



How not to waste a crisis

Geoff Mulgan

3 April 2020

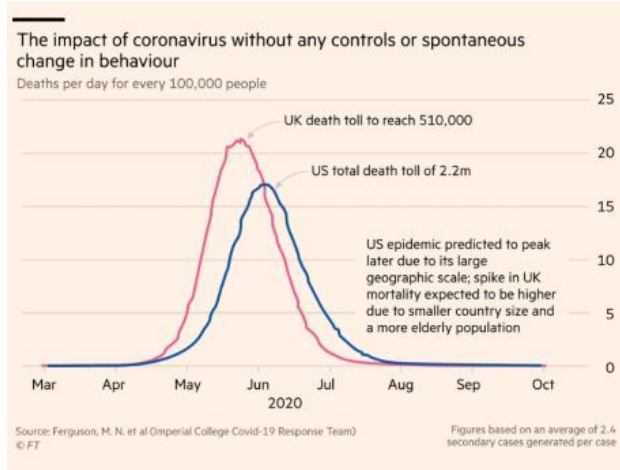
Wars are always dramatic accelerators of change. So are crises of any kind. Coronavirus could turn out to be just be a one-off blip, with normal service resuming once the worst of it is over. But it could be used to accelerate changes that were long overdue.

We have already seen an extraordinary reassertion of big government, with COVID-19 serving as an extreme stress test for governments of all kinds. Some patterns are already becoming clear (and will be usefully documented in [this new tracker](#) from the Blavatnik School at Oxford). So far east Asia has proven the most adept (partly thanks to recent experience with SARS and MERS), whereas, at least according to The [Lancet](#), ‘the US and UK Governments have provided among the world's worst responses to the pandemic, with sheer lies and incompetence from the former, and near-criminal delays and obfuscation from the latter’.

It’s too soon to make definitive judgements. No-one knows what the picture will look like in a few months’ time, and how, overall, the very different approaches of Sweden and Israel, Taiwan and Japan will be assessed.

Here I attempt something different: a first look at some of what might happen in relation to government once the crisis is over, and some tentative thoughts on what approaches may be adapted from COVID-19 to other problems.

Openness: the story of this crisis confirms what we should already know: the vital importance of free flows of information. China's disastrous early moves (denial, attacking whistle-blowers etc) confirmed that, though fortunately China then became one of the most effective at containing the virus, and showed the world that case isolation, distancing and testing could arrest the spread. Yet the absence of independent statistics in China means there is valid scepticism about whether any of the numbers can be believed. Part of the lesson is that societies can think much more



effectively and quickly if they're open and mobilise many brains. Overly hierarchical and authoritarian governments struggle for this reason – there are too many incentives to cover up uncomfortable facts. Taiwan has been a particularly a good example of radical transparency, combining bottom up civic creativity and technocratic efficiency. Many others have gone a long way in opening up

their analysis, data, models and reasoning, so that they can be critiqued and improved. The UK's statistical office has moved fast to offer almost real time data. The crucial lesson is that we often need more models, and better models, and more interrogation of models rather than fetishising any single model, as some governments and media commentary have done. Indeed, the opening up of models to scrutiny could be a big shift and point to a future where many aspects of government are informed by open and competing models, and visible learning when they turn out to be right or wrong.

Data: the crisis has prompted an extraordinary range of voluntary initiatives around data such as Data USA. It is also highlighting the new tools available to governments



to observe, monitor and predict. The most impressive examples have included Singapore's contact tracking methods, south Korea's massive testing programme helped by data, and the use of mobile phone and travel data across east Asia. Seoul's use of, and sharing of data is particularly remarkable (with, still, zero deaths in a city of 11m). Taiwan has also been remarkably effective at organising 'digital fences' to organise the quarantine of infected individuals through mobile

phones. Although many of these methods raise questions about civil liberties (well

covered here) they also point to what could become possible around climate change and other challenges. My guess is that the conventional reaction against these – which only emphasises individual privacy - will look anachronistic. Instead we will move on to the arrangements needed to govern data and data-sharing in the public interest.

Agile communication: the crisis has brought a wide range of classic information strategies, with lengthy speeches by Presidents and Prime Ministers laying down the new rules (I particularly liked Angela Merkel's). The best have been upfront about the risks; open with the facts; and honest about the uncertainties. There has also been a lot of experimentation with Whatsapp, chatbots of all kinds and local groups, to help people make sense of their own risks and symptoms, and for the first time serious action on the part of the big platforms to deal with rampant lies and misinformation, as they realise that they have become de facto public services. This last might be one of the better legacies of the crisis.

Anticipation: the crisis is showing the potential power of anticipatory governance. In Singapore for example 40% of those tested were contacted by the government rather

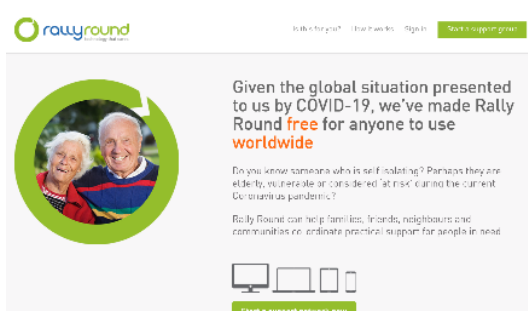


than self-presenting, because contact data showed they had been close to people with COVID-19. There are many other fields where government could operate in much more anticipatory ways – spotting and preventing problems rather than only curing them, whether in education, health or welfare, and using data and SMS as proactive tools.

