

REFLEXIVITY IN THE AGE OF PANDEMIA: ADAPTIVE POLICY MAKING AND THE COVID-19 CRISIS

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1.0 Introduction

The year 2020 will be remembered as the beginning of the Age of Pandemia. A new period in human history when people and nation-states come to the realisation that the risk of pandemic has become structural to our hyperconnected globalised society. Just as the global movement of finance, labour, goods and technology has transformed the planet dramatically over the last century, so have the global disruptions to ecological systems and human consumption patterns heightened the risk of pandemics in our everyday life. The Covid-19 crisis has shocked us to the vulnerability of our global system and the systemic risk posed by highly infectious diseases.

This is an important point. The risk of a pandemic is not an external threat but a by-product or 'externality' of modern industrial society. A risk that is embedded within the very structure of our contemporary community - not any different from the risk of a nuclear reactor meltdown or the crashing of global financial markets. In this 'Risk Society', a term coined in 1992 by German sociologist Ulrich Beckⁱ, such pandemics will continue to crop-up as new and novel human pathogens emerge from the mutative cycles of modernity.

How should policy makers respond to such a risk? We argue that the current tendency of using the war metaphor is not the way to respond. Such a metaphor is useful to mobilise and rally people around a short-term external threat. But it is also the root cause for the chaos we are experiencing now - the lack of government preparedness despite having experienced similar events such as the 'Spanish' Flu, SARS or the Zika virus epidemic throughout the last century. The war metaphor masks the fact that the threat of

pandemic is a long game requiring a more complex response at the local, national and global levels of society. We require far-reaching changes to the way we design and organise our cities and supply chains, and a rethinking of the way we interact and transact as a global society. Arundhati Roy wrote recently that, "Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anewⁱⁱ." In this paper, we argue that such a response would require reshaping policy making around the concept of reflexivity and made operational through an adaptive policy making approach.

2.0 Living with Uncertainty

As we enter the fourth month of 2020 over 1.6 million people in 203 countries have been infected by SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes Covid-19. As a respiratory illness it manifests in many forms, mainly as a dry cough and fever. For most, the symptoms are mild or not noticeable. Covid-19 is particularly damaging because of its highly infectious characteristic. A feature that allows it to spread if undetected for weeks in a patient until his or her defense system is overwhelmed and requires hospitalisation support to recover. An estimated 16% of people require hospitalisation for up to 12 days; 3.8% end up in critical ICU care for over a weekⁱⁱⁱ. The data that does exist suggests that people with two or more specific comorbidities (diabetes, being 60 years of age, recent incidence of cancer, hypertension and underlying respiratory disease) are particularly vulnerable^{iv}.

The rapid spread of the disease has imposed an unusual strain on public health systems, with even the richest countries in the OECD finding themselves stretched to breaking-point. Nation-states are scrambling

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to secure medical equipment and testing material to identify, treat and pacify the raging pandemic. Governments have overcome their initial inertia and imposed population movement restrictions to contain the spread of the virus. All the time painfully aware that their actions collectively have precipitated a cardiogenic shock on the global economy - as businesses face the triple blow of a demand, supply and liquidity crunch.

Governments now are struggling to devise policy tools and settings that enable society to gradually return to a new normal. The whole of society cannot be practicing extreme social distancing for months on end. There will need to be staggered and gradual relaxing of regulations, some applied at the national scale others at the city or district level. The key questions, though, are: when do we relax lockdown regulations and what thresholds do we apply in the event that cases increase? The answer is nobody really knows. We will have to 'feel' our way out of this and assess risk based on new information and events as they unfold.

