A new policy paradigm from the LSE Maryam Forum: 1. Reforming the way we deal with global emergencies

*Existing systems for dealing with global emergencies have struggled to rise to the challenge of the pandemic. **Erik Berglof, Adnan Khan, Hassan Gali (LSE)** and the **LSE Maryam Forum's global emergencies working group** sets out what needs to change.*

Over the past year, it has become clear quite how badly the systems for dealing with global emergencies have survived their first major test. Most have either proved unfit for purpose or have been hamstrung by inadequate leaders. Global emergencies demand coordinated responses, global public goods and exceptional leadership.

What needs to change?

Recommendation 1: A paradigm shift in crisis policymaking, which learns and adapts quickly to local circumstances

When we design policy responses for global emergencies, we need to recognise that they are "black swan" events: unpredictable, with a potentially massive global impact. Humanity needs a change in mindset: we need to prepare as much as possible, but also factor into planned responses the extreme uncertainty around the impacts when the shock actually hits. Planning for policy responses must incorporate the need for experimentation, and the mechanisms to learn from it in real time.
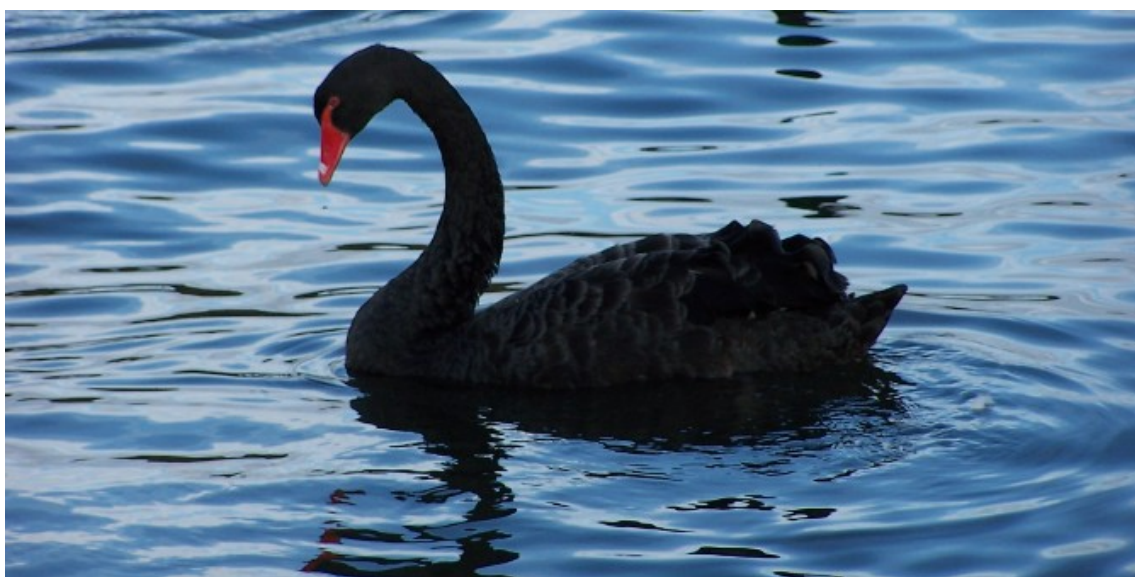

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The same shock can have very different impacts depending on local conditions. Africa has seen a muted health crisis thanks to a combination of demographic factors and infectious disease awareness, but it has suffered a major economic crisis as recessions in the rest of the world hit its economies. This means policy responses have to capture all relevant dimensions – both health and economic – and the intended and unintended consequences of policy.

Smart containment is key. Policymakers need to learn and act on real-time evidence. The approach will vary by space, time and phase of the crisis.

An integrated multi-disciplinary response is vital. The approach needs to manage financial stability, health and development outcomes without one jeopardising another.

Recommendation 2: Create integrated data infrastructure to support national preparedness, with protocols for data sharing and coordination

This digitised, geo-coded data infrastructure will incorporate layers of demographic and public sector data and new digital sources. These systems can be activated quickly and built on in real time to support planning and coordination. Traditional "early warning systems" may not be helpful in an unexpected shock, but a data infrastructure can be flexed and enable governments to take prompt action.

Digitalised data collection in real time can help with immediate responses to shocks such as natural disasters. Governments should invest in it. In emerging and more digitalised economies, private sector data can also be harvested to this effect (although this may miss specific groups, including the most vulnerable).

National data collection and analysis has been reasonably effective during the COVID crisis, yet data sharing and coordination between authorities (agencies, states, nations) has been poor. Fighting a catastrophe that does not recognise borders requires effective protocols for coordination and data sharing among different authorities.

Recommendation 3: A common set of principles for debt restructuring and debt relief, with possible pre-emptive debt relief for the poorest countries

For the poorest countries in Africa, COVID has primarily been an economic crisis. Under guidance from the IMF and the World Bank, the G20 has adopted limited debt relief. But those measures are unlikely to be enough to avert a debt overhang, or to create fiscal room for supporting a green and inclusive recovery. Moreover, China, a major creditor country, is not a member of some traditional debt restructuring processes such as the Paris Club.

Recommendation 4: Build resilient institutions at home and globally

The COVID-19 response had mixed results, but it was considerably better at the national than at the global level. Global institutions have made significant efforts, but have not been able to scale up their firepower. The shock has sometimes been beyond the institution's mandate and toolkit.

Global institutions such as the WHO need to be reformed – or even replaced. They should learn from the competitive yet highly co-operative research efforts. An alignment of national and global interest, data/information and research sharing, and active national government support have all contributed to the fast development of effective vaccines.

We urgently need to improve knowledge sharing. One way could be to develop a network of regional bodies to assess and disseminate best practice.

These recommendations are the first of a set of six produced by the Maryam Forum working groups.

This post represents the views of the authors and not those of the COVID-19 blog, nor LSE.

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