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Seeing Both Sides of the Coronavirus Crisis

Coronavirus and its Societal Impact - Highlights from WZB Research

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Seeing Both Sides of the Coronavirus Crisis

By Jianghong Li

Under the coronavirus crisis, much has been written about the loss of human lives, strain on healthcare systems, loss of employment and worries about unprecedented economic recession. Less well-known are the secondary and just as detrimental impacts of the coronavirus pandemic [on mental health, family life, and relations in the wake of necessary shutdown measures](#), particularly within disadvantaged groups. Ample anecdotal evidence tells us that domestic violence against women and children may be on the rise, based on [substantial increases in hotline calls for assistance with domestic violence cases](#) and reports from NGOs. There is also anecdotal evidence of psychological distress among those who have lost their loved ones to COVID-19, and [evidence of stress and strain](#) among parents who must manage both child care and working from home. Not surprisingly, racial and ethnic discrimination and xenophobia are on the rise as well [1] as political leaders, the media, and the public [look for scapegoats](#). The fact that xenophobia has never failed to rise during historical pandemics dating back to the 19th century should not tempt us to consider it normal [2]. In the current COVID-19 crisis, a particular target group are individuals with an Asian background, encountering overt as well as covert xenophobic ridicule and attacks.

For many of us, it is difficult or even impossible to see any positive aspects of the coronavirus pandemic. Despite its many gloomy sides, it is important and perhaps even therapeutic not to lose sight of these positives. The crisis reveals our vulnerabilities and at the same time opens windows of opportunity for inventing solutions to overcome them. It is also a time for us to display our strength, resilience, creativity, compassion for others, and to show solidarity in combatting the virus. Here are a few examples of positive side effects.

The shutdown period is a golden time for digital society to showcase the wonders of digitization and to identify critical areas (e.g. the health system) that need further development and upscaling to be better prepared for the next pandemic. Without digital technology, we would have been much more vulnerable to the coronavirus crisis: the economy would suffer even more without the possibilities of the home office; experts' communication and governments' decisions for actions would have been much delayed; students would have missed learning opportunities; and we would feel much lonelier. Digital contact tracing used in East Asia exemplifies the beauty of modern technology as a highly effective method of disease control and prevention.

The coronavirus pandemic teaches us important lessons about public and personal health. It may have greatly raised our awareness of how important it is to maintain a good basic personal hygiene and to engage in healthy behavior in order to strengthen our immune system as existing morbidity strongly increases the risk of infection [3].

Coronavirus broke out in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. For the rest of the world it initially seemed to be a very distant, regional epidemic. Its unexpected and rapid global spread has been a wake-up call for the world and can raise our awareness of other global

dangers, the most preeminent among them being climate change. Global warming does not only happen in the arctic or in Australia; its impact is evident everywhere.

The coronavirus pandemic stimulates ideas for strategic innovation and transformation in research and development. In medicine, a lot of work and money has already been invested in the development of vaccines and medications against the COVID-19 disease. The pandemic also creates an impetus for some governments to invest more in national health systems and health resources and, hopefully, to place health as a priority. The current crisis also gives an impulse for cross-disciplinary research to understand the wide-ranging impact of the pandemic. In fact, this is already happening not only at the WZB but across the globe. The Lancet, the leading medical and health journal, has called for interdisciplinary studies for a special issue, "[A planetary health perspective on COVID-19](#)." Empirical data on social, economic, and psychological impacts of the pandemic on individuals, families, and children are being diligently collected by social scientists. These data will enable researchers to establish empirical evidence for pervasive social inequalities on the impact of the pandemic.

Indeed, the Corona pandemic threatens humanity. But it also gives us an impetus to move forward.

[1] Delan Devakumar, Geordan Shannon, Sunil S Bhopal, Ibrahim Abubakar. Racism and discrimination in COVID-19 responses. The Lancet, Vol 395, April 1 2020.

[2] Alexandre I R White. Historical linkages: epidemic threat, economic risk, and xenophobia. The Lancet, Vol 395, April 18, 2020.

[3] Fei Zhou et al. 2020. Clinical course and risk factors for mortality of adult inpatients with COVID-19 in Wuhan, China: a retrospective cohort study. Lancet 2020; 395: 1054–62.

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