

Behavioural changes in times of crisis

Parallels between the corona pandemic and climate change

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The Current Column

of 1 April 2020

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Deutsches Institut für
Entwicklungspolitik



German Development
Institute



The corona pandemic is hitting humanity like a global tsunami: it claims lives in a so far unpredictable number, pushes health care systems to their limits, disrupts global supply chains and destabilises the financial sector. Measures are being taken all over the world to slow down the spread of the virus and minimise the economic damage. In this situation, behavioural change of individuals is indispensable.

From a behavioural science perspective, there are three points of particular relevance in the current crisis: *First*, the situation mandates that we limit ourselves as individuals for the global common good. In many cases, this is not primarily a question of one's own well-being, but rather the well-being of others. *Second*, the effectiveness of our individual actions is often uncertain and very difficult to trace. By contrast, the cost of the cutbacks we are making is immediately tangible and could severely change our living conditions. *Third*, the constraints we are being asked to accept are experienced in the present, while the positive impact of our abstention will be felt largely in the future.

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The situation we are currently experiencing as a result of the corona pandemic has many parallels with the threat posed by climate change. Just as with a global pandemic, the climate crisis poses a risk of immeasurable proportions to human life. Likewise, it requires us to limit our individual freedom for the global common good. The cost of our abstention is also immediately tangible in the present, while the benefits often appear uncertain and far off in the future.

The current situation shows that behavioural change is difficult under such circumstances. Despite multiple calls for voluntary social distancing, most people have only come to comply with these requests in recent weeks as political requirements have been imposed and incentives have been shifted. Similarly, and contrary to all expert recommendations, lifestyle changes made by individuals in recent years to tackle climate change have been sparse and slow. In order to effectively avert the climate crisis, the right degree of political regulations and shifted incentives seems to be crucial here as well. Compared to the acceptance of current restraints to fight the corona pandemic, however, the willingness for behaviour change to protect the climate has so far been very low among the majority of society. Why is that?

A key difference between the threat posed by the corona pandemic and that posed by the climate crisis is found in two dimensions: the personal and the temporal distance. The more distant a threat appears, the lower is our willingness to take

action. The corona pandemic is currently very much on people's minds; temporal distance is thus small. Personal distance varies. Some people are already directly affected, while others have only learned about the extent of the virus through the media. By contrast, the consequences of the climate crisis are for many people still difficult to see to date. They unfold over a longer period of time and have so far only little effect on the everyday lives of most Europeans. Consequently, many people still see the threat posed by climate change as lying in the future and have a low willingness to make immediate changes to their behaviour.

Latest studies from China and Italy show that the negative global environmental impact of human activity has decreased significantly since the outbreak of the corona pandemic. Perhaps the current state of emergency represents an opportunity to also take another look at our own individual behaviour in terms of climate protection. For example, we are currently learning to make greater use of digital solutions and cope with reduced mobility – a key building block also for global sustainability. Equally, political decision-makers should make sure not to lose sight of climate change mitigation these days. While the climate crisis may have currently slipped out of public focus, this does not mean it is any less relevant. On the contrary, if current political measures for fighting the corona pandemic fail to take into account the consequences for the global climate as well, this would have severe implications for our future.

For society to accept political measures for individual behavioural change, it is crucial from a behavioural sciences perspective to stress the relevance of individual action for collective success. Moreover, the effectiveness of individual behaviour needs to be made tangible for people to be willing to accept the cost of individual abstention. In addition, it is important to illustrate the pressing need for immediate restrictions to achieve future success if the general public is to grasp the necessity of taking action at an early stage.

As the personal and temporal distance to the climate crisis still appear quite large to many people, these points are currently even more difficult to convey for climate change mitigation than for fighting the corona pandemic. It requires a democratically-anchored political system that values scientific advice and is nonetheless willing to take action now to set a course for a sustainable future. The longer we wait to adapt our behaviour, the more drastic the changes will have to be in the future.