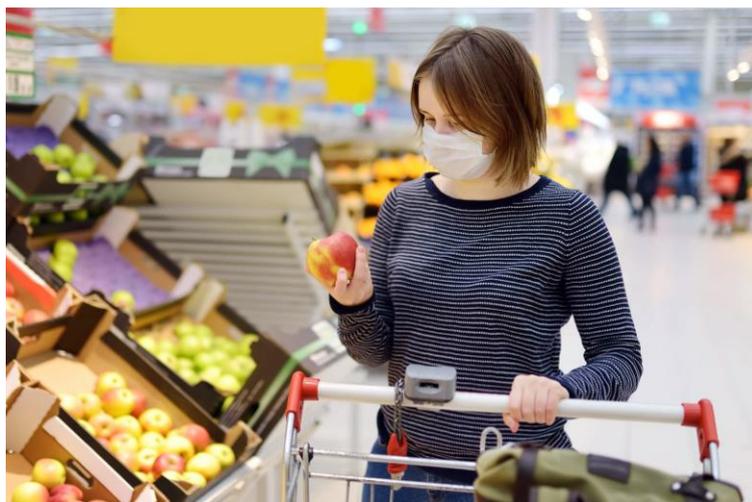


Lessons from a once-in-a-life experience

Families and family policies after COVID-19

1 April 2020



The novelty and fast transmission of the virus has increased by thousands the number of deaths every day. All generations in the family have been affected, with the older generation paying the highest toll. In order to save as many lives as possible, governments have implemented urgent policies to contain the epidemic spread and reduce a peak healthcare demand. [2] In this regard, the family unit is essential for the effectiveness of any interventions in isolation, requiring multiple ones to be combined to have a substantial impact on transmission, including household responsiveness and personal commitment.

The coronavirus has threatened our economy, institutions and way of life, it has interrupted our connection with relatives and friends through a strict lockdown that demands to keep a social distance, if not a real one. In many parts of the world, confinement has made children stay at home and parents work from home. In the midst of this once-in-a-lifetime experience, our shared history has shown us that critical situations present various opportunities. Thanks to our interconnected societies we have seen development into more sophisticated use of technology, educational solutions, redesign and flexibility of the workplace, less polarization, a revived appreciation for the outdoors and life's other simple pleasures. We are being forced to re-discuss our life and development models, to put the individual at the center of our actions, the person and with it the family. [3]

COVID-19 has made a profound impact and its unprecedented public health threat has kept many contained in their homes. The novel virus has re-oriented our relationship to governments, communities and our own families. It is unquestionable that this pandemic will reshape this generation and, in the aftermath, the world would have gone through such a transformation that it will never be business as usual again. [1]

Once the human tragedy of this pandemic eases, we need to redouble our efforts to build prosperity, climate security, and better lives for all. How will it change the way we work, we educate our children, we travel, we keep contact with our relatives and friends? How will it affect our economies and our way of life? It is too early to find answers, but we need to learn for the future.

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The continuing global expansion of the coronavirus not only means growing numbers of infected people, restrictions on mobility, cancellations of events and a downturn in the global economy: it is also making it clear that many jobs are done better when the people are able to work from home or wherever they consider appropriate, accompanied with the notion that many trips and journeys, in fact, may be unnecessary. [4]

Additionally, UNESCO gives some idea on how life has changed for families during these days. "As the world was preparing to face COVID-19, many educators were figuring out how to prepare to teach online. Only in 10 days, the number of students affected by school and university closures in 138 countries had nearly quadrupled to 1.37 billion, representing more than 3 out of 4 children and youth worldwide. In addition, nearly 60.2 million teachers are no longer in the classroom". As Egypt's Minister Tarek Shawki said, "we have made more progress with digital and distance learning in the past 10 days than in the past ten years." [5]

Some predictions

Some experts have predicted how coronavirus will change our world for different fields and help to foresee some of those lessons.

"This is an unprecedented opportunity to not just hit the pause button and temporarily ease the pain, but to permanently change the rules so that untold millions of people aren't so vulnerable... So many policies that our elected officials have long told us were impossible and impractical were eminently possible and practical all along... the homeless could've been housed and sheltered in government buildings; water and electricity didn't need to be turned off for people behind on their bills; paid sick leave could've been a right for all workers; paying your mortgage late didn't need to lead to foreclosure; and debtors could've been granted relief." [6]

"This is an unprecedented opportunity to permanently change the rules so that untold millions of people aren't so vulnerable."

