

Covid-19 as a Critical Juncture and the Implications for Advocacy

Duncan Green

London School of Economics and Political Science and Oxfam

Abstract

This paper discusses the possible longer-term impacts of the Covid-19 outbreak on political, economic and social systems. To shape the discussion, I use the concept of ‘critical junctures’ as moments of change. I then explore the potential impact on the aid sector, and the implications for progressive advocacy, whether by civil society organizations or others, in defending past gains, building on new opportunities or heading off new threats.

Policy Recommendations

- In the face of a critical juncture of the scale of Covid-19, activists should be wary of ‘business as usual’ – carrying on with their pre-crisis campaigns and advocacy as if Covid was nothing more than an annoying interruption, or at most, finding flimsy grounds to link ‘their’ campaign to the crisis.
- Instead they should stand back, becoming ‘reflectivists’ as well as activists in order to understand the evolving politics and public mood of the crisis, and the constraints and windows of opportunity/threat they present for activism
- In so doing, they will need to accept that some existing advocacy priorities will become less salient, while others acquire greater relevance and power, provided they can be convincingly linked to the crisis (e.g. gender-based violence or the importance of the care economy).
- New issues will also surface in the crisis, for example on the importance of personal space as a human right. Activists need to cultivate ‘lateral vision’ in order to spot such emerging issues and explore their progressive potential.
- New threats will also appear – what Naomi Klein has termed ‘disaster capitalists’ are historically more adept than progressives at seizing these windows of opportunity. Defensive strategies - stopping bad stuff from happening – are likely to become an important role for advocacy and campaigns as the crisis unfolds.

Introduction

This paper discusses the possible longer-term impacts of the Covid-19 outbreak on political, economic and social systems, its potential impact on the aid sector, and the implications for progressive advocacy, whether by civil society organizations or others. To shape the discussion, I use the concept of 'critical junctures' as moments of change.

The Coronavirus struck China, Europe and North America first, before moving onto the rest of the world. At the time of writing, the impact on developing countries was only just emerging. There, the initial social, political and economic impacts have come from the response to Covid, rather than the virus itself (death rates so far remain much lower than in Europe or the US). In particular, power grabs by governments and over-zealous enforcement of restrictions on movement by security forces are leading to criticism and unrest in a number of countries. Economies in poor countries are also taking a beating, with rising concerns on the impact of the slump in activity on poverty and food security. Over the coming months, monitoring how the politics of Covid unfolds will be an important task.

Given this time lag, and even though I generally work on issues of international development, this paper mainly discusses the Northern in its subject matter and sources, although it also begins a discussion on developing countries that will surely expand in the future. After finalising this latest version, I intend to put it to one side and focus on the development impact and response, but will return to the paper once the crisis is over to see what, if anything, stands the test of time.

I deliberately start with what I call a 'theory of change' – thoughts on how the wider world might change as a result of Covid-19 and the response. Only then do I move on to some brief thoughts on the impact on aid and how advocates can best respond to the Covid crisis.

Epidemics as Forks in the Road

The Black Death, which wiped out up to half of the English population in the mid-14th Century was also a fork in the road of European history. Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson [argue that](#) in Western Europe: 'The massive scarcity of labour created by the plague shook the foundations of the feudal order. It encouraged peasants to demand change'. In subsequent decades, wages rose and the English government tried to defend the status quo, triggering the Peasants Revolt of 1381, which captured most of London. Although it was put down, the government abandoned its efforts to block change and a free labour market stayed for good.

In Eastern Europe, in contrast, landlords responded to labour shortages with repression and succeeded in creating what became known as the 'Second Serfdom', including increasing amounts of forced labour. The diverging paths in response to the Plague reflect small differences in initial conditions, such as population density and the relative strength of landlords and peasants, which subsequently led to radically divergent paths over time, as Eastern Europe remained mired in feudalism, while Western Europe transitioned to waged labour.

The Black Death was just one prominent example of what political scientists call 'Critical Junctures' (CJs). Asked what he most feared in politics, British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan reportedly replied in suitably patrician style, 'Events, dear boy'. Such 'events' – be they scandals, crises or conflicts - can disrupt social, political, or economic relations. They throw the status quo and power relations into the air, and in so doing can open the door to previously unthinkable reforms. They act as a fork in the road, a moment of change in the path dependent evolution of political institutions and systems, which move them onto one path, and not others.

Importantly for the current crisis, little of this is foreseeable, either in advance or at the time. The small differences ([butterfly's wings](#)) that lead to different eventual outcomes

(tornados) can only be discerned after the event, if then.

The Black Death is not the only example. In [Plagues and the Paradox of Progress](#), health scholar Thomas Bollyky argues that health shocks have had other major impacts on institutions and society. 'Encounters with infectious disease have played a key role in the evolution of cities, the expansion of trade routes, the conduct of war and participation in pilgrimages.'

According to Bollyky, 'prevention and control depends on the cooperation of people and governments... Under pressure from social reformers and angry citizen mobs, governments of wealthy countries in the 19th Century constructed water and waste management systems, adopted housing codes and food regulations, promoted personal hygiene and entered into the first international health treaties.'

