



# Preparing responses to crises: Key lessons learnt from the impact of COVID-19 on marginalised communities

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**Abstract:** The COVID-19 pandemic was a large-scale human disaster on all fronts. It is worth identifying four structural defects in the governance response, ten lessons that need to be imbibed and a five point agenda for change.

Early in the pandemic, before its potential impact could be understood, the German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier described the challenge of COVID-19 as a '[test of our humanity](#)'. It was an astute observation. First, the crisis required a response engendered by empathy but laced with pragmatism: leaving the virus festering in any corner of a community would mean that the entirety of society would be exposed to danger. Second, service provision structures (in this case the healthcare system) would need to withstand turbulence by delivering vital relief. Third, significant trust was required in governance, with capacity to respond with intelligent, precise policies, at speed. Fourth, mitigation and resolution would need governments to draw on the best talent, commission it effectively, creating end products swiftly that could be disseminated widely, to defeat the problem.

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The large-scale lives lost, decimation of livelihoods, unfair access to health services, mental health issues from lock-downs, surges in violence against women, loss of trust in governance, vaccine access inequalities, vaccine hoarding by the wealthy, and prolongation of the problem into new iterations show the chasm between where humanity sits and how far away from 'passing' the test we are.

The crisis impacted all parts of the global population. But data concludes that it was far worse for [communities farther from sites of power](#). Pre-existing, deeply entrenched, ossified structural discrimination had already denied access to basic facets of human existence for those 'left behind'. The pandemic pushed members of these communities even further behind, while the impact was accentuated in cases of intersectionalities such as gender, disability, sexual orientation, national status, location and access to employment. For many of these communities, marginalisation was the norm in the pre-pandemic period; but when the majority locked down, they either became over-exposed to risk due to systemic deficits that exposed them as front-line workers, or faced even more acute consequences as resources became scarce and were commandeered to serve majorities.

Identity-oriented hate politics pre-existed the COVID-19 pandemic. The vote-winning formula was simple: an individual or a group of individuals who desire political power tap into latent anger in the population by taking an anti-politics stance, based on politics and institutions that are not working. This is manifested in different ways, often in societal failures to generate economic growth through employment, leaving masses unemployed, facing rising costs and austerity measures, while unable to benefit from visibly better living standards elsewhere. Wealth concentration, growing inequality and the need to recalibrate value across supply chains to enable better wealth distribution may be obvious roots to tackle this problem. However, this requires powerful interests to cede wealth to angry disenfranchised masses.

So, a different course of action was made feasible. Wealthy interests organised to generate anti-politics, not focussed on solution seeking, but on translating anger to seize or hold on to power. The obvious route was to pick a scapegoat and generate an artificial majority against them. In Europe the desperate trickle (the larger flows were into neighbouring countries) of refugees and asylum seekers became the obvious spur. Elsewhere, minorities and/or indigenous peoples were portrayed as 'disloyal' to the state or seeking greater access to scarce services at the cost of 'ordinary' majorities in equal need. Amplified by like-minded media that were part of the group seeking power, this unleashed 'patriotism' and 'nationalism' was based on deeply disingenuous xenophobic as well as inevitably misogynistic readings of history, that were used to elect populists close to narrow commercial interests which they then proceeded to protect. Even in the pandemic.

If business as usual had continued, the emerging regimes would probably not have been exposed to the level they were. However, effective pandemic response required empathy, pragmatism, determination to overcome real challenges, integrity, deep system-oriented public policy thinking, respect for others, willingness and ability to understand science and make necessary societal changes besides moral and public confidence in abilities. It is no wonder then that the test has been and will continue to fail drastically.

The pandemic has also shown that, while many governments were reduced to bumbling, irresponsible, skill-free, responsibility-shy individuals committed to the well-being of themselves and their patrons, society has proved more resilient. Communities have self-organised, created coping mechanisms, supporting each other, reaching out across polarised lines to find ways of managing. Some businesses stepped up, health service workers went the extra mile every day. Many sacrifices were made and appreciated.

The lessons that have already emerged are clear in terms of this pandemic, but also for preparedness for future crises - be they health, environmental or related to wider societal breakdown. As derived from [MRG's Trends Report for 2021](#) which examined these issues globally, these are:

1. Ensure universal health for all irrespective of personal status.
2. Address housing, shelter and sanitation which sustain underlying health inequalities.
3. Promote land rights, environmental protection and access to green space to support resilience and recovery during the pandemic while preventing future crises.
4. Ensure that decent work, labour rights and adequate welfare assistance remain central to public health strategies, protecting those whose livelihoods are most at risk.
5. Educational initiatives must ensure that all students, including those from minority and indigenous backgrounds, are adequately supported.
6. Governments must employ participatory rights-based public health strategies, not repressive controlling measures designed to promote political and financial interests.
7. Combat dissemination of hate speech, harmful rumours and misinformation generated by nationalist groups keen to exploit fear and confusion, to attack marginalised groups.
8. Clear conflict prevention components must be part of global pandemic strategies to prevent surges in violence.
9. Ensure that humane migration policies remain at the heart of the pandemic response in line with international human rights standards and public health protocols.
10. Embrace holistic, locally appropriate pandemic responses that recognise and respect community perspectives, practices and beliefs.

Beyond the pandemic, it remains imperative that the following measures are mainstreamed to equip societies with greater resilience to crises:

1. Placing the *Leave No One Behind Principle* at the forefront of all policy making by collecting disaggregated data, designing inclusion litmus tests and generating audits for rights access.
2. Implementing a *social protection floor* against systemic and episodic phenomena that have increased human insecurity.
3. Strong ripostes *challenging narrow exclusively nationalist narratives* that fragment societies and foster conditions leading to social breakdown and threats to international peace and security.
4. Concerted action for *adequate safeguards against unfettered global capital flows* syphoned from societies where they are generated to accumulate in places where their benefits are shielded.
5. Rejuvenated efforts towards a *fairer trading system* that rejects overproduction, overexploitation and monopolistic or cartel-like supply chains that deepen the environmental crisis, destroy circular economies and force communities into marginalisation.

An agenda for change is within reach and mass movements are mobilising to amplify its necessity. Breaking political and financial hegemonies of wealth and privilege will not be easy. It requires sophisticated thinking, intelligent design and concerted mass action driven by integrity and making common cause with others. The appetite for this long-standing fight had waned as populations became complicit and complacent. The COVID-19 pandemic highlights how vital it remains today if we are to pass this test of our humanity.