



Competition or Co-opetition

Op-ed during the beginning of the COVID-19 Worldwide Pandemic, April 2020

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The International Labor Organization estimates that the current pandemic could cause [the equivalent of 195 million FTE jobs in the 2nd quarter of 2020](#) to be lost worldwide, pushing millions of people into unemployment, underemployment and working poverty. Clearly, as stated by Kristalina Georgieva, managing Director of the IMF, we have entered a [recession](#) that is worse than any since the end of WWII, and calls it “[humanity’s darkest hour](#)”. Ever since the corona pandemic started seriously influencing economics, one wonders about the role of human rights in the debate. National leaders try to figure out to what extent national lockdowns should be allowed to influence an economic down turn. After all, the cure should certainly not be worse than the disease. And yet, trillions of dollars are pumped into the economy.

The first reaction of most nations was to downplay the pandemic, or, as they say “manage the truth”, claiming that the virus would have little effect on them. The Brazilian government, for example was in such denial that it is, surprisingly, [drug gangs in Brazil’s favela’s](#), and not a government, that enforce a corona virus lockdown there. In short, world leaders are fearing for

the worst economic scenarios, resulting from measures taken to curb the pandemic. And this was not without reason; because it does, indeed, have enormous global financial consequences. And it seems that it is only the start of a set of domino stones that will topple. So, how to deal with this new global situation?

Under these circumstances, there is a need to ensure that the response is grounded firmly in human rights! And, strangely enough, it is human rights that often gets to be the first victim of a crisis. Restrictive, stigmatizing and punitive measures can lead to significant human rights abuses, with disproportionate effects on already vulnerable communities. During the past few years the number of human rights activists had increased as a consequence of an upsurge of human rights abuse. We measured an increase of violations regarding the rights of women, children, refugees, religion, as well as limitations of freedom of speech, and more. And now the focus seems to shift from raising awareness of human rights violations to the state of the economy. The do-gooders of society, those who work on shoe string budgets, the ones who often depend on bare minimum subsidies and

donations for their voluntary and non-profit work, are amongst the first organizations to suffer. Think, for example, of Non-profit and Civil Society, and Charity Organizations. When this happens, the burden of charity and doing good will default upon private initiatives - people who are less coordinated and professional, albeit with good intent. Communities must have access to accountability mechanisms and remedies in situations where rights have been breached, or where there is a risk of breach. These organizations are desperately needed.

There is, however, good reason to use the economy as a leverage for fixing the current crisis. After all, if an economy collapses, people have no income and spend less. Many in Africa are already complaining that they now have to choose between sitting at home and starve to death, or go to work and risk getting infected by COVID-19. If people sit at home the economy suffers, because it shuts down production, and that lays off the factory workers, who, then in turn will have no income; this results in a spiraling macro-economic downturn. It could easily become a dangerous slippery slope that is very difficult to recover from, as many an empire in world history can attest. And, after all, who would care for human rights if people have no money to purchase even the basics of food and shelter?

In times of crisis the world turns into an arena of competition. And we see that happening now. Everybody needs more money, and the pot is smaller. The main competition is between *nations, political policy makers, the medical world, captains of industry and bankers, and non-profit organizations*. And years ago, *the preacher*, too, would have had a larger stake in the debate. But in most of the West, this guy has been released from active duty. In China and some other countries he is simply put in jail, whilst in other nations he is the lone policy maker. The overall question is, though, with all these parties fighting over the power of definition, who will

win the competition? If it were up to nations, military power, intelligence, and money talks. But would that save the world? If it were up to the World Health Organization and the medical world, the economy is dependent on healthy people; the money should go to curing people and then, what is left over, to the economy. Is the answer to the conundrum? The captains of industry and bankers, on the other hand, would argue that one needs a good running economy to keep the people healthy. So, yes to health care, but not more than really needed. Notice, it is these same captains of industry, the champions of free market economy, that jack up the price as supply runs short and demand of medical goods rise. Time and time again, we must conclude that when the world focuses on making money alone, economic collapse is the result. And it takes many years to recover. What have we learned from 1987, 2000, and 2008? Central banks, such as the [Federal Reserve Bank](#) in USA and the [European Central Bank](#), would argue that the problem is tackled by printing enough money for the purpose of deficit spending by governments; this should avoid national and global economic collapse. But how much so called *fiat currency* should governments create against an imaginary future, until the people will have to pay for equalizing it? At one point it will cause hyperinflation, or in other words, mass poverty in the population. And if it were up to the politicians, they might opt for more control to keep law and order as the crisis rolls forth. And by the way, many ride on the crisis as a springboard for more votes or control. To what extent should we relent the people's power to them? How far should individual politicians be allowed to rule by decree, or use high tech surveillance systems to monitor people's movements, and people's discussions in the public square? And as far as most Human Rights organizations are concerned, they would vow for saving humanity and the rule of law, and civility. And finally, the Civil Society actors, those practically oriented people on the ground, could claim that without civility humans will

act more like animals, and that there needs to be a balance between governments and individuals. Where, in a democracy, and all these different players in the arena, lies the true power of decision? Who will win the attention? And who is right?