In the last 100 years, the two greatest pandemics have been the [Spanish flu](#) and HIV/AIDS. The flu outbreak of 1918-20 took hold in the final months of World War One and claimed anything up to 100m lives (10 times more than were killed in the war itself). Yet its political and institutional impacts remain hard to distinguish from the response to the War. , In one interesting subplot, the fact that [Woodrow Wilson was incapacitated by the flu](#) in the negotiations that ended the war meant that he was unable to resist the French demands to squeeze the defeated Germans for onerous reparations. A badly timed dose of flu helped pave the way for the rise of Hitler.

To date, HIV/AIDS has killed some 40m people. Researchers credit it with transforming global health, elevating the issue as a foreign policy priority and helping to raise billions of dollars for researching, developing, and distributing new medicines ([Bollyky](#)). It also introduced a new paradigm for the involvement of affected individuals and communities and changed the dynamics between caregivers, the pharmaceutical industry, public health establishment and international organizations, and affected communities. ([Piot, Russell and Larson](#)).

However, I am unaware of any research on its broader political and social impact and would welcome suggestions.

Other precedents for crises as CJs include the great [1958-62 famine](#) in China, following the misnamed 'Great Leap Forward'; the [Bengal famine of 1943](#), the collapse of the USSR, the 9/11 attacks, two World Wars and the Global Financial Crises of 1929 and 2008. Two (very) broad lessons arise from the last of these:

- Badly designed responses to crises, such as the punitive settlement agreed after World War One or the kleptocratic free-for-all that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, can put countries and continents on deeply negative pathways. Equally, well designed responses, such as the setting up of global institutions including the United Nations after World War Two, can have a much more beneficial long-term impact.
- CJs are not single moments. Seen through the telescope of historical distance, they may seem like points in time, but the reality when you are living through them (as we are now) is both more extended and much messier. During a crisis, what seems immediately important may subsequently fade into irrelevance. In the early days of the 2008 financial crisis, the rise of the G20 appeared to promise a new order of improved global co-operation and the eclipse of Northern countries' monopoly of the G7. But the G20 rapidly faded into insignificance; the deeper impact that emerged was of an erosion of trust and institutions and the rise of populism, leading to something closer to a vacuum of leadership at a global level (sometimes called the 'G zero').

In responding to a crisis, it is thus worth distinguishing between short term actions (responses to the crisis; issues of inclusion and exclusion; unintended consequences) and the long term (shaping the recovery; responding to big political, normative and

ideological shifts). Right now, most attention is understandably focussed on the short-term responses, but this paper instead explores the possible longer-term impacts.

Covid-19 and Global Inequality

As Boris Johnson found out, the virus assails human beings irrespective of our rank and privilege. But what happens next is acutely influenced by where we sit within a large range of inequalities.

As with HIV/AIDS, poverty and inequality are critical 'pre-existing conditions'. In all countries, poor people have worse health, and so are more vulnerable to the disease; they live in more cramped conditions and so find it harder to 'self-isolate'; they often work in informal, unregulated jobs that are likely to be overlooked by government safety net schemes.

In addition, some groups find it particularly difficult to follow guidance predicated on stereotypes of nuclear families, able to self-isolate in ample private housing. Overcrowded refugee camps, prisons or [migrant workers](#) hundreds of miles from home are particularly vulnerable. Poor women also face particular difficulties: in self isolation they may not be able to escape from abusive partners; as traditional custodians of the 'care economy', their burden of care is also likely to shoot up during and after the outbreak. Inequality *between* countries similarly ratchets up the effect on the poor – poor country governments are less able to respond, whether economically or politically, especially in so called 'fragile and conflict-affected states', where governments are often either absent or predatory.

Although this paper does not explore the immediate impact in detail, it is important to keep these inequalities in mind when discussing the medium and longer-term consequences and responses. One word of caution: although the immediate impact of the crisis seems almost certain to increase inequality, the longer term impact is less certain. There are some historical grounds for expecting some *reduction* in

inequality. Economist Thomas Piketty in his best-selling book [Capital in the 21st Century](#) highlighted the impact of world wars in wiping out accumulated capital and reducing wealth inequality. In his book [The Great Leveller](#), historian Walter Scheidel found that over a much longer term, plagues have played a similar role (Scheidel, p. 335).

The Covid-19 Critical Juncture: Possible long-term impacts

Covid-19 will act as a major stress test of current assumptions about how the world works, and our institutions and practices. They may not come out of it very well, according to [Ranil Dissayanake](#): 'We have allowed the economic model in much of the west to outsource risk, uncertainty and insecurity to labour through changes in firm structure and inter-relationships. This may have allowed greater expansion in the economy and stimulated innovation, but it has not been matched by innovation in social protection or support for the vulnerable, and if Covid is a stress test, this is the area I fear we are going to fail most miserably.' What follows are some thumbnail portraits of potential areas of political, social and economic impacts, often raising more questions than answers.

Politics

Covid-19 shines an unforgiving light on all political leaders and systems, exposing their strengths and weaknesses in preparing, detecting, responding and (eventually) leading the recovery from a crisis. All political systems are struggling to cope, and there are alarming signs of the USA and China, in particular, seeing this as a moment to prove the superiority of their own system/blame each other, rather than build new forms of cooperation, as has been the case with some previous CJs.

The Global and Institutional Legacy: Crises can resemble political earthquakes, releasing pent up forces in the tectonic plates of politics, triggering a rapid shift to a new balance of forces. Given its particularly chaotic handling of the pandemic to date, and the startling level of internal division on

display, could Covid-19 become a '[Suez moment](#)' for the USA, a critical juncture in its long term loss of global hegemony, as the Suez crisis was for the UK?

