

A social interaction budget can be part of the response to COVID-19

*In the response to COVID-19 governments across the world faced a difficult choice: keep the economy open or open early the economy and face a large number of infections/ deaths (the case of Sweden, US and Brazil) or close important parts of the economy to reduce the number of infections/ deaths (the case of France, Spain, and Italy). There seems to be a trade-off between protecting public health and keeping the economy afloat. In this piece, **Alexandra M Bocse** (LSE) is arguing that the concept of a social interaction budget, and the way it gets spent, can enable countries to return to economic activity while keeping under control the infection rate.*

A concept that is very familiar to politics, as well as environmental studies scholars, is the concept of the carbon budget, the amount of carbon that we can spend while keeping the increase of global temperature within a certain limit. In a similar way, a country (assuming international travel restrictions are in place) and the world (if those restrictions are lifted) has, I argue, a limited amount of social interaction budget that allows it to keep the infection/death rate within a certain threshold. Community transmission still takes place around the world at a high speed ([CNBC 2020](#)). Once the virus is present in the community (as it is currently the case in many countries), social interaction will help it spread further. I argue that, as societies and economies reopen, governments should channel the use of the social interaction budget towards key economic areas and that they should also use techniques of stretching the social interaction budget.

Policymakers should channel the use of social interaction budget towards key economic areas

Many governments around Europe were faced with the difficult choice: do we open schools or factories first? Opening schools requires a very large amount of social interaction. Particularly, in pre-schools and primary schools social distancing is difficult to enforce, while adults working in a factory are more likely to follow social distancing guidelines. The educational trajectory of many students (particularly in developing and less digitalized countries) will suffer if schools do not reopen, but entire families will be severely hit financially if parents find themselves unemployed for months or even more (in the case of a recession). So probably the wise thing to do is to prioritise economic sectors where social interaction can be better controlled and, most importantly, that account for an important share of the GNP. In the case of Greece or Spain, this could be the tourism sector. In the case of Germany, it could be manufacturing.



Policymakers should also promote a framework that encourages the wise and fair use of the social interaction budget

During the pandemic, in many countries, the workforce is split into three broad categories: key workers ensuring basic services on the ground, workers from home, and those that cannot work from home and in most European countries benefit from at least partially paid leave from the government. It is a matter of social justice to provide an income for those whose jobs cannot be performed as they entail substantial social contact. The problem is that a furlough scheme inevitably frees some time and triggers the temptation to spend time outside the house. On a regular Thursday pre-pandemic, many would have been usually indoors, at work, but that was not the case in late June in the UK with many taking to the beaches during otherwise usual work hours ([Reuters 2020](#)). The presence in a crowded shop or on a crowded beach often translates into a higher infection rate and more work/risk for key workers such as nurses picking up extra shifts, which is arguably socially unjust towards them. Governments need to more clearly communicate that for those furloughed, now the 'job' entails staying safe and not contributing to the virus spread, above all. As economies gradually reopen, workers will inevitably spend some social interaction budget to perform their work. This means that there is less budget available for those that have not yet returned to economic activity.

Policymakers need to find ways to increase the social interaction budget

The social interaction budget that keeps the infection under a certain threshold and the R Number (how many people get infected by a single infected person) < 1 is limited. However, the use of PPE by people in their daily lives can allow for more social interaction while maintaining the infection rate constant. Countries in Asia have been quite successful in tackling COVID without introducing the strictest lockdown and this is very often attributed to the use of PPE and particularly face masks ([Tufekci 2020](#)). Studies are showing that if 80% of the people socially active wear masks the virus transmission could be halted ([Howard 2020](#)). For many countries securing face masks even for medical practitioners was difficult, therefore there was a certain degree of reluctance in recommending ordinary citizens wear masks. It would have put additional pressure on the PPE supply. Although scarves covering the nose and mouth or cloth masks might not offer a high degree of protection against the virus, it prevents the potentially asymptomatic or mild symptoms spreader project saliva droplets. It can also prevent young asymptomatic people touch their nose and immediately after that merchandise in the grocery shop or communal kitchen areas at the workplace. Several countries in Europe that have seen substantial drops in the contamination rate (Spain, The Czech Republic, Austria, etc.) made a long time ago compulsory the use of face masks in public spaces. In addition, face shields can prevent the reflex of touching the face and can help fight contamination from surfaces.

Several months into the European pandemic, the restrictions on the social and economic life in the UK remained extensive with substantial negative effects on the economy. Until early July, the UK economy remained partially closed with millions furloughed, yet the new infections rate was higher than in most European countries that had eased the lockdown and allowed people to resume their jobs (please see [Worldometers 2020](#)). Overall, the UK has the largest COVID death numbers in Europe and among G7 ([BBC 2020b](#)). The great majority of countries in the EU, by contrast, have had, at least until early July, a lower infection and death rate per capita and are now more advanced in lifting the lockdown. At least part of their success can be attributed to the way they managed in the last months their social interaction budget: closing schools early in the pandemic and deciding early on not to reopen schools this academic year due to concerns related to the proper implementation of social distancing among young students; better enforcing the lockdown (including through fines) and making sure fewer citizens violate the lockdown rules and misspend social interaction budget; adopting early on compulsory face masks and integrating into policy the evidence that came from Asia in this regard. Nevertheless, we are far from the end of this pandemic and earlier access to the vaccine for the UK could improve its overall record in coping with COVID-19. The concept of social interaction budget can help us design solutions for restarting the economy and limiting the damage made on it by future restrictions on social life until a very effective COVID-19 cure or vaccine is found.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the COVID-19 blog or LSE.