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Global Health Security

Trust During the Time of Covid-19

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SYNOPSIS

Lack of trust predates the outbreak of Covid-19, but it is an essential element for anyone involved in tackling the outbreak as well as strengthening of global governance.

COMMENTARY

G7 LEADERS on Monday, 16 March 2020 announced a slew of measures to address the Covid-19 pandemic; in a spate of relief for the multilateral system, the emphasis was distinctively on coordination and cooperation: information sharing, global economic relief, and coordinated public health measures.

Its urgency and necessity follow from the sense that multilateralism is facing tough challenges as divisive unilateralism grows popular among those who do not trust the global governance architecture. But the success of the G7's actions will depend on how much the world trusts its capacity to handle the crisis.

Trust and Governance

If there is one word that encapsulates the governance challenge as Covid-19 wreaks havoc globally, it would be the word, "trust". Covid-19 has disrupted every aspect of life in affected countries, raised fears, and sparked uncertainties. Yet how people respond reduces to a crucial factor: Trust – or lack thereof – in their neighbours, their healthcare or welfare systems, and their authorities.

When panic-buying or store runs broke out around the world, a familiar pattern played out over and over: People, facing uncertainty and fear, sought safety in stockpiling.

Economists who study bank runs are familiar with this pattern: it illustrates an underlying logic of self-preservation amid uncertainty – and a lack of trust in the system to prevail (sometimes quite reasonably so!) – yet leads from individually-rational actions to systemically-irrational outcomes – in laymen's terms: panic.

Making sure that a system is fit to meet people's needs in a crisis – and then persuading them of such – must therefore be one of the major aspects of tackling the Covid-19 outbreak.

Domestic Trust

Leaders need stocks of legitimacy to be trusted in a crisis when so many unknowns abound, and they build these stocks outside of the crisis period. Approval of US President Donald Trump's handling of the crisis fell sharply along partisan political lines: according to aggregate surveys by statistical website fivethirtyeight.com, between 10-16% of Democrats trusted his handling of the crisis while 75-87% of Republicans approved.

Because Trump domestically has only played to his base, non-Republicans simply did not trust him and a litany of his missteps were carefully documented, which will make it harder for him to carry out interventions that are needed. A leader who senses he lacks trust may also be overly concerned with optics rather than overcoming the situation.

Experts also need stocks of legitimacy in order to be heeded. Unfortunately, this is not as obvious as it should be. Britain's Brexit process had poisoned the well (the British public infamously had had enough of experts, according to UK cabinet minister Michael Gove) and far too much of the population were eager to dismiss expert advice, especially when that advice would be disruptive to everyday life while the virus still appeared distant.

Put together, there has been a trust deficit that has hampered effectively addressing the crisis. The turmoil on global stock markets suggests most firms and investors have no trust in the management of the outbreak in major industrialised economies and are pricing in for a hard recession.

International Trust

International cooperation also requires trust – between countries and with international organisations. When the crisis in Wuhan unfolded in January, the United States offered to send expert assistance but was rebuffed. One wonders if the reverse will hold true should the crisis escalate in the US and China offered its help.

Countries have always devised foreign policies that support their domestic interests and public opinion but doing so is a delicate matter when it comes to close neighbours whose reactions also have domestic impacts. When one country trusts that the other is handling a problem effectively, things are fine.

But when that trust does not hold because of insufficient information, it may be forced to take preventive measures, even at economic cost to itself, if only to assuage domestic pressure. In the early days of the outbreak in Wuhan, several countries risked Chinese ire as they announced travel bans from China. Yet today, it is China that is now following this logic to place travel restrictions on other countries.

Attempts to cover up cases, slow rollout of testing (and thus lack of information), or ineffectual responses make it difficult for neighbours to trust that others have a handle on the situation. Lower trust – and therefore raised defences – will be inevitable until they come to grips with the situation.

Multilateral Trust

Multilateral cooperation had been brought to its lowest ebb just prior to the outbreak of the crisis. International organisations such as the World Trade Organisation are teetering on the verge of collapse, with its dispute settlement mechanism broken. The US-China trade war, which had only just begun to show signs of abating, had led many countries to hedge against both superpowers.

Britain chose to go with Huawei in its 5G infrastructure against the US' wishes, while erstwhile Chinese partners were reviewing infrastructure projects on the backs of debt and sustainability fears. A lack of trust in the multilateral system preceded the Covid-19 outbreak.

On Covid-19, the World Health Organisation was initially criticised in Asia for not declaring an emergency earlier in January, sparking a petition with half a million signatures. It did declare an emergency on 31 January followed by pandemic on 11 March.

However, the emergency declaration on 31 January seemed to be ignored by anyone outside Asia, and many countries are now paying the price for this. Yet one must ask why the WHO's warning went unheeded: Did it have enough legitimacy and trust to be taken seriously immediately?

Rebuilding Fractured Trust

Whatever the case, the pandemic is now upon all of us. National interests around the globe have converged over Covid-19 and will require multilateral cooperation to effectively address it, so the G7's coming together is welcome, though only a first step.

Countries large and small, rich and poor, all have the same interest: To quash this disease as quickly as possible, wherever it may arise, because it could re-enter one's borders if it is out in the wild. It is also fundamentally a technical issue that can, like pandemics before, be defeated without politicisation.

We are now seeing demonstrable success in Singapore, China, and South Korea that have effectively nullified the domestic threat of the virus – they now appear most impacted by importing it from countries where the virus is still uncontrolled. They have managed systems that are effective and trusted to contain their outbreaks.

While many countries still need to put domestic control measures in place urgently, this is also a rare opportunity to strengthen a troubled multilateral system and should not be wasted.

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