Some African scholars see Covid as a midwife for decolonization. According to [David Mwambari](#), of King's College London, 'As African countries started cancelling flights from former colonial countries and putting their citizens under quarantine, the myth of Western invincibility fell apart, alongside its corollary that only the Global South is susceptible to infectious epidemics..... while [Africans] will certainly also go through a tough period, they should see this crisis as an opportunity to fast track the process of decolonialisation.'

In addition to the fate of particular governments and leaders, the pandemic is likely to leave some kind of institutional legacy. Will it be a new wave of global and national collective action institutions, as after World War Two? Although this would be the logical response to the shock of a global pandemic, eg beefing up the WHO's role in to share medical technology and rapidly coordinate pandemic and other responses, Donald Trump's [mid-Crisis decision](#) to cut US funding to the WHO suggests this is not a given.

The way we frame discussions about policy: As Ranil Dissayanake suggests, the current crisis could lead to a change in the framing of what constitute desirable policies: if resilience to shocks is the aim, then [moving from a focus on efficiency to encouraging redundancy](#) (e.g. having multiple failsafe mechanisms, even if that entails greater expense) makes more sense; it may also require a move from building 'maximizers' to 'stabilizers' such as (in social policy) social protection, universal basic income, improved sick and unemployment benefits or other automatic social safety nets, that kick in early on in a crisis to smooth out the bumps. While the 2008-11 financial crisis is often credited with introducing social protection to policy frameworks in many poor countries, the buzz this time has been around Universal Basic Income, with [Pope Francis](#) becoming perhaps

the most prominent advocate of UBI as a response to the crisis.

Climate Change could act as an early litmus test of the nature of COVID-induced shifts in the political landscape. When the crisis delayed COP26 convenes in Glasgow in 2021, we could see just how much has changed in political narratives and priorities on issues such as the primacy of economic growth, sustainability, system resilience and collective action and cooperation. In April 2020 170 Dutch academics gave a flavour of what might be in the pipeline, calling for [a radical shift in economic thinking](#) during and after the COVID crisis, based on moving away from GDP as the main indicator of progress, to a focus on redistribution, 'regenerative agriculture', a reduction of consumption and travel, and debt cancellation, for small and medium sized enterprises in the North and entire economies in the Global South.

National Politics: [Nic Cheeseman](#), a professor of democracy and international development, sees three different mechanisms through which Covid undermines democracy at a national level: The most obvious mechanism is that authoritarian leaders use COVID-19 to ban rallies and protests, and in some cases cancel elections, for example, by declaring states of emergency in [some 50 countries in the month to 6th April](#).

A less obvious mechanism is that authoritarian leaders simply do more of what they have always been doing in the knowledge that no one is paying attention. The third mechanism is more universal and less intentional, at least in the short term. The assumption of emergency powers by governments creates long-term problems because these powers - and the new technologies developed to respond to crises - are rarely fully reversed when the crisis is over. This 'ratchet effect' is far more insidious than the other two.

These debates also reflect deeper shifts in the tectonic plates of political debate. The war for Boris Johnson's ear is in large part a battle between notions of individual and

collective rights. Which should take precedence – an individual’s right to move about, shop and interact with others, or the collective right to curtail these freedoms in the common interest of public health?

The latter is the clear winner in confronting the virus, but will that victory be temporary or lead to a longer-term shift away from liberal individualism? A striking [editorial in the Financial Times](#) on 3rd April made a powerful argument for the latter:

‘Radical reforms — reversing the prevailing policy direction of the last four decades — will need to be put on the table. Governments will have to accept a more active role in the economy. They must see public services as investments rather than liabilities and look for ways to make labour markets less insecure. Redistribution will again be on the agenda; the privileges of the elderly and wealthy in

question. Policies until recently considered eccentric, such as basic income and wealth taxes, will have to be in the mix.’

The crisis may also have profound impacts on the new wave of populist leaders such as Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro, Mexico’s Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, India’s Narendra Modi and of course, the USA’s Donald Trump, whose erratic leadership and contempt for both science and institutions have been badly exposed by the crisis. The Global Financial Crisis of 2008 accelerated the erosion in trust in institutions and leaders, contributing to Brexit and the rise of populism: will the disastrous performance of populist leaders, contrasted with the successful reliance on science and institutions to keep us safe, come to be seen as the start of populism’s decline?

Ways forward				
Data tools for the covid-19 pandemic				
Application	Purpose	Data source	Civil liberties risk	Where it’s happening
Quarantine enforcement	Knowing people are where they should be	GPS data sent from bracelet or phone	Medium	Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, China
Contact tracing	Knowing whose paths have crossed	Top down: Government takes data from platforms	High	Singapore, S. Korea
		Bottom up: Phones provide data to each other	Low	Worldwide
Flow modelling	Knowing how many people pass through places, and how quickly	Mobile-phone-tower data	Low	Google, US, probably more
Social-graph making	Knowing which people tend to meet repeatedly	Mobile-phone-tower data with machine learning	High	Nowhere known

Source: *The Economist*

Nowhere has the encroachment on democratic and civic space been more apparent than over the issue of surveillance. Data protection has been swept aside in many countries in the interests of tracking and containing the pandemic (see Economist summary table, above), but as Yuval Noah Harari told [Channel 4 News](#) on 27th March:

‘When it’s over, some governments will say yes, but there is a second wave, or Ebola, or

just flu’ – the tendency will be to prolong surveillance indefinitely – the virus could be a watershed moment. And now it is under the skin – governments are not just interested in where we go, or who we meet, but even in what’s happening inside our bodies – our temperature, blood pressure, medical condition.’