How will communication with our loved ones be? "People are finding new ways to connect and support each other in adversity; they are sure to demand major changes in the health-care system and maybe also the government; and they'll become newly conscious of interdependency and community." [7]

But the main consequence has to be how we help families to fulfill their main social role, care. "Care of our families while we work, from child care and elder care to support for people with disabilities and paid family leave. Coronavirus has put a particular national spotlight on unmet needs of the growing older population in our country... Care is and always has been a shared responsibility. Yet, our policy has never fully supported it. This moment, challenging as it is, should jolt us into changing that." [8]

There are also some difficulties to be prevented and overcome. "The paradox of online communication will be ratcheted up: It creates more distance, yes, but also more connection, as we communicate more often with people who are physically farther and farther away — and who feel safer to us because of that distance." [9]

Working from home together can lead to the occasional fight and frequent miscommunication. "There are only two things required for conflict: difference and proximity. This time in our lives puts couples and families in much greater proximity with each other than is typical. Consequently, their differences will become more and more obvious." [10]

Furthermore, this crisis and the quarantine could unfortunately create a fertile ground of domestic violence, more if courts are also on lockdown.

Mandatory quarantines could also have a big impact on the careers of mothers when we come out the other side of this, as women take on an outside share of domestic duties. "As this crisis rolls on, if women are the only ones stepping up when kids suddenly show up at home for weeks on end, how's that going to reflect in your end of year review? Suddenly that maternal bias you thought you extinguished when your kids hit school age is gonna flare right back up." [11]

Our commitment

Urban or densely populated areas are the most vulnerable. Where people have more interpersonal relations either in or outside the household, the virus has spread rapidly. [12] In order to prevent this, social distancing of high-risk groups has proven to be particularly effective at reducing severe outcome given the strong evidence of an increase risk with age. [13] Another successful method at improving the control in densely populated areas has been the early testing campaigns. In all these cases the infected and their families have an important role not only following government's instructions but also by taking preventive measures in their household as voluntary isolation, quarantine and social distancing.

It seems crucial to follow official instructions in order to reverse epidemic growth and reduce case numbers to low levels. But all these non-pharmaceutical interventions require to be combined together for their effectiveness — in this regard, social distancing of the entire population, home isolation of cases and household quarantine of our family members are the best ways for families, especially urban communities, to contribute. Additionally, school and university closures have important strategies to reduce the transmission between generations in a household, but it has a costly impact on health systems due to increased absenteeism linked to child care and unpaid care needs at home. [14]

Urban communities and families are key in reducing the spread of the pandemic. It seems crucial to follow official instructions for it. Initiatives where the urban officials include a family perspective into their interventions seem to be a cornerstone for a better crisis response situation and while designing preventive measures for development. Our Federation, together

with the Veneto Region, launched the Venice Declaration in 2017 [15]. It has been a commitment to make urban areas more family friendly and it has attracted many other cities and territories to its cause. In the face of the ongoing crisis, the Venice Declaration seems critical to put a family perspective into every intervention, but tomorrow it will be even more important to build a new world and start again together by treasuring what has happened.

This commitment could not be better explained from a regional perspective as the President of the Veneto Regional Council does — “I don’t think I’m far from reality if I say that the Venice Declaration is already an excellent political-administrative program of intense work for the future of our Cities, Regions and Nations. If today’s reality is bitter and difficult, if today we have to look at the present with the pessimism of intelligence, it is equally true that we must look to the future with the optimism of the will: no one must be left behind, no one must be left alone.” [16]

In other words, all of us need not only the material help to cope with our limitations, but also the company and affection of feeling appreciated, as we do mainly in the family. Many other consequences of this approach can be found in the results of our Families and SDGs project [17].

From a global perspective, we have constantly advocate for the role of families. As a Report of the UN Secretary General says that “families provide material and non-material care and support to its members, from children to older persons or those suffering from illness, sheltering them from hardship to the maximum possible extent.” [18] These words show now their fullest dimension, as families have their children at home, they are the first to protect its aged members and to take care of those who are infected.