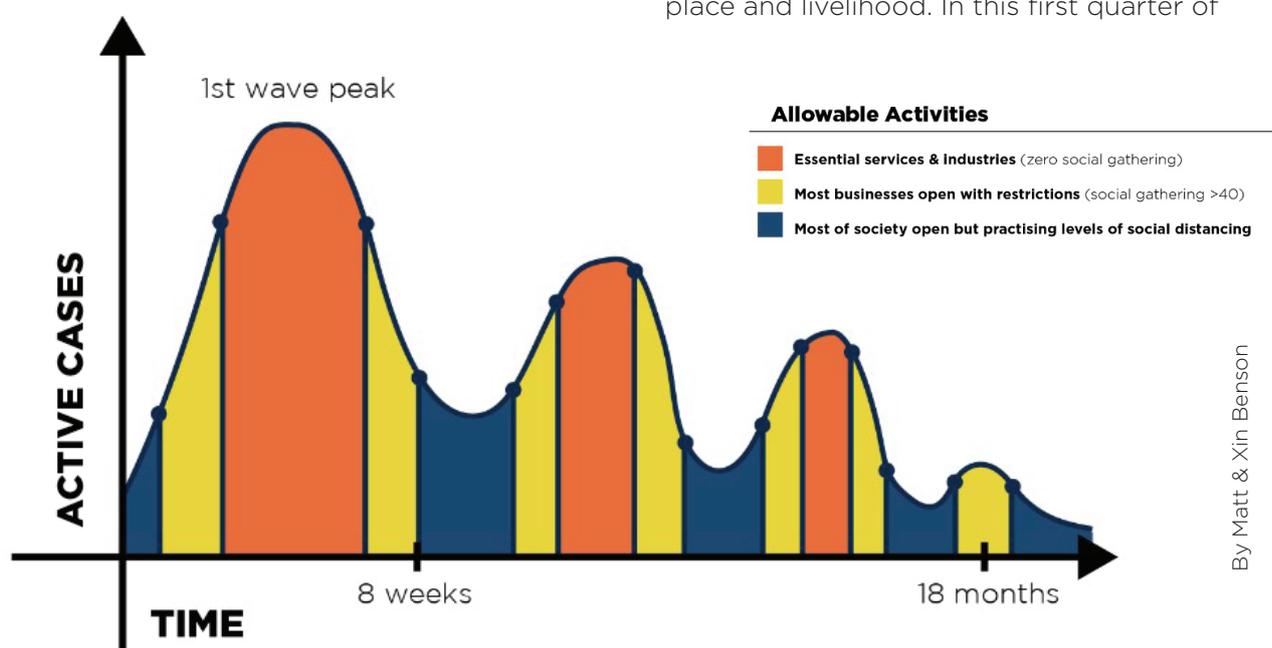
Against such uncertainty and unknowns, how should policy makers navigate the unfolding Covid-19 crisis? How do they prepare for the aftermath of the crisis when the personal, social and economic costs of the crisis

become increasingly apparent. In this article we describe an approach based on the principle of reflexivity – the idea of utilising adaptive policy instruments that can efficiently adjust to the changing patterns and intensity of risk that we will endure in the short-term and then need to embed into the uncharted landscape of a post-Covid world.

3.0 Reflexivity for Policy Making

In a time of war, lockdown buys time. It is a defensive action, a retreat. What some have called the 'hammer'. But the war metaphor may be misleading in the Age of Pandemia. For what really matters is the ability of policy makers to stay ahead of the epidemiological curve. Our actions and reactions must be shaped by the multiple oscillations of the epidemic. This is a key concept that many in the scientific community are converging around – the adaptive suppression method^Y. The approach centres on an idea that after the first wave has been flattened, society and economies are gradually reopened, with different levels of alertness and physical distancing depending on local circumstance and custom.

At the core of the risk management policy is the need to balance the health risk of the population with the economic and social risks of containment. The physical geography of constraint against the human geography of place and livelihood. In this first quarter of



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2020 most countries are in the midst of battling to flatten the curve. Yet the success of this endeavour does not guarantee that we are out of the woods. For a recurrent epidemic cluster could easily re-emerge from a single infected individual.

Hence the epidemiological perspective anticipates such a scenario and focuses policy instruments on keeping the recurrent waves of infection at lower levels of incidence – creating less stress on the health response system and the economy. People must be allowed to go back to work, albeit cautiously, and guided by the different threat levels as determined by risk management protocols. The figure below illustrates in simplified form the concept of the adaptive suppression method - the oscillating rhythms representing the multiple waves of infection incidence with different color bands representing policy reflexivity.

Geography becomes a key parameter of this strategy as the spatial relations between people, places and industry become reactivated. While the economy is cautiously re-gearred back into action, clusters of infection need to be identified quickly and outbreaks contained through quarantine and self-isolation. Intensive serological testing needs to be conducted to monitor the collective immunity of the population. When certain thresholds are breached, different levels of movement restriction need to be reintroduced based on the geography of risk and the calculus of economy. Yet we need to be mindful that different people have different vulnerabilities to the disease and the effects of containment occur within different cultural contexts. In many cities people in public housing or in slums, living in cramped and squalid conditions, face aggravated economic stress by the loss of daily wages or income. The same applies to undocumented migrants or refugees who occupy the shadow economy and whose existence fall through the cracks of bureaucratic accounting systems.