Writing in [Global Policy](#), Nathan Alexander-Sears fears that ‘this expansion of

state [biopower](#) will become an enduring feature of a new biopolitics for the purposes of “security” and excavates an extraordinarily prescient passage about the politics of quarantine, from Michel Foucault’s [Discipline and Punish](#) (1975):

‘First, a strict spatial partitioning... Each street is placed under the authority of a syndic, who keeps it under surveillance; if he leaves the street, he will be condemned to death.... This surveillance is based on a system of permanent registration: reports from the syndics to the intendants, from the intendants to the magistrates or mayor. At the beginning of the ‘lock up’, the role of each of the inhabitants present in the town is laid down, one by one; this document bears ‘the name, age, sex of everyone, notwithstanding his condition’: a copy is sent to the intendant of the quarter, another to the office of the town hall, another to enable the syndic to make his daily roll call. Everything that may be observed during the course of the visits—deaths, illnesses, complaints, irregularities is noted down and transmitted to the intendants and magistrates. The magistrates have complete control over medical treatment; they have appointed a physician in charge; no other practitioner may treat, no apothecary prepare medicine, no confessor visit a sick person without having received from him a written note ‘to prevent anyone from concealing and dealing with those sick of the contagion, unknown to the magistrates’. The registration of the pathological must be constantly centralized. The relation of each individual to his disease and to his death passes through the representatives of power, the registration they make of it, the decisions they take on it.’

Watching some of the more draconian responses 45 years on, all that Foucault missed was the way digitization has made this process both easier and more efficient.

Impact on Decentralization: A seismic shock of this severity is bound to lead to upheavals at a national level. In Pakistan, India and Brazil, sub-national governments (provinces/states like Sindh, Kerala or Rio) [reacted more decisively than national ones](#), which were more reluctant to take action (I’d

be interested to hear why that might be). Firm action, at least in the early days of the pandemic, seems to earn more public trust than indecision or dismissal, so where there is an effective local response, we may be seeing an emerging social contract between citizens and the local state, which could shift the balance of political power, post-crisis.

Will the politics of Covid be different in poor countries? As the virus spread to low and middle income countries, governments initially imported and imposed northern responses such as self isolation and lockdown. This prompted a chorus of criticisms that different policies were needed for poor country contexts. ‘It’s hard to wash your hands when [380 families share three taps](#)’ observed [Vincent Lali](#) in Cape Town. Lockdowns seem particularly unsuited to informal and rural economies, [according to Ndidi Nwuneli](#): ‘It is planting season in most parts of the Continent, and yet farmers are being asked to sit at home.’

More fundamentally, Nigerian writer and activist [OluTimehin Adegbeye](#) wrote that ‘across Africa, people survive difficulty by coming together as communities of care, not pulling apart in a retreat into individualism.’ As activists and grassroots organizations start to respond to these unsuited policies, as well as the widespread violations of human rights during coercive lockdowns, it seems likely that new forms of politics will emerge from the crisis, although it is still too early to say what they might look like.

The Political Critical Juncture: Governance practitioner and analyst [Graham Teskey](#) [summarized](#) the potential political forks in the road in the table below.

Negative Consequences	?	Positive Consequences	?
Will the adoption of Emergency Powers ratchet many governments towards retaining undemocratic and unaccountable powers?		Will the experience of Covid 19 restore demands for the use of reason, evidence and data in public policy making?	
Will the effect be the further shrinking of democratic spaces, and the number and robustness of independent voices and data sources (media, CSOs etc) that has been noted in the last few years?		Will there be a widespread reaction that state capability (as both Fukuyama and Kleinfeld argued) has been excessively eroded in many rich western countries? Will more resources be poured back into basic and essential services, especially for the most vulnerable and at risk?	
Will some governments be tempted to cancel or postpone elections as a result of Covid 19?		Will it restore citizens' trust in the state and its leadership once the crisis is over?	
Will this experience encourage governments to announce more 'Emergencies'?		Will it trigger demands for more broad-based reform and renewal of the state and its potential for the public good?	
Will governments seek to legitimate broader, deeper and more consistent data collection, collation and tracking of citizens whereabouts, purchase, communications and habits?		The acceptance that the state has a central role to play in economic and social development – it cannot just stand back and 'get out of the way'	
Will citizens withdraw legitimacy if states go too far in exercising their Emergency Powers?		Will this moment come to be seen as a 'Critical Juncture' – a realisation that 'we must do things differently from now on' and that 'Big Government' may not be so bad after all?	

Society

Social norms: The expectations that guide assumptions and behaviours in how we relate and treat our fellows, can change in the aftermath of a CJ. This can have impact on policies and advocacy, for example in the way the 2008 financial crisis contributed to increased concern over levels of inequality.

But they can also affect more day to day social interactions.

