

Opinion – Coronavirus: A Global Crisis Waiting for a Global Response

Written by Gisela Hirschmann

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GISELA HIRSCHMANN, APR 2 2020

“Ebola is a global crisis that demands a global response“, then US President Obama argued when requesting an emergency meeting of the United Nations Security Council in 2014. But where do we see multilateral coordination in the current pandemic? For days, the live webcam of the UN Security Council has portrayed a silent, empty hall; its agenda for the next weeks has been cancelled, and its diplomats are being called home. There are no signs that the Council is meeting any time soon on the current health crisis, despite the global impact of the corona pandemic for peace and security. This is a worrying signal for the state of multilateral institutions. The true character of a person, they say, is only revealed in a crisis. In these days, the same can be said about the true state of the multilateral system.

Until recently, Brexit, President Trump’s cuts in the United States’ financial contributions to UN organizations, and the withdrawal of member states from the International Criminal Court have put international institutions under pressure. In light of this, the launch of the “Alliance for Multilateralism” during the UN General Assembly’s last session in September 2019 by the German and French foreign ministers promised to be a last attempt to rescue multilateral cooperation. This coronavirus crisis will reveal to what extent states are truly committed to multilateralism and international coordination.

There are three areas in which a global response is needed most: pandemic containment, rule of law monitoring, and prevention of future diseases. Let’s first have a look at the measures to contain the pandemic. So far, responses to coronavirus were primarily national or even local. The lack of international coordination did not prevent the global spread of the virus; instead, it might even have contributed to it. An internationally coordinated closure of borders and travel restrictions would have enabled a controlled return of travelers while ensuring medical testing and preventing economic losses. As we could witness over the last weeks, unilateral travel restrictions on short notice led to increased traveling without preventing the spread of the virus. The same applies to international events: a joint UN-led coordinated response could have produced clear rules for the Olympic Games and other international sports events early on that respected the guidelines of the World Health Organization (WHO). We now know that the Champions League soccer match in Northern Italy should better have not taken place in order to contain the spread of the virus in that region. While it is understandable that governments are now doing everything they can to mitigate the economic effects of the crisis domestically, these measures need to be internationally coordinated to prevent growing economic inequality.

Multilateral development organizations are already concerned that the economic measures of Western countries will have a significant impact on their development aid. As a consequence, we can expect new economic and humanitarian crises, political instability and refugee movements if domestic economic measures are not coordinated internationally. Finally, we need a globally coordinated production and distribution of medical assistance. Preventing the export of medical equipment, such as respirators, or claiming the development of vaccines exclusively for a country’s citizens would signify the end of international solidarity as we know it. It is unimaginable that our globalized production system could not provide sufficient masks, respirators and medicines on short notice for all in need. For global distribution, we can rely on the infrastructure of the UN’s humanitarian agencies, which have proven their expertise in numerous crises throughout the last decades. Hundreds of thousands of blue helmets have been

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deployed in conflicts around the world; now is the time to enable the UN to send out international white coats and mobile hospitals to support national health care systems in their fight against the pandemic.

The second area in need of a global response is a coordinated monitoring of the respect for the rule of law and human rights. Most of the measures to contain the spread of the corona virus, be it in democracies or autocracies, significantly restrict the fundamental rights of individuals, such as the right to free movement, freedom of assembly or the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition. Some countries enforce these measures through digital technologies, others by the use of their military. It is of vital importance to ensure that these measures are not exploited to silence domestic opposition or discriminate against minorities. The international community also needs to ensure that these measures are truly temporary and that efforts to promote the rule of law are continued once the emergency situation is over. Given that international media attention is focused on corona and is neglecting ongoing conflicts, some states are now tempted to use the diversion of attention to violate human rights in the assumption they would remain unaccountable. It is the responsibility of the members of the UN Security Council to ensure that emergency measures are respecting internationally accepted principles of rule of law and human rights. National human rights institutions, non-governmental organizations and other UN bodies are crucial to monitor member states' compliance with these principles.

The third area in need of a global response is the area of prevention. Despite the fact that we are still in the midst of fighting the current pandemic, it is not too early to think about prevention. Internationally renowned virologists have warned since the last SARS epidemic that certain wild animals that are genetically close to us are a core source of epidemics and pandemics. After many years of inaction, the UN Security Council needs to adopt regulations that restrict the trade and consumption of these species and monitor member states' compliance in order to protect international peace and security. Let's take the UN's role in the treaty on nuclear non-proliferation as an inspiration. The production and use of nuclear material is being monitored rather effectively across member states by independent UN experts. The international community could equip the WHO with a similar mandate to send out independent experts monitoring the compliance of member states with international regulations on the prevention of viral diseases. Until now, the WHO is dependent on the information given by its member states.

Once again, the outbreak of the corona epidemic has demonstrated that governments are not committed to the degree of transparency necessary for effective containment. A new regulation on the trade and consumption of wild animals and independent international control mechanisms could help the WHO to better assess the outbreak of an epidemic and limit the spread of a virus. Up until now, states have emphasized that health policy is a core element of their national sovereignty. The global impact of pandemics however reveals the responsibility of the international community to redefine the understanding of health policy from a global perspective.

Many state leaders, journalists and citizens in the Western world compare the current crisis with the situation after the Second World War. The multilateral institutions that states established in 1945 are now at crossroads. If states do not respond to this crisis in a globally coordinated way, all rhetorical commitments to multilateralism are empty promises. It is encouraging to see that the various UN agencies are continuing to work to mitigate the effects of the corona virus in the vulnerable environments in which they are present, even if member states' coordination is absent. The WHO has appealed to private individuals to fund its work in fighting the pandemic. But the UN agencies' work can only be upheld temporarily and requires systematic support. In light of this, the silence of the intergovernmental bodies of the UN and its member states indicates that multilateral cooperation is in an even greater danger than we might have thought just a few months ago.

Instead of adopting nationalist measures, states now need to act on their commitment to multilateralism. Some recent developments give hope: the French President Macron assembled the state leaders of the G7 in a video conference. However, they failed to agree even on how to name the pandemic, let alone on a concerted response. The recent appeal of the German foreign minister Maas for greater solidarity within the EU is a sign of progress after all the single-handed measures adopted by individual EU member states throughout the last weeks. But solidarity within the EU does not lead to a global solidarity, which is needed to effectively fight a pandemic and its global economic impact. Only Tunisia recently requested an emergency meeting of the Security Council, so far in vain. Currently,

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China holds the Council's monthly rotating presidency and the lack of action of the council reveals the true face of its multilateral commitment. In the following months, the presidency will be held by the Dominican Republic, Estonia, France and Germany. If none of them steps up to activate the Council on this global emergency, it will probably be too late to rescue multilateralism.

About the author:

Gisela Hirschmann is Assistant Professor of International Relations at Leiden University, The Netherlands, and currently a visiting scholar at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard University. In her current research, funded by the German Fritz Thyssen Foundation, she analyzes crises of multilateralism and the reactions of international organizations in historical comparison.