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Tripod Missions: Five Principles for Solving Society's Most Pressing Challenges

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Abstract

The COVID crisis has forced policymakers to design new and comprehensive rescue programmes under huge time pressure. This task has required innovative policy thinking and the pursuit of new kinds of collaboration. The handling of the pandemic, however, also provides valuable lessons on how to address some of society's other pressing challenges—above all climate change. 'Tripod Missions' provide a framework for turning the pandemic's lessons learned into a guide for tackling other major societal problems.

1 | THE COVID CRISIS

The COVID pandemic has brought immeasurable suffering. Loved ones have been lost, dreams scuttled, businesses destroyed, and communities torn apart. Perhaps it is human nature to look for a silver lining in everything, even in a global pandemic. As social scientists, as students of business and public policy, we believe that COVID has given us an opportunity—to experience 'Giddens' Paradox' in something akin to real time. And if we draw the right lessons, maybe we can solve some of society's most pressing challenges, above all averting the worst of climate change. It is time to think through the implications of COVID and what they can teach us about how to approach the future.

2 | GIDDENS' PARADOX IN COVID TIMES

A decade ago, the British sociologist Anthony Giddens defined the paradox that has long prevented forceful action to save the planet: 'As collective humanity, we might wait until the destructive potential of climate change is irrefutable. But by then it will, by definition, be too late, because—at least so far as we know at the moment—it is irreversible' (Giddens, 2015). The reason

is that incurring certain short-term costs to achieve uncertain long-term gains runs against the incentives of policymakers and CEOs. In fact, many of us deal with forms of Giddens' Paradox in our everyday lives: how many lung cancer patients wished they had stopped smoking decades ago?

Unlike the natural sciences, laboratory experiments are rare in social science. Yet COVID offers as close to a laboratory setting for Giddens' Paradox—and how to resolve the conflict—as we can hope to find. Consider the early lockdowns. Because of the often-asymptomatic spread of the virus, lockdowns had to happen before widespread suffering and death occurred. Perversely, when such decisive actions prevented carnage, critics quickly seized on the better-than-feared situation as evidence that the measures were overblown. No wonder that decisive action became harder politically, although the evidence of its effectiveness grew stronger. On the individual level, Giddens' Paradox is operating even more brutally, as social media timelines in the US in particular fill with the regrets of COVID patients and their loved ones over not having taken the vaccine (Healy, 2021).

Whereas the time lag between (in)actions and consequences in Giddens' original formulation of the paradox is measured in decades, it has been mere weeks in the case of COVID, at both the societal and personal

levels. And precisely therein lies its instructive potential, for several things have gone unexpectedly well during the pandemic.

3 | WHAT WENT WELL—AND WHY?

Much has been written about what has not gone well since the onset of the pandemic, from populist politicians downplaying its severity to the breakdown of international solidarity, the failure of global institutions, conspiracy theories, and profiteering. And yet, much has gone well, too.

The development of multiple, highly effective vaccines in record time is of course the most obvious achievement. But it is not the only one. Who would have thought that we could run companies of all sizes with most staff based at home from one day to the next? This ability to adapt and reduce economic and social life where necessary was vital. A group of researchers at Imperial College London estimate that the quick shutdowns in Europe in March 2020 saved an astonishing 3.1 million lives across 11 countries over a six-week period (Flaxman et.al., 2020).

Moreover, Europe effectively resisted the ‘saving lives versus saving jobs’ framing that beset the US. Thanks to employer commitments and readily available wage subsidies, the EU-wide unemployment rate peaked at 7.7%, up from 6.3% pre-COVID (Eurostat, 2021). In comparison, the US unemployment rate jumped from 4% pre-COVID to almost 15% in one month (Congressional Research Service, 2021). In addition, there are countless examples of companies leveraging their production systems to make face coverings and other critical supplies, communities organising to provide food to the elderly, and schools innovating to keep children learning.

Taking a step back, we believe that two key ingredients have been present in much that has gone right: First, a mission focus and, second, intensive three-way collaboration between government, business, and civil society to achieve specific goals established in support of that mission. The overarching mission of course has been to ‘beat COVID’, with the specific goals in support ranging from ‘flattening the curve’ and ‘preventing the collapse of healthcare systems’ to ‘instituting social distancing’ and ‘developing vaccines’, bringing key social actors together. We call this model of driving change ‘Tripod Missions’, and we believe it holds the key to making progress on other major challenges as well.