Gender: The crisis is [heavily gendered](#), both in impact and response. Women comprise the majority of health and social care workers and are on the front lines of the fight against COVID-19. Mass school closures have particularly affected women because they still

bear much of the responsibility for childcare. Women already do three-times more unpaid care work than men – and caring for relatives with the virus adds to the burden. In many developing countries, the informal economy (often predominantly female) is receiving much less state attention than waged work. There is a clear risk of [increased violence against women](#) as a result of self-isolation. What is not yet clear is whether this will lead to longer term rethinking of, for example, the importance and policy priority given to the care economy. World War One was followed by an upsurge in women's emancipation, whereas after World War Two, women were driven out of the workforce and back into the home. Which will it be this time?

Solidarity: The extraordinary [mutual aid response](#) and [explosion of volunteering](#) in many countries could be a turning point in many people's relationship with their communities. It seems unlikely that they will all disappear once the virus is defeated – some could morph into social movements, perhaps in the way that the civic action in response to Mexico's 1985 earthquake sowed the seeds for [new social movements](#) that ultimately led to the overthrow of Mexico's one party state.

That solidarity could also be reflected in a new 'intergenerational social contract' – young people are concerned and looking after vulnerable older people in the crisis, but what will be the wider impact on inter-generational equity? In a paper on the long term impacts of Covid-19, [Alex Evans and David Steven](#) argue that:

'The young are being asked to sacrifice and to step up for the old. The vast majority accept that their parents and grandparents are rightly our immediate priority - but solidarity between the generations must work both ways. Redistribution from older people with assets is part of the answer. This is also the time for older generations to support the decisive action on climate change and on more sustainable, equitable, and resilient patterns of development that many younger voters desperately want.'

But there are more depressing potential impacts too. I am struck by my own reactions as I pass people in the street and see them as potential sources of infection, rather than individuals. My brother rails against London as a cesspit of infection. Will Covid-19 further erode our sense of a common humanity?

Space as a Human Right: At a personal level, the sudden limitation/removal of public space through lockdown makes us acutely conscious of space as a public good. How much private space we have access to will determine how painful or otherwise the next few months will be. Will the crisis lead to new priority and attention being given to the right to space?

Travel and Movement: Environmentalists are celebrating an effective end to carbon emissions from air and road transport and pleading for such shifts to be irreversible. Business travel should be replaced by Zoom chats. Whether this will happen in the work space may depend on the lockdown experience of the quality and cost of online interaction (and people learning to go on mute), compared to the face to face version. But in leisure, it is hard to see why tourism and associated travel should not revert to its pre-existing growth trend after the crisis passes, unless governments choose to pass significant new legislation to deter it.

The Economy

The extraordinary impact on the global economy (far more serious than that of the 2008 financial crisis) hardly needs rehearsing here. In the longer term, the economic slump is likely to leave a political legacy. *The Economist* believes that:

'Perhaps the most important lesson of 500 years of history, however, is that nothing has helped boost state power in Europe and America more than crises.'



It believes that 'the world is in the early stages of a revolution in economic policymaking.' Austerity has gone out the window; 'whatever it takes' is on the lips of the world's leaders. It even sees a possible knock-on effect: 'If central banks promised to fund the government during the coronavirus pandemic, they might ask, then why shouldn't they also fund it to launch an expensive war against a foreign enemy or to invest in a Green New Deal?'

This may of course be wishful thinking – magic money trees abounded during the global financial crisis, but rapidly disappeared in the upsurge of austerity that followed.

Low- and middle-income country economies: In the early days of the Coronavirus outbreak, most attention was focussed first on China, then on Europe and the US as the virus spread there. Although at the time of writing (mid-April), the direct health impact on developing countries is variable and in most cases fairly modest compared with Europe or the US, the economic, social and political impact is anything but.

By 28th March, [The Economist](#) was reporting 'Foreign investors have pulled \$83bn from emerging markets since the start of the crisis, the largest capital outflow ever recorded.'

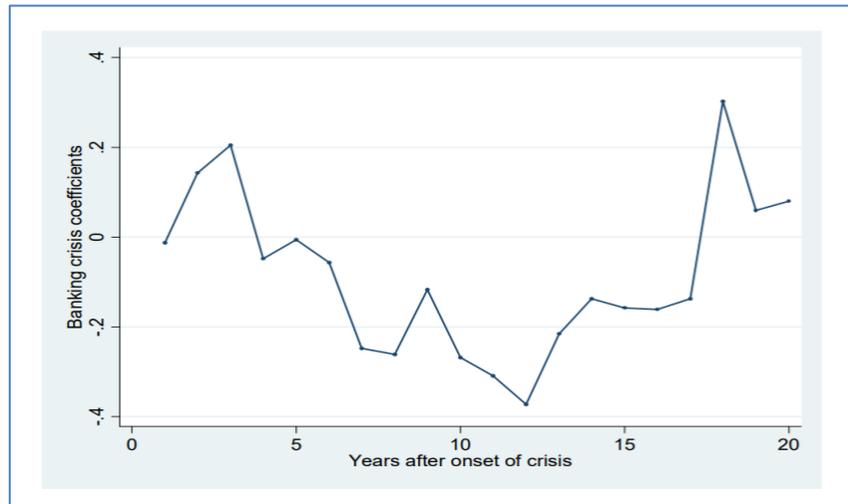
Remittances from migrant workers – often a crucial lifeline that globally comes to four times the volume of aid – are also bound to fall in the global shutdown.

