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Hamlet during the Pandemic: To Lock Down, or not to Lock Down?

If Shakespeare's Hamlet had been alive and working in government during the current pandemic, I bet his one-million-dollar policy question would have been, "To lock down or not to lock down?" The Corona virus pandemic is raging across the world and up till now there seems to be no clear light at the end of the tunnel. It seems that a vaccine or a cure will take a longer time than anticipated.

Some governments have decided to go into lock down and hopefully wait out the pandemic, flatten the curve and allow more time for health facilities to adapt and respond. Other governments are finding it very difficult to enforce a lock down. Each of the two groups have their reasons.

Countries that have enforced complete 24 hour lock downs have differed in the time span under which they endured it, the strictness of the measures enforced, the control procedures and the penalties imposed on non-compliers. China was the first country to impose a lock down. Most European countries have instituted one form of national lock down to curtail movement. Italy starting imposing a lock down after it was very harshly hit by the pandemic. The UK imposed a lock down a couple of weeks following Italy asking citizens to stay home. This was a 180-degree shift in policy after initially, for a couple of days, Prime Minister Boris Johnson talked about herd immunity, but then quickly retracted. After contracting the corona virus, and miraculously being saved, Johnson is no longer in a hurry to open up businesses.

In the United States, we continue to see the ongoing debate about the need to "open up the economy" and "open up America" as President Trump says, versus the need to continue the lock down in some states, and the curfew in others until a later undetermined time when the health and pandemic experts determine that it is safe to do so. Trump is keen on speeding up the process and is encouraging governors to open up the economy and going back to business as usual. At first when he mentioned he will "open up America" he was met with fierce opposition, that it is not up to him to decide. One week later, a sort of compromise was reached where Trump clarified that it was up to governors to decide what is best for their own state and the federal government provided a guidance protocol for phased implementation of the re-opening.

Differences were evident as well in the tolerance threshold of the citizens involved. In South Africa, as in Italy, and later in the United States in more than twenty states, there were demonstrations against the strict lock down measures, and calls on governments to allow citizens to go back to work. Continuing lockdowns indefinitely is not an option. Several countries are now starting to slowly relax the measures or at least figure out ways for a lock down exit plan. Germany and Austria have started allowing small shops to open, Spain is allowing children to wonder outside their homes and Iran has allowed shopping malls to operate for limited hours.

What is the situation in developing countries? The good news, *so far*, is that many developing countries, in Africa specifically, were not as hard hit as Europe and the United States. As a result, few governments have imposed complete lock downs and the majority are reacting by choosing a middle ground. Schools and universities have been shut down, restaurants and clubs closed, people were advised to stay home and curfews were imposed, but no complete lock downs. The justification is that these countries simply cannot afford it. They cannot ask all people to stay home. If poverty rates are already high, people are living in slum areas in densely populated spaces and informal sectors are dominant, governments find it very difficult to ask people not to go to work. Additionally, governments in developing countries cannot afford the social protection measures and the unemployment benefits needed to allow their citizens to stay home. There are fears however, that by allowing people to go back to work during the pandemic, we are giving more precedence to business and economic rights than human life itself.

The question has no easy answer. If we give both parties the benefit of the doubt, and assume that they are both concerned about the well-being of citizens, it is then a question of whether we risk the

spread of viral infection when opening up the economy and resuming normal life, or we risk aggravating the economic recession and having more people lose their jobs. In developing countries, where there is no buffer, the stakes are very high. Safety and quality of life for citizens is the ultimate goal, but there is no clear way of how this can be achieved. Even Hamlet found difficulty answering his existential question!