

From Corona Crisis to Heritage Futures

A virus has put the world on hold. Many individual human actions suddenly appear extremely small and insignificant in comparison with the unyielding might and relentless spread with which the SARS-CoV-2 virus is presently conquering Earth. We are witnessing how the virus does not distinguish between human hosts and how all societies struggle with the challenges of containing and managing the corona virus disease “COVID-19”.

It is not surprising that many have started asking about the legacy that the ‘corona crisis’ of 2020 is going to leave behind for the years and perhaps for decades to come. Seldom have the relations between present and future societies felt more relevant than during the present weeks.

Besides a likely breakthrough of digital solutions in communication, there are some important lessons to be learned. We all need care from fellow human beings but also adequate health care provision, appropriate risk preparedness and basic social security available in the communities within which we live. Furthermore, there have been calls to make the global economy less dependent on ‘just-in-time’ production and multi-country supply chains. A third issue that has been raised is the right level of power for international organizations, national governments and expert authorities: which combination of competence, trustedness and executive capacity will make the best decisions for a population’s wellbeing and which boundaries must not be overstepped?

There are considerable implications of all this for education and scientific research. On the one hand, this concerns a likely shift to a much greater role of distance learning and digital communication in teaching. On the other, during the years to come we will see many new topics of research and academic debate relating to the current crisis, its management and its consequences.

Perhaps most importantly, there are also consequences of the current crisis for cultural values and beliefs around the world. The strict measures imposed on large parts of the human species have been posing a question that is not asked often enough: how do we want to live together on this planet? Avoiding handshakes and other physical contact for a while has been relatively easy for most but rethinking our contacts with animals, especially those demanded by meat production, will be much more difficult for many – yet could also have greater benefits. Still other kinds of values directly linked to COVID-19 are even more pertinent in the present situation: commentators in many states call for more economic self-reliance, governments increasingly invoke national symbols while international collaborations are played down, and a variety of xenophobic ideas circulate in the media. Such nationalistic rhetoric and behaviour promote a set of values and opinions that could put global peace at risk.

Education, research, culture and communication are important to address this risk. These are the realms of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, better known by the acronym UNESCO. Since its start after the end of World War II, UNESCO has been aiming to foster the building of peace, the eradication of poverty, sustainable development and intercultural dialogue. Of particular importance has been the ambition to increase mutual understanding and collaboration among the 193 member states and their populations. One tool for achieving this is UNESCO’s 1972 World Heritage Convention. With presently more than 1,100 listed sites, the Convention is arguably the most successful of UNESCO’s various initiatives.

Today, UNESCO’s aims are as significant as ever but the corona crisis could have detrimental consequences for the ability to achieve them in the future. We should therefore not forget that all the measures we take today to mitigate the crisis and its impact, the way in which we communicate on social media about the events as they unfold, and all the calls made about what needs to be done, or must cease to be done, once the crisis is over have a bearing on our future ability to work globally for the building of peace, the eradication of poverty, sustainable development and intercultural dialogue.

In the light of the global spread and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is time to remind ourselves once more of the interdependences between all the people and communities on this planet. We are all part of an interconnected humanity. In recent weeks, we have been reminded that there is a strong need for global solidarity and co-operation. As the virus has spread across the world's societies, many realised the benefits of a speedy global exchange of correct information, of mutual support and solidarity between people to address everybody's needs, and not the least of joint strategies of medical research and the development of a safe vaccine. Over the years and decades to come, we can expect many other kinds of crises when similar collaboration will be important.

Maybe it is time to start identifying and promoting a new kind of world heritage that is not employed to bolster national pride and generate financial benefits for a limited group. We might be better served by a world heritage that reaffirms the many interconnections and common interests between all branches and specimen of humanity – and indeed between humans and other living beings on this planet.

An intriguing example of a truly global world heritage is Tracey Williams' collection of plastic artefacts washed up on the world's beaches. Her images illustrate how global production, consumption and disposal of human artefacts are connected through the flows in the world's oceans. A majority of this plastic trash does not find its way to any beaches but has a destructive impact on maritime habitats and contributes to building up a unique geological signal of the Anthropocene at the bottom of the sea.



Illustration: World heritage for the post-corona world? Artefacts of the Anthropocene.
From Tracey Williams's Collection "Lego Lost at Sea", *The Guardian* 4 April 2020,
<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/apr/04/monopoly-houses-toy-soldiers-lego-museum-of-plastic-lost-at-sea>.

A need to appreciate such global interrelations and the way in which all our lives as human beings are connected with each other could turn out to become the most important lesson from the current corona crisis for future societies.