

How the pandemic could save us

We are at a crossroads. Ian Goldin argues that the pandemic has created opportunities for change which would have been impossible before the pandemic

Despite the tragic deaths, suffering and sadness that it has caused, the pandemic could go down in history as the event that rescued humanity. This column argues that the pandemic has created a hinge moment of change, in which governments and citizens have demonstrated their ability to undertake reforms which would have been impossible before the pandemic.

Sustaining and building on this momentum for reform is vital if we are to address the critical challenges facing humanity, stop future pandemics and build a more inclusive world of shared prosperity.

Despite the tragic deaths, suffering and sadness that it has caused, the pandemic could go down in history as the event that rescued humanity. It has created a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reset our lives and societies onto a sustainable path (Schwab and Malleret 2020, Zakaria 2020). Global surveys and protests have demonstrated the appetite for fresh thinking and a desire not to return to the pre-pandemic world.

Rescue offers no guarantee of a better life, but it does make it possible. Like refugees whose rescue from a cataclysmic fate allows them to envisage a better future, we now have the potential to create a better world.

First, though, we have to traverse a no-man's-land; we are leaving the old pre-pandemic world but have not yet entered into a new one. This will naturally create anxiety and a desire to return to familiar territory. This is the greatest danger, and recalls the words of Jay Gatsby in Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*: "*Can't repeat the past? Why, of course you can!*"

Set in the Jazz Age of the Roaring Twenties, the depiction of the exuberance following from the devastating pandemic of 1918 and WWI could well be repeated, as the pent-up desire to socialise and spend creates a roaring 2020s. A century ago, that ended in tears, with the Great Depression, the rise of fascism and WWII.

Bouncing back is bad

In a recent book (Goldin 2021), I argue that that returning to 'business as usual', or 'bouncing back', means we would be heading in the same direction that brought us to the catastrophe we are in today. Other widely used expressions are similarly worrying.

'Bouncing forward' implies we are leaping ahead along the same tracks which lead over a precipice. A Great Reset, as called for by the World Economic Forum, or 'reboot', another popular phrase, can suggest that we should go back to what has already been programmed, when what is needed is a different operating system.

Whether we now commit to a new and improved world or remain set in our dangerous ways is the historic choice confronting us

'Building back better' – the slogan used by the Biden–Harris presidential team – is more encouraging but still worrying; if there is one thing that COVID-19 has taught us, it is that our system is built on shaky foundations. Building back on unstable foundations guarantees future collapse.

To prevent future pandemics, which could be much more deadly than COVID-19, and to stop catastrophic climate change and other crises, we need to change direction. Is this possible, and in what way?

Appetite for change

COVID-19 has shattered the mental mirrors that have prevented us from breaking from the past and embracing new horizons. The coronavirus rupture has shown that citizens are prepared to change their behaviour when required to do so and that governments are able to break out of their economic strait jackets. Old excuses for inaction are no longer credible.

The task now is to turn the reactive response to the health and economic emergencies into a proactive set of policies and actions to create an inclusive and sustainable world of shared prosperity. Before the pandemic this may have seemed unattainable, even idealistic.

Changes that would have taken a decade or more to emerge have taken place almost overnight. Among the positive changes have been a deeper recognition of the importance of nature, the role of essential workers, the contributions of science and experts, and having supportive family, friends and colleagues.

But the pandemic has also exacerbated health and economic inequalities within countries and between them, devastating the lives and livelihoods of many and greatly increasing isolation and mental illness. A world that functions largely online is more atomised and may lead to a hardening of social and political silos.

Unless the negative consequences of the pandemic are urgently addressed, they will cast a long, dark shadow.

Pendulum swing

The idea that there is no such thing as society, only selfish individuals, can now be relegated to the dustbin of ideological history.

We have witnessed an outpouring of solidarity, not least of the young for the old and of essential workers for others. The young sacrificed their social lives, education and jobs and took on enormous debts to help the elderly get through COVID-19.

Essential workers placed themselves at daily risk to staff our care homes and hospitals and ensure that food was delivered, rubbish collected and that lights stayed on. Many sacrificed their own health for others.