Currently, we are on the verge of a complete change of status globally. The pillars of governments and of the financial world shake at their foundations. The medical world is at a loss to find quick solutions to cure and avoid another outbreak of pestilences. And few know the outcome of this ordeal. The question is what direction we will take. Hopefully we will not make the same mistakes as in the past. From an anthropological perspective we could actually predict a knee jerk reaction to quick changes, which is either fight or flight; or in other words, it is a world of competition, with few winners and many losers. Some will eat, many will be eaten. Back to competition it is.

International human rights obligations and a judiciary provide frameworks for ensuring that public health efforts are needed, proportionate, and reach the most vulnerable. At the same time anti-COVID-19 measures must not unnecessarily limit inalienable Human Rights. In order for any restrictive measure to be effective these measures need to be based on sound and clear arguments. And that is where human rights come in. It is these that deal with people's health, their wellbeing, their conscience, their expression, and much more. They protect both the individual as well as society. In the end, it is about human dignity, not about the law of the jungle. The objectives of Human Rights, are both to stabilize society, as well as celebrate the humanness of each human being. Human Rights help us distinguish between the animal kingdom and humans. As a matter of fact, treating human beings as equals in a complex hive with many other people, actually works better than the system of "doggy-dog" that we live in now – a world in which the rich have more rights than the poor.

And when tackling emergencies, smaller communities are crucial. They help people to help each other; they allow people to self-quarantine, rather than be forced to be detained in their homes; they get access to medicines, and help by looking after people and families. The role of central government is to facilitate all of this and allow for the direct and meaningful participation of civil society and nonprofits. This will better protect the vulnerable and those who are affected most. It presupposes, however, transparency in information and decision-making. Only then will unintended breaches of Human Rights be avoided. And on top of that, transparency helps Governments build trust among communities, thus becoming more effective themselves. That is why participation from the bottom-up is a fundamental principle. In the words of the Greek physician Hippocrates, in the treatise entitled *Epidemics*, the crucial governments mission should be "[to do good, or do no harm](#)".

In summary, we already observe healthy initiatives and interactions during this crisis. At the same time, you will recognize we have landed in very competitive arena where the battle between all of the above mentioned parties, compete for medical equipment, budgets, media attention, profits, control, decision making, etc. But competition as a strategy is too one-sided, and one that is outdated under the current crisis. Even more so, it will collapse the system. A better one for the current situation is [co-opetition](#). Yes, you read it right, and it is no spelling error. It combines *competition* with *cooperation*. [Co-opetition](#) is about all parties working together to find balanced measures. Co-opetition requires involving all of the above mentioned stake holders in consultation processes before deciding what direction to take. All of these parties focus on durable solutions for the greater good, without losing sight of the needs of the individual human being. As each party looks at what it can contribute as part of the solution,

all of them benefit collectively. For example, rather than governments monitoring the public so that violators of the lock-down measures can be penalized, governments could request the public to participate.

Transparency and interaction between policy makers and the people is paramount. Top-down restrictions without people buying into them, causes government mistrust; and will hamper the development of those crucial elements that are so necessary in society: kindness, solidarity, and an ethic of care. Some governments are already working on alleviating high expenses of the poor, such as mortgages and home rent payments. Larger internationals, too are trying to help by donating money and other resources, or by allowing employees to dedicate their time for find solutions to the crisis. And we have seen an increase of voluntary work worldwide.

It is time we change our focus from yearly increasing production targets and the increase of nominal wealth to please the wealthy stake holders, to other elements of societal happiness. If there is anything we should learn from this crisis, it is that a society with a shear focus on financial gain is unsustainable, and mostly helps the already affluent. Pouring money into the economy is a sign of having lost control. A healthy society is not just based on physical health or on just a smooth running economy. Life is a bit more complex than that. Our proposed form of co-opetition asks

- for more businesses to accept their social responsibility,
- for the banking sector to stop the so called [*fractional reserve lending*](#), and unlock their funds to people and businesses again, and be more active at looking for ways to contribute to society as a whole,
- for the medical world to lower its prices so as to make health affordable for the majority of the people – the poor – as well as

change the focus from the dictates of pharmaceuticals to a focus on people's health,

- for nations to protect each other,
- for political leaders to create even better policies that protect freedoms of individuals,
- for civil society to be allowed to help keep society civilized,
- and yes, for the preacher too, so he, too, can play his role.

They all collaborate with each other, without a focus on competition, but a focus on cooperation and collaboration. They are all part of a machine that helps keep society civilized. This is a time to celebrate all of them. This is not a time to abandon any of them. Good governance is enabling each of them to what they do best – which is, to serve society and to protect the Human Rights of all individuals; and all that in a sustainable way.