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Coronavirus and policy quandaries

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The Coronavirus experience presents policymakers with various quandaries on how to best manage risks. In policymaking, every decision has consequences which may also include unintended ones. Policy consultees may present different qualified opinions on various aspects and areas, but also on the timing and logistics of decisions.

open :ial policy, the type of welfare system in place can play an important role. For example, if

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In economic policy, government's readiness to assist different sectors and social interests from businesses to workers and self-employed persons is vital: the Coronavirus is having a negative impact on the economy, and while some of us have guaranteed income and work flexibility, others are dependent on income which is more volatile - such as those who are repaying loans while their income is dwindling. In such a context, government, opposition, employers, unions, and other stakeholders can adopt a 'one-nation' approach, where every sector does its part for the common good.

With regards to social distancing, lockdowns, and quarantines, experts point out that the timing of such decisions can play a very important role in their impacts. It is only reasonable to expect the government to follow such advice. But different policy cultures also come into play: More collectivised systems such as those in East Asia may permit more authoritarian policy decisions. Are more individualised societies ready to adopt methods used in China which restrict people's freedom? Or should policies have a relative degree of self-policing, and to what extent?

Freedom itself is not a walk in the park: One's decisions may have different consequences, and sometimes it is difficult to make choices amid the anxiety. Think about health workers who have to decide whom to attend to when hospitals are full of sick patients. Think about families who require the carrying out of services by others in their households or who have elderly relatives living elsewhere.

Besides, authoritarian governance does not necessarily explain efficacy: Iran's corona-crisis is a case in point.

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there are mental health issues. Public Radio International recently quoted Dr. George H.

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are many people who would already have been experiencing mental health challenges prior to the Coronavirus crisis.

In the face of such considerations, how can one proceed?

According to Xifeng Wu, Dean and Professor of School of Public Health, Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, China, who was quoted by the World Economic Forum, 'The experience in China taught us again that in dealing with pandemic events, the right thing to do is to believe science and public health experts. Overreacting is better than non-reacting.'

Whether a more authoritarian or liberal mode of managing the spread of Coronavirus is in place, citizenship and community play important roles in policy impacts. Here, policy makers need to factor in how much citizens are ready to fulfil their responsibilities; how much they trust the authorities; and the strength of their social networks.

Besides, authorities need to make sure that people from different social backgrounds encounter equitable treatment and rights. The most obvious demographic that comes to mind comprises of the elderly and others who are more likely to be negatively affected if they contract the Coronavirus. But attention should also be given to those who have mental health challenges, those who are not integrated in Malta's welfare systems as well as all those who must make difficult economic choices to balance out conflicting concerns. The gender dimension must also be taken into consideration: Both the caring professions and various forms of less secure jobs may be overrepresented by women, who in turn may have demanding responsibilities in their respective families. There may also be less obvious gender factors – for example, older men who have weaker family and community links. Other social realities which need to be taken into consideration are that for some families, being confined together is increasingly stressful, whereas for others, being separated from each other proves problematic in itself.

Authorities also need to factor in different types of people's behaviour. Sometimes we are selfinterested and rational, at other times we are not. Sometimes we are altruistic, and sometimes we are more likely to follow community norms.

This leads to considerations on communication. In increasingly diversified societies, authorities need to make sure that communication strategies are efficient and equitable, and that their outreach goes beyond the more integrated majorities.

Singapore, which like Malta is a small state, is being mentioned as a country which has responded very well to the Coronavirus crisis. It has an efficient bureaucracy in a small territory, a universal health care system, and policy experience from SARS in 2003. According to The Economist, its government took immediate steps to tackle Coronavirus: it had a clear message, followed scientific advice, and enjoyed the people's trust. Time magazine adds that together with Hong Kong and Taiwan, it has so far been relatively successful in containing the virus. All three are closely interconnected with China, with direct flights to Wuhan, but they took bold decisions and responded rapidly to threats which they saw coming. In Singapore, quarantine was accompanied by policies such as government's offer of \$100 Singapore dollars (\$73) per day to self-employed ns, and the prohibition of employers to detract quarantine days from staffers' annual leave

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every one of us – including organisations speaking on the matter - should follow evidence-based and official sources to get our information, to avoid sensationalist agendas, and to have national consensus once decisions are in place. The alternative may be more uncertainty, fragmentation, and negative impacts.

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