

COVID-19 AS A GAME CHANGER

This covid-19 pandemic is so profound it is likely to create a new normal for our approach to how we deal with global challenges. How this future will look is not a given and we all have a role – and indeed a responsibility – to influence the outcome. Because of the pandemic, there is a good chance of a growing understanding among people and decision-makers of how interconnected our world is and how interdependent countries and people are. This could be a silver lining of covid-19 and bring out the best in us. The alternative, far scarier, is a retreat to isolationism and a down-turn in our combined capacity and willingness to deal with the common issues facing the planet and mankind. There have been dangerous steps in this direction, including the recent US decision to withhold funding to the World Health Organization, WHO.

Fifteen years ago, the Indian Ocean Tsunami killed 230,000 people; most of them perishing within just a few devastating hours. The outpouring of support, because people elsewhere felt solidarity, made a huge difference. Many lives were saved in the intermediate aftermath, reconstruction was quicker and a better preparedness for future events now exists thanks to investments in early warning systems. There are many other examples more akin to covid-19 when the world put its best foot forward. The eradication of smallpox and the reduction in the spread and lethal outcome of HIV/AIDS are success stories where a shared sense of purpose and global collaboration made the difference.

More often than not, however, a prevalent perception is that a crisis is something that happens to other people, somewhere else or only potentially in a distant future. People and decision makers tend to look the other way and define their world too narrowly, often at their own peril. That is precisely how the path to the covid-19 pandemic started, with local disbelief that anything so distant warranted concern, let alone action. This mindset inevitably resulted in drastic measures taken late, more lives lost, and economic disruption on a scale that could have been avoided.

The corona virus recognizes no border, favours no nationality, respects no culture, spares no community. Anyone can be infected. Many more see their livelihoods and life-chances threatened. We know all too well from previous experience that harm is always greatest for the vulnerable and the poor. A poor community or household could take many years to bounce back or may never recover. In this sense, based on earlier crises, we have not yet seen the worst of covid-19. Recovery will take a long time, even after the peak, or recurring peaks, of infections have subsided. Based on ample experience, recovery and prevention of future events will require international cooperation and coordination in addition to strong national efforts.

Because of the speed, wide spread and devastating impact of the corona virus, people are learning almost in real time that even when you at first appear unaffected, others may suffer from what you do or do not do, and you will suffer from their behaviour. This happens to hold true also of other global challenges. For example, like the corona virus, CO2 emissions, the chief cause of global warming, see no borders, and impact everyone on our planet. Your action or in-action makes a difference in our interconnected world.

The strong focus we now see on covid-19 is essential to save lives and livelihoods. The tendency at this stage to close borders and restrict movement seems justified temporarily. Inward looking efforts are

understandable, if maybe not always beneficial. Looking ahead, to prevent recurrence of this pandemic or deal effectively with other common challenges, collaboration and solidarity within and across countries is essential. Not just for reason of altruism but because it ultimately makes a difference for you, at home, wherever you are. You cannot close your borders to deal with infectious diseases in isolation from the rest of the world. The same applies to climate change as well as migration driven by poverty and conflict. Closing your border does not solve these root problems in our interconnected world.

The US decision to stop funding the Green Climate Fund was compensated by other countries increasing and in many cases doubling their financial support. Probably the same will happen over time with WHO and financial support to fight pandemics, though the current state of the world economy will make it difficult. Yet, the absence of the world's largest economy, or any country, is just not a way forward to dealing with global challenges.

With covid-19 there is no doubt a risk for collateral damage and setbacks in achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, the SDGs, and reduced funding for sustainable development and humanitarian response. Instead, I believe the world must take covid-19 as a rude wake-up call, and act with a renewed sense of urgency.

We must seize this opportunity to build back better. The world can and should emerge stronger after this destructive and unprecedented pandemic, strengthened in our determination to deal collaboratively and in solidarity with global challenges and united in our resolve to avoid, mitigate and adapt to global crisis.

Jan Mattsson

The author is chairman and co/founder of the Museum for the United Nations – UN Live, and former under-secretary-general of the UN.