The intolerable costs of austerity and a culture that celebrated individualism and undermined the state has been starkly revealed. In the UK, funding for government health and safety inspections declined by two-thirds in the pre-pandemic decade and over a third of front-line workers feared that not enough was done to protect them from catching COVID-19. Around the world, thousands of health workers died due to the absence of effective personal protection equipment.

Society owes everyone who has made sacrifices a better future. Solidarity needs to be translated into political agendas that focus on inclusive long-term objectives. Prime Minister Lloyd George's 1918 rallying cry after the armistice that ended the First World War was that a 'fit country for heroes to live in' be created¹. We need to learn from the failure of this apt ambition to be realised.

Learning from history

The world wars forever changed global politics and economics; Maynard Keynes argued that it was necessary to 'snatch from the exigencies of war positive social improvements'². In Britain and the US, this translated into offering the soldiers returning from the Second World War free education, healthcare, job security, a pension and an affordable home, none of which would have been available to most of them before the war. Globally, the Second World War gave birth to the United Nations, Bretton Woods Institutions and Marshall Plan.

The pandemic too will change everything, from our personal priorities to global power. Already it has brought profound changes in our work and home lives. It marks the end of the neoliberal era of individualism and its primacy of markets and prices, and heralds a swing of the political pendulum back to state intervention.

As Nobel Laureate economist Angus Deaton has argued 'we now face a set of challenges which we cannot duck' which threaten the fabric of society, providing a 'once-in-a-generation opportunity to tackle the disadvantages faced by many that this pandemic has so devastatingly exposed' (Johnson *et al.* 2021).

Globalisation

Globalisation has caused this universal health and economic emergency. And yet, to address it we need more globalisation, not less. We cannot stop a global pandemic without more global politics. Nor can we stop climate change or any of the other great threats by political deglobalisation.

Economic deglobalisation would condemn to continuing poverty the billions of people in the world who are yet to benefit from the jobs, ideas and opportunities that globalisation brings. It would mean that citizens of poor countries would not have access to the international vaccines, solar power panels, investment, exports, remittances and ideas that are urgently needed to rebuild countries and create a future of shared prosperity.

If isolating ourselves and stopping globalisation could insulate us from risk it may be a price worth paying. But far from reducing risk, it will only increase it. The greatest threat to our lives has historically come from internal or external conflicts.

Now the threat comes from forces that are beyond the control of any one country and which require international cooperation, rather than assertions of supremacy.

It is in every country's self-interest to cooperate to contain global threats. Similarly, it is in each of our own self-interest to contribute to the creation of more cohesive and stable societies.

Stopping global crises

If we learn to work together to stop pandemics, we will have learnt to cooperate. We will have learnt that our lives are intertwined with the lives of people across the world, including those in the poorest countries.

COVID-19 has tested us. By passing the test we will have proved we can also conquer climate and other threats. Nothing should be taken for granted. The virus is not only changing our possibilities and actions, but also the way we think, our dreams and our imaginations.

The pandemic has shown that it is much less costly to stop a crisis than to respond to one that is raging. In just one day in 2020 governments spent more responding to the pandemic than they had in ten years of pandemic prevention.

The fact that a pandemic was inevitable and we failed to prevent or prepare for it is surely as loud a wake-up call as could be sounded. If this is finally heard, COVID-19 could rescue humanity and provide a portal to a better future.

Whether we now commit to a new and improved world or remain set in our dangerous ways is the historic choice confronting us. ■

Ian Goldin is Professor of Globalisation and Development at the University of Oxford

Endnotes

1. David Lloyd George, 23 November 1918, cited by Mark Carney in *The Economist*, 16 April 2020.
2. John Maynard Keynes, "How to pay for the war", in Johnson and Moggridge (1978).

References

Fitzgerald, FS (2000), *The Great Gatsby*, Penguin

Goldin, I (2021), *Rescue: From Global Crisis to a Better World*, Hodder.

Johnson, E and D Moggridge (eds), (1978), *The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes*, Cambridge University Press.

Johnson, P, R Joyce and L Platt (2021), "*The IFS Deaton Review of Inequalities: a New Year's message*", IFS Briefing Note.41

Schwab, K and T Malleret (2020), *Covid-19: The Great Reset*, Forum Publishing.

Zakaria, F (2020), *Ten Lessons for a Post-Pandemic World*, Allen Lane.