4 | ENABLING TRIPOD MISSIONS

To build on what has gone right during the pandemic, government, business, and civil society must continue

to evolve. The good news is that in all these areas the ground has already been shifting. In part that is because clearly not everything has gone right even before the pandemic. COVID was not a Black Swan event. This crisis was predictable and, in fact, was predicted, as are other crises (Avishai, 2020). Yet governments, businesses, and civil society were caught off guard, and several institutions have performed poorly. The accelerated soul-searching opens the opportunity for real change and to reimagine relationships in innovative new ways. At least four elements are critical in this rethinking.

Mission: The economist Marianna Mazzucato has long argued that a ‘mission-oriented’ approach to research and innovation policy is the most promising route to unleashing innovation-led growth and to solving some of the most pressing public policy problems (Mazzucato, 2018). More recently, Mazzucato has further developed her approach into a broader ‘guide to changing capitalism’ by using missions to rethink the interactions of government and business (Mazzucato, 2021). A mission focus, that is, a clear view of the desired policy outcome rather than a procedural approach rooted in institutions, is the right starting point. The traditional principle of industrial design, ‘form follows function’, should also apply to the way we structure institutions and stakeholder cooperation. An institution is a means to an end, not an end in itself.

Government: There is no question that the COVID crisis has really brought into focus that public administration is in dire need of reform. Take Germany, for example. Although public policymakers made tremendous efforts to address the pandemic and resulting predicaments, the institutional structure in which they operated was more often a hindrance than a help. To put it bluntly: You cannot easily solve 21st century problems with institutional structures based largely on 19th century principles. Ralph Brinkhaus, leader of the conservative parliamentary group in the German Bundestag, was right when he argued that public administration needs ‘the reform of a century’ (Tagesschau, 2021). German public institutions at the very least need a ‘crisis mode’, which implies institutional reform as well as overhauled operational and management practices. The debate about public administration reform has, by and large, been mute since the days of ‘New Public Management’ (Dunleavy & Hood, 1994). The current situation warrants bold new reform proposals. This includes but is not limited to a top-to-bottom digitalisation and a fundamental re-evaluation of hiring and procurement.

Business: Even before the pandemic, the debate over the role of business in society was reaching something of a tipping point when the US Business Roundtable declared that the purpose of a corporation is to promote ‘an economy that serves all Americans’, a marked departure from prior commitments to the primacy of shareholders. Leading management thinkers

such as Colin Mayer have gone further, arguing that the purpose of a corporation should be ‘to produce profitable solutions to the problems of people and planet, and not to profit from producing problems for people or planet’ (British Academy, 2018). In fact, with support of notable stakeholders, Mayer is working to enshrine a purpose commitment in corporate law. Inherent in this reorientation of business around purpose is the recognition that business firms are social and political entities, not detached economic agents as is often wrongly assumed. For what this social and political role of business looks like, look no further than *Vision 2050*, the recently published action plan by the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, on how to achieve a world in which ‘9 billion people can live well, within planetary boundaries, by 2050’ (World Business Council for Sustainable Development, 2021).

Civil Society: Governments and businesses command vast resources, but they do not operate in a vacuum. They respond to incentives shaped by the ultimate change agent: people operating individually or through communities and civil society. The participation of civic actors is critical because of their function of agenda-setting and the necessary organisation of broader social buy-in for any mission-related policy programme. Giddens’ Paradox explains why this is so important: Only if the required urgency for policy intervention and change is widely understood and accepted, as it was, for instance, during the early phase of the pandemic, will there be legitimacy and space for far-reaching reforms. We have not yet made the required progress in addressing climate change precisely because the public at large has, so far, not been sufficiently supportive of far-reaching intervention. The tangible effects of climate change are beginning to materialise, yet significant progress will still only be possible if most of the public stands behind the necessary change.

If broad social buy-in emerges on the back of Tripod Missions, in addition to addressing humanity’s most pressing issues, we might also be able to reverse social polarisation and the fraying of our social contract. The populists who have done so much damage to our social fabric in recent years have worked on the assumption that ‘politics is downstream from culture’ and that to change politics you must change culture first (Friedersdorf, 2017). This mechanism is indeed important, and involving civil society in missions is critical to instituting such cultural change.

The cultural change of Tripod Missions is, however, based on unifying society behind joint efforts to solve the large problems we face, rather than creating social division based on lies and fake news. By delivering tangible results, and by doing so in an inclusive and participatory manner, Tripod Missions can contribute to what US President Biden has called perhaps our most urgent task: ‘We have to prove democracy still works.

That our government still works—and can deliver for the people’ (Ward, 2021).

