism and xenophobia around the world in the last years. Fed by unscrupulous politicians and deranged opinion leaders, hatred starts with demeaning slurs, spreads within tribes, spills over other tribes, and ultimately spirals into violence, first by isolated individuals, then by mobs, ending up, in extreme cases, in genocides. Such a pandemic is making all of us less secure, even if it creates the illusion of in-group cohesion for a while. It has been accompanied, through similar channels, by a pandemic of obscurantism and anti-science attitudes.

Another ominous pandemic has been spreading, especially in the United States. It is the epidemic of [loneliness](#) and [despair](#), which has affected the elderly through isolation and the younger population through job loss and community breakdown. This epidemic has not only spread a social disease, but has even stopped and reversed the progress made in life expectancy in this country, through a surge in mortality due to overdoses and suicides.

One may wonder if this is part of a wider pandemic of selfishness and lack of [empathy](#), which has spread since the 1980s and has found fertile ground in cultures in which individualism and self-reliance are praised values, and in highly unequal economies in which the winners lack incentives to care for the left behind because they live completely separated lives.

Even deeper, a pandemic of materialism and [consumerism](#) has contaminated almost everyone for more than a century and made us adopt a lifestyle that focuses much more on accumulating “stuff” than on good relations and inner development.

One potent factor that generates multiplier effects is the transmission of (physical and human) assets and values across generations. And again, this can have positive and negative effects. The most spectacular example, perhaps, of a positive cascade is the economic and technological [take-off](#) of the human species. What are the two best known examples of exponential growth? Pandemics and GDP. But the growth of GDP is, in fact, just another form of pandemic as well. Successful businesses spread income and foster the development of other businesses, innovations form the basis for the next wave of innovations. And every generation transmits its infrastructure of equipment and knowledge to the next one, who will add to this and carry forward to the next one, and so on. On the negative side, stunted human development in poor countries creates poverty traps that keep generation after generation in poor health and deficient education.

The development of the human species, through the increase of its population (another pandemic, which tends to spontaneously abate with development) and its productivity,

has been a great success for itself but, unsurprisingly, a catastrophe for other species and the environment. We need to control its spread and redirect our development in order to prevent the “human pandemic” from dying due to the exhaustion of its host, Nature, and also in order to preserve the rest of life.

So, let us make this crisis an eye-opening moment: many things have “gone viral” long before internet, we constantly live through many pandemics, good and bad, of hatred and kindness, of selfishness and empathy, of poverty and affluence, of obscurantism and enlightenment —we *are* a pandemic ourselves, as a species! Because of their multiplier effect, pandemics are powerful and dangerous. They can get out of control, and they can die out killing their hosts. But they can also produce explosions of good things. Our responsibility is to fight and curb the harmful pandemics, control the good ones which have negative side-effects, and foster the all-positive ones. By building up and sharing our empathy, supporting solidarity movements, transmitting loving values to our children, each of us can contribute to an exponential growth of human flourishing and happiness around the world. Especially, at this moment in which physical distancing makes us value social connections more than ever, we can recognize and embrace our mutual dependence, and start new pandemics of social innovation, right now.