

News from our societies – ICSW: COVID-19 – Five tests we face

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It is dangerous to write in the midst of a crisis when it will take time for what you have contributed to be published. As I sit down to put this news piece together at the end of March 2020, I know that much will happen in the near future that will change the situation as it is now. But I believe we face five tests as societies.

First is a solidarity test. We know that less wealthy countries are hit harder because they are all too short on health and social services, lack resources to provide social policy measures to compensate disappearing income sources and have insufficient means of communicating to the public. We also know that the poor in richer countries are hit harder because they have greater job insecurity and, in many cases, fewer options to access health services. Those less financially stable need the support of the more affluent world to get through this pandemic without too much damage, in both the short and the long run. And the vulnerable in wealthy countries must have a safety net that meets their needs.

Second is a test of our humanity. Elderly people and those with underlying health conditions are naturally hit harder by the pandemic. They must be protected to ensure the spread of the virus does not exceed the availability of resources to health services. Protection measures come at an enormous financial burden. There are voices saying it is more important to maintain society as we know it, even if we risk not being able to care for the most vulnerable. So what is the value of a life? Are elderly people worth less somehow? How our governments, societies and communities answer these questions will determine whether we are in this boat together or whether there are holes in the hull.

Third is a test of our relationship with the natural environment. For too long, humans have exploited natural resources in search of profit. We know that the risk of the pandemic can be positively correlated with the destruction of natural habitats and the consequent reduction of living space for wild animals. The natural balance is out of whack and can only be regained if we change direction and put people, not profit, in the driving seat.

Fourth is how entrenched our human rights laws are. Covid-19 is normalising the mass surveillance of citizens in some countries, using cell phone information as part of the track-and-trace strategy. This is undoubtedly wise as a temporary effort – most transmissions of the virus happen before someone is aware they are infected. Using citizens' personal data, contact tracing is easier than relying on the memory of the infected individual. However, it also hands those in power a mechanism to continue controls for other reasons, and as such making Orwell's 1984 vision a reality.

Finally, this is a political test. Borders are closed, nations tend to care for themselves and strongmen are strengthening their grip. Democracy can be the loser, international cooperation can be weaker and populism grows in a culture of fear. Scapegoats can be created. We have to stand against these trends and come out on the other side with continued international cooperation across borders.

We need to build bridges, not fences. And realise we are in this together. Survival is a matter of togetherness.

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