On 9th April the [World Bank predicted](#) that 2020 would see Africa's first recession in 25 years. In [analysis](#) published by the United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU-WIDER), [Andy Sumner](#) and [Eduardo Ortiz-Juarez](#) of King's College London and [Chris Hoy](#) of the Australian National University have estimated that as many as half a billion people could be forced into poverty, or 8% of the world's population.

Drilling down to national level, [African Development Bank economists Martin Fregene and Atsuko Toda](#) remind us that even before the COVID-19 crisis, Africa was already facing 3 crises: locusts, droughts and foreign exchange losses. The arrival of COVID-19 on the African continent creates a convergence which "sets the stage for an imminent food crisis—unless measures are taken to mitigate the impact of the pandemic." The sums involved are vast. [UNCTAD](#) has called for \$2.5 trillion to rescue the economies of developing countries. This would be made up of \$1 trillion in debt relief, \$1 trillion in additional liquidity mobilized through [SDRs](#) and \$500bn in aid to support developing country health systems.

What does this mean for Aid?

[World Bank research](#) on the impact of national banking crises in donor countries in 24 financial crashes spread over the 30 years to 2007 found that aid budgets behave like wily coyote running off the end of a fiscal cliff, [continuing to rise for 2-3 years before going into a 15 year U-shaped fall and recovery](#) (see below graph). Despite dire predictions, this turned out not to be the case in the global financial crisis of 2008-11, during which aid budgets continued largely unaffected.



Impact of Banking Crises on Net Disbursed Aid Provided by Crisis-Affected Donors, 1977-2007

Which will it be this time? Compared to 2008, the consensus behind aid seems much more fragile, with a rising use of language of national interest and a re-tying of aid budgets clearly to evidence. It seems unlikely that aid budgets will survive unscathed as governments seek to pay off the massive debts incurred in responding to Covid.

There are grave concerns about the implications of the crisis for the existing work of aid agencies. They will be forced to respond to what could become an extraordinary humanitarian situation – imagine the impact of Coronavirus running riot in overcrowded refugee camps with few facilities – and also to maintain work on existing priorities.

An [MSF post](#) captured the prevailing mood:

'As MSF, we will also need to manage the gaps we will face in staffing our other ongoing emergency projects. Our medical response to measles in DRC needs to continue. So too does our response to the emergency needs of the war-affected communities of Cameroon or the Central African Republic. These are just some of the communities we cannot afford to let down. For them, COVID-19 is yet another assault on their survival. This pandemic is exposing our collective vulnerability. The powerlessness felt by many of us today, the cracks in our feeling of safety, the doubts about the future. These are all the fears and concerns felt by so many in

society who have been excluded, neglected or even targeted by those in positions of power.'

Over the medium term, there may be a war for hearts, minds and crisis-constrained wallets between inward looking 'charity begins at home' mindsets and the counter-argument that the crisis clearly shows that global problems do not stop at borders – health (like climate change, migration and many other challenges) is a collective action problem that requires collective solutions, including aid. It is worth remembering that public and political support for aid did not collapse after the 2008 financial crisis, despite dire predictions at the time.

Searching for a silver lining, [Chris Roche](#) argues that the Covid-19 crisis could enable the aid business to finally meet its failed promises to localize funding and control in the hands of national organizations in developing countries. Expats will not be able to travel (whether through visa restrictions or their own organizations health and safety procedures). In their absence 'Local services and people will step up, as they do in every emergency, only this time their efforts are less likely to be camouflaged, or indeed undermined, by their international partners.'

Roche argues that this temporary, crisis-driven localization could become permanent, 'creating the physical and human infrastructure which allows for the arm's-

length, carbon-friendly, at-a-distance support that enables the emergence of locally led processes.’

Some Implications for Advocacy and Campaigns

The crisis has also provided a stress test for both the style and content of a range of NGO advocacy on issues including social, environmental and economic policy. Advocacy around the pandemic is likely to combine some or all of the following, with the blend changing over time:

1. Advocacy bearing witness to the impact of the pandemic, especially on vulnerable populations that are not getting sufficient attention from policy makers (e.g. those in shanty towns, prisons etc).
2. Advocacy for particular policy responses, such as debt relief, or safety nets for those in the informal economy.
3. Advocacy to address the unintended negative consequences of the responses – for example the rise in gender-based violence during lockdown.
4. Advocacy to shape the priorities of subsequent recovery policies.
The tone and content of advocacy and campaigns will need to adapt to where we are in that sequence – business as usual is neither wise, nor feasible.

Tone: At a time when the public is anxious, scared, and in need of comfort, I am startled by how much of the advocacy retains an angry, finger-wagging tone. Other activist narratives oscillate between utopia and

dystopia at disorienting speed. All too often, the general message seems to be ‘we were right before; now because of the virus, we are even righter. Why aren’t you listening? You must be stupid and/or evil.’

I am not the only one. Writing in The Guardian, [Martin Kettle observed](#):

‘Both left and right are currently guilty of acting as though nothing has really changed. Those on the left who believed before Covid-19 that Britain was collapsing under the weight of social inequality, a lack of Keynesian demand management or the folly of Brexit have looked at the crisis and concluded that, yes, the pandemic proves that they were right all along. Yet those on the right who believed beforehand that the economy was more reliably run in their hands, that borders needed to be rather more tightly controlled, and that nation states must make their own decisions feel equally vindicated.’

