Positive Responses to the Pandemic: Collecting and Sharing Examples

Draft 4

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This pandemic is the largest public health and disaster management experiment any of us are likely to experience as participant observers. We write as a diverse group of researchers, teachers and practitioners who have spent decades engaged with natural and technological hazards, humanitarian situations, public health, health psychology and communication. Many will be studying responses by international organizations and national governments. Equally important are the everyday responses of individuals, small groups, neighborhoods, civil society and faith organizations, schools, universities, technical institutes and vocational training centers, small and medium enterprises, and local government units.

We invite people to send examples of what we define as “positive” responses.

A Working Definition of Positive Pandemic Response

Our working definition of “positive” is as follows, and we invite suggestions that would make the definition more precise and useful.

By “positive” responses we refer to actions that involve kindness, compassion, care for others and altruism. We are curious about the employment of humor, cultural vehicles such as song, visual art, writing and story-telling. Positive actions may also involve careful and imaginative reflection on the needs of the other: imagining situations other than our own often privileged ones that affect basic human needs such as the need for contact and reassurance as well as our physical needs.

Creative use of digital technology is likely to feature in many examples. The “sofa singers” initiative in England is an example, and playful use of open-air balcony singing in Italy demonstrates how a low-tech initiative can be especially effective.
Above all, we are seeking examples of how people as individuals and in a variety of groups are reaching out to others in ways that use, reinforce and cultivate capabilities and the institutions that enable humans to thrive together. We are also looking for examples of hopeful responses that try to address what is required to learn and to change institutions and social relations so that a more caring, equitable and peaceful society results as part of the “new normal”. This is likely to involve awareness that not everyone is equally affected (despite the dominant media representation) and like all other disasters, the hazard is natural, but the disaster is socially constructed.

Scope of the Review

For the time being we are setting aside the question of motivation – what explains the will to move from thought to action. There are important questions in this domain. What role do duty and obligation play? Does motivation lie in a person’s or group’s social and political experience, beliefs and ideology? (Former president Obama’s tweeting a link to an account of spontaneous selfless acts might be an example.) Does motivation lie in a person’s system of religious and metaphysical understanding and belief?

Or perhaps many positive actions are merely creative ways to comply with admonitions, regulations and requirements issued by governments. If, so, is the motivation extensions of civil compliance? How does one understand non-compliance (e.g. not visiting the frail elderly) when there is a sincere belief that the elderly person wants and needs human contact? Non-compliance could be treated as a limiting extreme in the spectrum of examples we are seeking since there are many alternatives to physical face-to-face visitation (e.g. digitally mediated visits, phone calls, letters, training elders to use digital software such as skype).

In addition to question of motivation, we set aside initially issues of intention. Logically there is a chain that links intention, action and result. In public health, development practice and humanitarian action there is awareness that intentions and inputs (or actions) are not the same as outputs (results). The road to hell is paved with good intentions. For now, at least, we want to collect instances of positive action without yet considering results on well-being and the capability to thrive.
Also excluded at present, as mentioned at the beginning, are actions initiated by international organizations including the UN, IFRC and international NGOs as well as national and subnational (regional, provincial, state) governments as well as the national and international bodies that give voice to and lobby on behalf of various population groups.

**Big Questions**

We also bracket very big questions that many of us are entertaining at the moment. These include: what long-lasting or permanent social, economic and political changes might follow the pandemic? What will be learned about the intimate interconnection of health, socio-economic status, government policy and the dominant economic system? Will learning be relevant to the next pandemic? What the links exist among diseases that cross from animals to humans, global changes in forest and other ecosystems, climate change, species extinction, urbanization and economic globalization?

Many other disasters and crises are unfolding while the world’s attention is on the pandemic: there are floods in Indonesia and Angola, drought in southern Africa and southeast Asia, and there are on-going humanitarian crises in Yemen, Syria and elsewhere. In the short and medium term, will the pandemic make response to such situations more difficult? In the longer term, will lessons learned and social bonds strengthened in response to COVID-19 reduce vulnerability, increase capabilities and provide better mitigation of successive hazard impacts?

By embracing digital technology as a savior or panacea that allows contact without contamination and, in China’s case, epidemiological monitoring, does one not strengthen what Shoshana Zuboff calls “surveillance capitalism” and the further erosion of privacy? How important is privacy among other values? Can the World Wide Web bear the weight of rapid expansion of its use during the pandemic without crashing?

*PLEASE SEND EXAMPLES TO: benjamin4319@gmail.com with SUBJECT LINE: Positive responses to COVID-19*