Urban areas are a solution and a problem at the same time. It is therefore necessary to outline the model of an inclusive city, the city of tomorrow that places families and its members at the center of its concerns and that becomes responsive to the many challenges of urban life. The future of mankind is linked to the future of cities and densely populated areas [19], and the lessons learnt from this situation can give us a whole new perspective on how to make it.

Consequences

The fight against loneliness and isolation, specifically for old people living alone, must result in more flexible and accessible housing designs. It should be undertaken in a context allowing them to establish social relations in order to overcome the terrible feeling of loneliness, death or separation.

Thanks to the coronavirus outbreak, working from home has become a feasible option. Thousands of businesses are trying to figure out how to stay operational in a virtual world. Consequently, inclusive cities can find new opportunities to reduce inequalities while pursuing a more harmonious, more ecological and more resilient development for the future. [18]

Along with formal education and the needs from the changing labor markets, attention must be paid to informal education: knowing the crafts, what your roots

are. New and soft skills are required: interpersonal skills (empathy, leadership), communication skills, etc. Exchange and intergenerational skills must be promoted.

The real problem has been the lack of adequate intensive care facilities. The coronavirus is not only a curse: it is also an extraordinary chance to improve our facilities and health care infrastructure — and above all, to learn and be more ready for the next emergency. We should experiment with new models of organization in hospitals from the point of view of construction, which takes into account, not only the needs of operators, but also the needs of people. [20]

“The children who had safe, stable and nurturing relationships before those disasters had better outcomes.”

Thus, the hospital could become a place where people go more serenely and where mechanisms or instruments that favour interpersonal relationships are also easier to build. The idea of developing policies that promote home health care (an essential element, even in terms of costs), so that hospitalization could be limited to emergencies. In this way, the number of people going to hospitals would be reduced. It is necessary to implement home care services as this facilitates family proximity and care for the family.

In health care, attention must be paid not only to physical aspects, but also to the psychological ones. We need to communicate and improve the human side of medical treatments. Some specific psychological problems are more common, but what is lacking is a way to fight against some elements such as stress.

Urban spaces should be opened to enhance security and social distancing (with intelligent lighting settings), new systems to prevent crimes and ensuring they strengthen circular economy and food waste recovery to reduce pollution.

The cost of renting a house can represent a real problem for many families. It is crucial to look for public-private partnerships to provide services or apartments and housing at the right cost. In this way, families are able to pay not only for the cost of their home, but also for other services.

We will also need to guarantee health services in resorts, so that tourists can feel safe. It will be the occasion to plan the cities considering a more secure kind of leisure, without forgetting traditional ones. Social and personal relations will have to be guaranteed in urban spaces.

One big takeaway from research is that the children who had safe, stable and nurturing relationships before those disasters had better outcomes. There is strong evidence to show that programmes that promote safe, stable and nurturing relationships between parents (or caregivers) and children reduce child maltreatment and its lifelong negative consequences for mental and physical health, social and occupational functioning, human capital and security and, ultimately, for economic development. Those

programs should be a priority not only to preserve children rights, but also to prevent consequences of future crisis. [21]

Conclusions

Some preliminary conclusions we would like to propose:

1. The social model is no longer a reality in our societies. Innovative ways to address family challenges have to be re-designed as of work-family balance and support to families in vulnerable situations.

2. Prevent family violence investing in programmes that have been evaluated as effective – such as family-focused community interventions.

3. The need for broadband in all areas of the cities and access to new technologies has to be a priority to help working from home and doing schoolwork.

4. Increase the value of the time at home for unpaid care and domestic work through cash transfers, consolidation of work positions after parental leaves and social recognition.

5. Promote civic participation and social responsibility to reduce polarization, considering it is possible only when institutions are able to listen.

6. Increase the use of alternative and cleaner ways of transportation as of number of ecologic and autonomous vehicles, through free parking lots and accessible charging points, promote vehicle sharing by analysing how many people commute alone, as well as adapting public transportation to the needs of families.

7. Every solution to current problems must be based on the concept of sustainability, which should not be seen as a limitation but as an ethical value.

COVID-19 is a stark and frightening wake-up call to the world that pandemics show no respect for national boundaries. If we are going to beat this crisis and allow families to recover from it, international cooperation is more important than ever before. [22]

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