Getting righteous and angry hardly seems a useful or effective approach right now. As Leila Billing writes in her post on [feminist leadership and the crisis](#):

‘Holding feet to the fire, and espousing blistering critiques of our global economic, political and social systems will be paralysing and hope-quashing. As leaders, we must work collectively with others to put forward visions of a more just, equitable and inclusive future.’

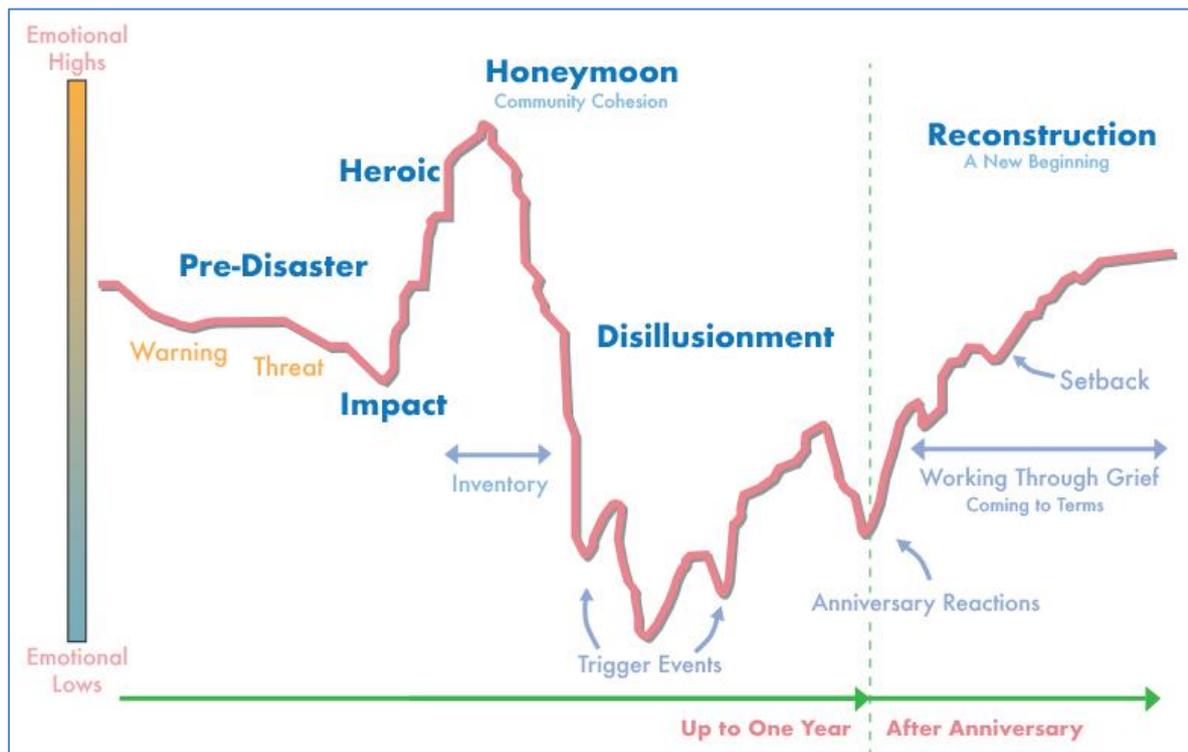
A [piece on Global Dashboard](#) by Kirsty McNeill made the case for a change in tone, summarized in these ‘12 rules’:

12 rules for communicating during COVID19:

1. Appeal to the Larger Us
2. Talk about our interdependence, not our interests
3. Amplify the hope
4. Show health workers as heroes
5. Remind people there's a plan #ForPeopleForPlanet
6. Make it manageable
7. Put communities, not organisations, centre stage
8. Talk about Britain's contribution to the collective efforts
9. Be patient about our other issues
10. Allow for anxieties
11. Make inequality tangible
12. Practice the cooperation we preach

But conversations with activists in other countries suggested this discourse (McNeill's piece was entitled 'This is a Love Story') was rather Eurocentric. Elsewhere, anger is widespread over how those in positions of power are using the crisis to increase repression, corruption and inequality. Even in Europe, it is likely that love will have a relatively short shelf life, especially in those

countries (such as the UK), where governments appeared to have seriously mishandled the response. This graph (source [here](#)) of psychological responses to disaster provides useful food for thought about how the love/solidarity v anger/accountability dynamic could play out.



Content: What might work better than knee-jerk ambulance-chasing? Some thoughts:

In the short term, be more prepared to welcome positive movement from the government or private sector. Monitor impact and feed back quickly and firmly on issues of exclusion and unintended consequences for vulnerable populations (for example on the likely [upsurge in domestic violence](#) during lockdown). Suggest positive alternatives or solutions. Use the crisis to build new relationships and earn trust for the future.

A nice local example comes from Myanmar, where senior local staff at the [Centre for Good Governance](#) spotted an opportunity to support the response to Covid-19. In the early days of the outbreak, they set up meetings with senior officials in the capital using their existing networks in government. At the request of a senior reform-minded official they hired an animator and rapidly produced an animation explaining Covid-19, the government's response, and actions everyone in the community could take to contain the outbreak.

The animation was promptly adopted by the government after feedback from the national response committee and has now been distributed across government and community social media forums in Myanmar. This, on the face of it, had little to do with CGG's focus on local government reform other than supporting the government to provide accurate information. Yet it cemented crucial relationships and political capital that can now be used to nudge the conversation on policy and system considerations during the response. It was also a step in the right direction for building public trust in the government's ability to act decisively in the crisis, and to do so transparently.