5 | FIVE PRINCIPLES FOR TRIPOD MISSIONS

To establish successful Tripod Missions, we believe five core principles must be adhered to:

1. *Define missions through broad social dialogue.* This not only helps to prioritise challenges to be addressed but also bestows legitimacy on solutions. To hijack the populist creed: Solutions must be downstream from a shared understanding of the problem. This initial process sets long-term goals and helps guide individual and collective activities and resource allocation, which is indispensable for any strategy.
2. *Measure outputs continuously and publicly.* Dashboards of critical and credible information have served us well during the pandemic and are key to guiding aligned yet decentralised efforts on similar missions, too. Qualitative as well as quantitative information is a key output.
3. *Build in feedback loops.* The challenges requiring Tripod Missions are dynamic and therefore require continuous, data-informed adjustment of solution paths involving all key stakeholders. There is a continuous need to demonstrate that real progress is being made. This boosts public morale and reinforces the validity of the overall approach. Yet, if specific activities do not contribute demonstrably to achieving the overall mission, stop them.
4. *Give citizens agency.* Citizens are critical agents of Tripod Missions, not passive subjects. Motivated by shared missions, empowered with data, and equipped with solutions and tools, they are key multipliers and drive lasting social and economic change. New forms of participation should be tested to empower citizens as much as possible.
5. *Provide the funds.* Governments’ willingness to foot the bill during the COVID crisis focused stakeholders on what needed to happen to beat the pandemic, rather than on arguments who would pay for what. As we see harrowing images of devastating floods and wildfires, there is no doubt that the costs of climate inaction will be far greater than that of concerted action now.

6 | PUTTING IDEAS INTO PRACTICE

How should the principles of Tripod Mission be combined into a coherent approach that can then guide actions taken by a variety of stakeholders? There are

some valuable management techniques that have stood the test of time in small as well as large organisations that could be adapted to Tripod Missions.

According to venture capitalist John Doerr, one mantra of the former CEO of Intel, Andy Grove, was that 'Ideas are easy. Execution is everything' (Doerr, 2021). It was also Doerr, a mentee of Grove's, who popularised a way of putting Grove's execution focus into practice: Objectives and Key Results (OKRs).

Put simply, OKRs help decentralised organisations focus on the most important tasks by formulating critical objectives (what) and defining key metrics to evaluate progress towards the stated objectives (how). A whole range of organisations from Google to the Gates Foundation have used OKRs to coordinate their activities (Doerr, 2018), and there were some efforts during the Obama Administration to adapt OKRs for public administration (Panchadsaram, 2021).

Here is an illustration. Imagine the Objective of a society-wide mobilisation effort were to 'End the crisis phase of the COVID pandemic' (O). A set of Key Results conducive of attaining this objective might include: 'Achieve more than 95% vaccination rate among the over-70-year-olds and those with important comorbidities' (KR1); 'Ensure every citizen has easy access to fast, reliable testing' (KR2); 'Establish routine testing in schools, workplaces, houses of worship, and so forth, such that 80% of the population is tested at least once a week' (KR3); and 'Guarantee that 90% of patients with a high risk of hospitalisation receive antivirals within 24 hours of testing positive' (KR4).

Although OKRs were conceived to coordinate stakeholders within decentralised organisations, the same basic approach could be used to coordinate different societal stakeholders under the overall umbrella of Tripod Missions. In the COVID example above, clearly the objectives can be achieved only if government, the pharmaceutical industry, health-care providers, employers, schools, churches, and citizens work together. OKRs could thus help formulate specific objectives for each stakeholder and track progress in their contribution to the achievement of the broader mission.

In his book *Speed & Scale*, Doerr applies OKRs to solving the climate crisis. He equates mission and objective and defines politics and policy, movements, innovation, and investment as 'essential levers' to accelerate the transition (Doerr, 2021). In a societal context, outside the world of business, we believe it is more advantageous to conceptualise missions as set out above and using OKRs one level below as the management tool to coordinate different stakeholders and operationalise Tripod Missions. However, the OKR framework is one example of a context-agnostic management tool that can enable Tripod Missions in practice.

7 | CONCLUSION

As of the time of writing, humanity has not yet beaten COVID. In fact, we have learned that victory over the virus may well mean it becoming endemic and, in the process, far less lethal and disruptive. Yet despite inevitable pandemic policy missteps along the way, the shared mission to 'beat COVID' has unleashed a level of close collaboration between governments, business, and civil society that is unprecedented, at least in peacetime. It is now essential that our joint, mission-guided efforts must not stop with the pandemic. There are many urgent problems to solve. Let us learn the lessons from COVID and get to work.

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