A balanced, reflective approach to risk management would serve to gradually subdue the embers of the epidemic while minimising the scar tissue of economic hemorrhage. People and communities would,

thus, be able to pick themselves up and rebuild their shuttered livelihoods, while governments begin the difficult task of nursing the shattered economy back to vitality.

4.0 Doing Adaptive Policy Making

In many countries such a reflexive policy process as described above does not exist. The traditional approach would be top-down and based on a command and control method of administering response. That cannot work in this Covid-19 crisis without paying a high price. For what is required is a system with the requisite nimbleness and mobility to be able to identify threats fast enough and deploy a crisis response with the swift efficiency needed for effective containment of the disease.

In traditional bureaucracies the efficiency of the information feedback loop is often compromised by the hierarchical structure of information flow and a culture of caution. The administrative structures are also not made for the swift decision making response time required of a crisis such as Covid-19. Tragically, we have seen in real-time the high price paid by countries that ignore the critical importance of a swift information feedback and response loop.

Surveillance and remedial actions further are most effective when it comes from a top-down and bottom-up system of information sharing. This would require a system that is reflexive – that is able to target the disease while being mindful of the social anthropology of vulnerability. A system that recognises the multiplicity of social groups affected by different hazards arising from the calamity of the crisis. And therefore such a system must be capable of, what Amartya Sen calls, 'listening as governance'. Sen describes this as policy making that is aided by participatory democracy - when the press is free, public discussion is unrestrained and, therefore, "governmental commands are informed by listening and consultation.

In many countries with strong digital

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infrastructure we are already witnessing the proliferation of citizen-to-citizen surveillance – the sharing of local observation, data analytics and aggregation of information for the purpose of public understanding and response. Frontline health workers, frustrated at the lethargic response of the government bureaucracy, have resorted to crowdsourcing to procure essential equipment and lobby for government action. Technical tips are being exchanged to health workers and the public alike, while potential local disasters are being thwarted by coordinated public outcry. In the absence of government transparency, popular platforms such as Google analytics provide access to proxy indicators, while WhatsApp, Facebook and YouTube, among others, become the means for amplifying knowledge and information across the globe.

Policy makers would do well to invest in systems that are able to tap into the rich and important resource of local feedback and local mobilisation. Countries such as South Korea and Singapore are already deploying surveillance and feedback systems based on information provided by mobile phone users. Countries like Germany are able to undertake rapid action for testing and contact tracing by allowing local authorities to mobilise local resources from public, private and civic organisations. Examples abound around the world of local enterprises working with local health and engineering experts to re-purpose their manufacturing capabilities to produce much needed materials and equipment to combat the crisis.

In the aftermath of the crisis, a similar bottom-up approach is needed to address the economic wounds at the local level. How do we revive the marketplace, the street vendors, the small businesses? How does social distancing reshape the economic and cultural practices that underlie the trust component of business relationships? In every society there will be innovation and reconfigurations required at the local level – geographical and cultural practices that the adaptive policy approach can harness to great effect.

In the immediate short term the bottom-up

adaptive approach acts as a palliative to comfort the anxieties of affected businesses and individuals. It allows government to listen to the sound of local anguish and identify temporary solutions to soften the impact of the crisis. It also buys time for government to work on the more challenging issues of revitalising the national economy in the context of a global recession and broken global supply chains.

5.0 Organising Adaptive Policy Making

How should policy makers organise themselves to provide response reflexively? The first step is to recognise the limits of existing hierarchical delivery structures. These are the agencies and ministries organised and designed to deliver top-down state control according to an outdated model of industrial society – the command and control mode of governance. We live today in a network society where, as sociologist Manuel Castell states, power resides in the network of relationships that constitute the morphology of our modern society^{vi}. In this landscape social networks and new communicative technologies are embedded in the process of producing goods and services, culture and power. A network where, as we have seen in this crisis, a group of local health administrators, engineers and volunteers could deliver rapid services that typically was the domain of an expert government agency.

Policy makers would do well to tap the power of the network society to be able to respond swiftly and efficiently in the post-Covid world. This will require a new type of government organisation that is able to carry out highly sophisticated coordination of the nodes and hubs of network resources re-shaping the dynamics of society. It will be able to support the initiatives of local actors in addressing local or particular issues, while sharing experiences across the network to promote innovative solutions and new developmental initiatives. The system would be reflexive in its ability to adapt quickly to particular risks while offering counter-measures that

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maintain the homeostatic functioning of society.