What emerges in the medium/long term is unpredictable, and activists will need to 'dance with the system' as it changes around them:

- Some existing advocacy priorities will become less salient – a real challenge to organizations where advocates become deeply identified with 'their' issue.

- Some advocacy priorities will become more relevant and powerful, provided they can be convincingly linked to the crisis (see the gender-based violence example, or the importance of the care economy).
- But new issues will also emerge, like the earlier discussion on space as a human right. After the Global Financial Crisis, smart advocates for economic justice realized that the new normal was fertile ground for reinventing the Tobin Tax as a global, remarkably effective campaign for a Financial Transactions Tax (aka [Robin Hood Tax](#)), which 12 years on is still being negotiated by 10 countries in the EU. Similar imagination and persistence will be required to make sure this latest crisis '[does not go to waste](#)'.
- New threats will also appear. In [The Shock Doctrine](#), and her [recent coverage of the pandemic](#), Naomi Klein has pointed out that what she terms 'disaster capitalists' are historically much more adept than progressives at seizing these windows of opportunity. Defensive strategies - stopping bad stuff from happening – are likely to become an important role for advocacy and campaigns as the crisis unfolds.

Recommendations for Advocates and Campaigners

Faced with a critical juncture of this impact, activists should avoid simply carrying on with business as usual, or trying too crudely to attach 'their' pre-existing issues to the crisis. Instead they should seek to be 'reflectivists' as well as activists, investing time and mental bandwidth in understanding the changes in the political, economic and social landscape arising both from the pandemic itself, and the responses to it.

'Dancing with the system' in that way is likely to present new areas of activism, whether new opportunities and issues that enter public debate, or new threats such as rising

inequality, encroachments on civil liberties, or the loss of livelihoods of poor families and communities. Priorities and possibilities will change.

So too should the tone and narrative adopted by activists. They need to align with the public mood and that of the decision makers they are seeking to influence. There will be waves of optimism and pessimism, of solidarity and anger. If activists' tone is too far out of synch with those moods, their messages risk being lost or provoking a backlash.

Final Thoughts

In a crisis, people often seek certainty. Those wielding crystal balls suddenly acquire an eager audience. I believe they are a dangerous delusion, and have long since embraced ambiguity and uncertainty (sometimes to the irritation of my more gung-ho colleagues).

Based on past experiences of crises as critical junctures, this paper has instead offered some precedents for the current moment, and ideas for how to navigate through the fog. That is the best I can do.

In finding our way through that fog, it is important for activists in the present crisis not to panic and latch onto the first issue that surfaces in the early stages of a CJ, nor look only through the blinkers of our personal or institutional pre-crisis priorities. Instead we need to develop a form of 'lateral vision' that lives with uncertainty and spots new issues and opportunities for change as they emerge – new waves to ride in the search for progressive change, as well as new threats that must be confronted. Doing so increases the chances that something good (or not as bad) will come out of this crisis.

There is an important role for real-time research in spotting and understanding those new waves as they emerge.

Stepping back from the detail of this paper, I am struck by the gulf between the discussion in governments such as the UK and US, and the response from the ground. At the level of national leadership, the moment feels more

like World War One – a crisis that bequeaths a legacy of suspicion and non-cooperation for years or decades to come, sowing the seeds of future crises. But in the streets and communities, the upsurge in solidarity and compassion feels much more World War Two, a moment of courage and creativity, of new forms of human organization emerging to make the world a better place.

The question for advocates and campaigners then becomes how do we enable that World War Two spirit and commitment to find rapid and lasting political expression?

Karl Marx once [wrote](#) (in more gender-blind times) that:

'Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.'

If there is one message from this paper it is that advocates and campaigners must be 'reflectivists' as well as activists, however hard that is in such turbulent times. Fired up by what Martin Luther King called '[the fierce urgency of now](#)', they must embrace, study and understand that history in order to shape it. Because it is a history that is being written right now, by all of us.

Dr Duncan Green is a Professor in Practice in International Development at the London School of Economics and Senior Strategic Adviser at Oxfam GB. His daily development blog is [From Poverty to Power](#). He can be contacted on d.j.green@lse.ac.uk or on twitter at [@fp2p](#).

A number of people have made helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. They include Victoria Austin, Esme Berkhout, Kieran Breen, Jake Broadhurst, Paul O'Brien, Anna Bwana, Talia Calnek-Sugin, Suzanne Cant, Fred Carden, Steve Commins, Mairi Dorward, Philip Edge, Paula Feehan, Harriet Freeman, Mark Fried, Larry Garber, Jonathan Glennie, Steve Golub, Amanda Griffith, Irene

Guijt, Molly Hall, Tom Kirk, Suying Lai, Stephanie Leonard, Narayan Manandhar, Kevin Zakariah Ndemera, Julian Peach, Mackenzie Schiff, Matthew Spencer, Graham Teskey, Tom Wingfield. I would also like to thank Global Policy and the LSE for hosting a webinar to present the draft, the 130 people who joined it online, and the discussants: Eva-Maria Nag, Alcinda Honwana and Dan Banik. I thank them all for their help, but any mistakes or misunderstandings are my sole responsibility.