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Corona quandaries

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The basic policy quandary in the current Coronavirus crisis is the balance between health and economic concerns. In each case, social factors intersect with the issues at stake.

As various countries around the world – Malta included – are relaxing a variety of Coronavirus measures, the World Health Organisation is emphasising that the pandemic situation remains open; advising preparation for the eventuality of a second wave of infections.

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While the world was not prepared for the first wave of the pandemic, different countries adapted to it in different ways, and this had different impacts. Merkel's Germany and Bolsonaro's Brazil are two examples in this regard.

In Malta, the official narrative is that if the Coronavirus situation in terms of active cases remains good and stable; the country can move on with its strategic plan to relax further measures.

The narrative is stating that scientific risk assessments are taking place, but to date they are being hidden from public scrutiny. This leads to various questions to which the government should reply in order to fortify public trust in decisions taken.

Such questions include

- How are decisions being taken with regard to the relaxation of measures?
- Who is the government consulting with?
- Are there procedures, protocols, and records of the government's decisions in the field?
- Which sciences are being used for risk assessment? Can the government confirm whether medical, behavioural, social, and natural sciences are all being referred to for evidence and recommendations?
- Is the government ensuring that plural methods are being used in the provision of data and evidence?
- Why are the Opposition, various social partners, civil society representatives, and experts being kept in the dark about the government's decision-making process, only to learn from the media what decisions had been taken?

open : speak, the economic impact of COVID-19 is rearing its ugly head in Maltese society: according
National Statistics Office, there were more than double the number of people registered

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nearly as bad as those in 2009, when the infamous economic crisis spread globally.

One must see what the impacts of the government's decision towards relaxation measures will be on the erstwhile negative economic situation. Here one must keep in mind that both push and pull factors can have influence: On the one hand, businesses must adapt their operations and strategies, but on the other hand, consumers must have confidence in the new normal.

In turn, various other factors can also have an effect: whether one feels 'safe' visiting shops, whether one's purchasing power has decreased, whether one prefers to be cautious in expenditure, and so forth. In the meantime, the daily updates on COVID-19 cases provide a medical background, and social and political influencers depict rosy or less-than rosy situations, while the dreaded second wave knocks at the door. People's day-to-day activities and social interactions are in response to all this and therefore, venture in different directions.

From a policy-making perspective, the situation faced by the government is not an easy one. A balancing act between economic recovery and people's health is crucial and in turn, both these industries affect one another. Illness can have negative economic impacts, but the opposite can also hold true, not to mention other social factors ranging from anxiety to loneliness, and from adaptation to risk-management.

Both health and economic factors could also impact social policy, for example, in the provision of welfare and the latter's sustainability. Such policy quandaries do not come with ready-made answers.

Any decision taken by the government will pose its own risk. What is important in this regard is that the level of public trust in policies is as high as possible. But again, there could be a situation of high public trust on policies which lack an evidence infrastructure. Which means that apart from balancing health, economic, and social factors, the government must also synthesise various forms of knowledge - the various forms of advice, and the plural expectations of the public.

I believe that this hard road of unknowns, risks, and opportunities should be as deliberative as possible. Rather than having to contend with directives issued during press conferences or interviews - generally with the Prime Minister - the public might feel more at ease if the government provided reassurance that all necessary consultations with stakeholders take place prior to decisions being taken.

Among these stakeholders, one would expect to find the Opposition, social partners, civil society, experts, and community representatives, thus ensuring an ongoing and transparent recovery process. What better way to be prepared for a second wave than to have a consensual evidence-based approach within democratic parameters? The protagonists in question would be sharing knowledge and responsibility for the road ahead.

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