The reflexivity of policy making will be shaped by the particular historical, administrative and social structure in different countries. Their characteristics however may be guided by the following key concepts:

■ **Reflective leadership^{vii}.** Leadership is crucial in any crisis. During the pandemic a particular form of leadership is required that is able to make complex decisions, quick. Key to success will be the ability to communicate openly and transparently with society and demonstrate the willingness to be reflective in making and even changing decisions as new information comes to light. The composition of the leadership team should constitute central and especially sub-national leaders that embody the priorities of society and the aspirations for reflexivity. Reflective leadership is one which is comfortable with managing a top-down and bottom-up system of management.

■ **Adaptive Policy Instruments.** Given the high degree of uncertainty of the Covid-19 crisis, policy making has to be shaped with a risk management mindset. It will recognise that policies may have differential impacts and embody adaptive measures that enable better targeting of policy action while maintaining overall governance structure and fiduciary responsibility. Adaptability is also a function of devolving power to lower levels of authority when necessary to improve the performance of particular programmes. The system is also adaptive from an institutional learning perspective as information is shared and best practices are replicated rapidly across society to strengthen overall capacity in quelling the epidemic.

■ **Communicate and control.** Which is the opposite of command and control. It requires the social mobilisation of society in all its heterogeneity through effective communicative strategies. It deploys

sophisticated but practical modalities for working with key stakeholders to control the movement and behavior of particular target social groups. Anis Chowdhury and Jomo Kwame Sundaram cite the Kerala state as an example where government has worked with religious leaders, local associations and civil society to mobilise society towards behavioural change – in this case eschewing the term ‘social distancing’ for its caste connotation and replacing it with ‘physical distancing and social solidarity^{viii}’.

■ **Short circuits.** As the world and events are hyperconnected, there will be moments when situations look like they may spiral out of control in a direction that could trigger other crises. That could be from a community health perspective, social issues or economic freefall. The concept of short circuits may need to be applied. This could manifest itself by a sudden lockdown, or a complete reversal of policy direction. Strategic communication is critical in addressing the intended behavioral change and psychological impact of such a decision.

■ **Critical supply chain perspective.** The resumption of certain key services during lockdown measures must be based on a critical supply chain framework. Some governments during the crisis have issued permits for certain factories to operate but cannot get the product to citizens because key partners of the supply chain remain under lockdown. The critical supply chain framework will ensure that production facilities are able to connect with key suppliers, packers and logistics partners to deliver essential goods and services in a timely manner.

■ **Makeshifting.** Policies, programmes, management units, projects and even procedures are going to have to be assembled, disassembled and reassembled in very short time frames with limited resources. Reflexivity necessitates the ability to shift course quickly to avoid a threat or consolidate a strategic footing. Makeshift solutions will be needed that pull bits of existing policies, regulations, people and materials from what is

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immediately at hand, in some cases literally due to isolation or physical distancing. This mental framework needs to become ingrained in our social structures post-Covid.

■ **Orbital Synchronicity.** We need to remind ourselves (regularly) that Covid-19 is not an abstract policy exercise. It is real-life in real-time with real-time human flaws and issues, with deadly consequences. Hence synchronising our individual worlds (orbits) with those of our teams, stakeholders and the community at large becomes important. It is about creating a new rhythm, new relationships and new perspectives for the Age of Pandemia. In practical terms this will mean working in collaborative environments as the norm, creating large networks fast, and pulling together separate (possibly opposing) systems into single unified (or synchronised) arrangements to produce outcomes.

■ **Re-gearing.** As the Covid-19 pandemic becomes a force that is changing realities and psychologies as much as it is the economy and government, re-gearing will be required across most institutions, many businesses and possibly culturally. New purposes will need to be found for whole organisations, buildings, assets, recreational facilities, airlines and cruise ships. The re-gearing process will likely start experimentally and be recalibrated as new realities emerge. But it represents a tool that can be used to rebuild livelihoods.

6.0 A New Frontier

The Covid-19 crisis has exposed the fragile underbelly of globalisation and called into question some fundamental assumptions about our economic models. It has erased the distinction between North and South as we witness the world's most advanced cities being ravaged by poor policy responses. More importantly it has exhibited the ability of ordinary people to rise above adversity and craft innovative and practical solutions to their immediate problems. People who are willing to cross social, political and class boundaries to extend support and nurse back

our humanity.

Policy makers now face an opportunity to carve a new frontier for society. Reconnecting our frayed relationships and broken supply chains guided by the principles of reflexivity. An agenda of reconstruction that is shaped by a vision of a cosmopolitan world bound together by our mutual interdependency. A post-Covid world that takes seriously the necessity to balance people, culture and ecology. A transformation that forces us to look within and reflect on our own humanity.

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