Value: the crisis has shown the vital importance of public services, and their ethos. The most important workers in any society are the ones on the frontline, not just in health, and social care, but also in essential infrastructures. It's a paradox that they are so often the lowest paid or lowest status in the workforce. The dominant ideology of recent years – that devalued their work and saw it as natural that pay rocketed for CEOs or finance – now looks even more anachronistic.

Civic mobilisation: everywhere we are seeing an extraordinary mobilisation of societies to look after the isolated and elderly, such as the Collective Action Networks

in Cape Town. The UK for example has just mobilised over half a million volunteers in a day for the health service, using the GoodSam app (developed by Nesta). Other examples like RallyRound use platform technologies to orchestrate circles of support for those in need. These point to what should be being done



anyway as societies face epidemics of loneliness and the need for radical overhauls of care systems that can't only rely on paid professionals. But we will need much more comprehensive systems to handle work that lies between traditional paid jobs on the one hand, and traditional volunteering on the other.

Welfare: the extraordinary moves to put in place income support for individuals, and cash support for businesses, point to a very different possible future for government.



There have been massive [fiscal and monetary](#) actions, even bigger than during the financial crisis. The responses so far have included the UK offering 80% of pay to workers, Shanghai allowing firms

that didn't lay off employers were able to deduct social insurance payments and receive subsidies for employee on-the-job training; and Singapore providing an ambitious package of care and support including one-off cash payments to every adult. Some countries already have single accounts for businesses and citizens which in principle make it much easier to loan money on different terms, or to introduce new kinds of universal basic income (Singapore's MyInfo and Central Addressing System is one example; India's Aadhaar another as is Nemkonto in Denmark). The absence of anything like these has greatly hampered action in some countries.

Mental health: large scale isolation puts a big pressure on mental health, and manifests in domestic violence, depression, anxiety, and particular challenges for young men. Governments in the past have only concerned themselves with the most acute cases – but



population level mental health is fast becoming a policy concern (not least because of growing evidence on how different interventions can have an impact). The work of organisations like Action for Happiness, with strongly evidenced interventions to improve everyday mental health could be further integrated into public policy.

Finally, I turn to four meta issues for how government operates that have come into focus in recent weeks.

Command, control and decentralisation: the first concerns how governments respond. Many people are instinctively in favour either of strong central powers or of



decentralisation. But the most successful responses to COVID-19 use hybrids that combine great centralisation and great decentralisation. For some tasks – like shifting economic policy or deciding on isolation rules – countries need legitimate central command structures that can work very quickly, with full authority, and drawing on the best available insights of many different agencies. But they also need to link into highly

decentralised capacities that can improvise in the light of local conditions, and to encourage rapid learning from each level of the system (I've described these in the past as 'triggered hierarchies'). The command parts have often been put in place quite well – the learning systems are so far much less impressive. There is no doubt that the crisis is dramatically accelerating innovations of all kinds, and not just in ventilators, tests or emergency hospitals. India repurposed 10000 train carriages to be ambulances; Bogota quintupled bike lanes in response; Rwanda introduced hand sanitisers in urban centres. This surge of imagination is heartening. But there is very little systematic capture of these innovations – and few examples so far of using teams to document what's being learned so that it can be shared. This represents a big missed opportunity.

Global collaboration: the other meta issue is the weakness of international cooperation, despite the efforts of the WHO. This is once again highlighting the vital need for better coordination mechanisms – sharing data, knowledge, learning, equipment and expertise; joint action on vaccines; or collaboration on sharing intensive care facilities. The global bottom up systems have worked well – first spotting the outbreak and its risks, mapping innovations, and then crowd-sourcing solutions. But intergovernmental cooperation has looked sluggish and inept. There are a few exceptions – China has been very active in training officials in other countries, and Cuba has maintained its tradition of generous health diplomacy, while the UK has now heavily funded vaccine development. But the great majority of action has been national, and only national. Hopefully the age of anti-multilateralism may be coming to an end and better shared response systems can be put in place for next time.

Parliaments: the world's parliaments and assemblies have been amazingly slow to adapt to the crisis or to use the new tools – Zoom, Hangouts etc - that have become part of daily life in so many other organisations. GovLab at NYU have [a good site](#) which tracks some of the ways parliaments are using digital tools, and at Nesta last year we documented quite [a few of the ones parliaments should be using](#) both to tap into

expertise and to organise themselves. But so far few have come out of this crisis looking good, with most utterly tied up in anachronistic rules.

The next few months will bring intensive learning on how to manage the crisis, as well exit strategies. There's an extraordinary flowering of platforms to share ideas, like [this one](#) on social science. We'll be able to judge the importance of constitutional arrangements (like the ones that greatly constrain executives in Sweden for example) or whether there are big differences between countries where there is serious scientific expertise around cabinet tables and ones like the UK where the leaders are mainly ex journalists and lawyers.

But we also need to start planning for the peace. What new methods can be adapted from the crisis, particularly to slower burn crises like climate change? What new ways of thinking has it thrown up?

In a later blog I will return to the 'intelligence design' and 'intelligence assemblies' aspect of COVID-19 which I have written about extensively in the past (the improvised systems now being put in place for Coronavirus have obvious potential parallels for other issues, notably climate change). I am probably too obsessed with this. But to my eyes COVID-19 is making it much more obvious why we so badly need a new discipline and practice around mobilising intelligence assemblies – which is very different to traditional silo-based systems and to the recent consumerist focus of digital teams in governments.

So we should never waste a crisis. An incredible amount of thought, creativity and commitment is going into the responses around us right now. But how can we harness some of that for longer term impact? That's the question I'll be returning to repeatedly over the next few months.