**OPINION PIECE**

**COVID- 19- Could this be the ‘wake-up call’ that we need?**

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Throughout the human history, societies have struggled with achieving and maintaining equality. However, it is the persistently rising levels of inequalities that have made the contemporary global society among the most unequal. Since industrial revolution, in order to make ‘progress’, we have focused on making systems efficient and acquiring material wealth. As a result, we have pushed forward an agenda that favors fierce competition over thoughtful collaboration, work over family, military spending over human development, and profits over human well-being. This lopsided economistic approach is deeply ingrained in how we organize, educate, think, act, and even lead.

In recent weeks, COVID-19 has brought ‘our way of life’ to a screeching halt. Since the World Health Organization (WHO) declared it as a global pandemic, we have been asked to exercise ‘abundant caution’ amidst school/ business closings. Meanwhile, panicked shoppers have been forming long lines outside big wholesalers, and grocery stores are trying to stock empty shelves. The health care capacity to meet the daily (maybe hourly) need is also being tested widely. Economists are beginning to study the sharp decline in economic output, caused by global efforts to contain the pandemic. Although we have never witnessed anything like this before, we realize that the overall impact is likely to be quite severe.

As I reflect on the rapid pace with which COVID-19 continues to disrupt our lives, I cannot help but notice its equalizing effect, that may be beginning to challenge our fixation with the economistic approach. First, COVID-19 has impacted all of us indiscriminately across borders, gender, socio-economic and racial lines. We know that we can only slow it down through local, national and even international cooperation. It is forcing us to re-prioritize our work and spend more time at home with families. It has exposed serious shortcomings in our health care system, and highlighted lack of preparedness of our educational institutions. We should have invested more resources in basic health care, telemedicine, scientific research, and building robust online educational systems.

I believe that COVID-19 has the potential to bring us together. In many ways, it already has. We have found renewed respect for health care workers, those working in grocery stores, and teachers. Many of us are also trying to be empathetic and responsible in our messaging with the communities and organizations we lead. Microsoft and Amazon have set-up COVID-19 Response Fund to help small businesses. Yet, at the same time, patients have been charged hefty bills for getting checked in hospitals, hiring freeze have been announced, and millions of workers have been laid-off. We expect big corporations to step up their efforts to fulfill their responsibility to the society. We also need to own our individual responsibility. We need to do more!

Jared Diamond in his book entitled, “*Collapse- how societies choose to fail or succeed*” offers a roadmap of factors that contribute to failures of societies. It includes their failure to anticipate a problem; and when the problem does arrive, the failure to perceive it and solve it successfully. I believe this roadmap is telling of the situation we face today. While we may have failed to anticipate the pandemic despite early signs, it is critical that we perceive the underlying causes to solve this problem. In many ways, COVID-19 is also symptomatic of many other wicked problems (such as global warming, rising levels of global inequalities, global poverty, racial/ gender/ cultural tensions etc.) that we face today. As a global pandemic, COVID-19 has further exposed our misplaced priorities, and highlighted the encroaching weaknesses of our socio-economic lives. It may be a wake-up call for us to correct the way we live, lead and organize.

In order to deal with COVID-19, we need to reinforce a different approach that redefines ‘human progress’ beyond profits, and machine-like efficiency. I would advocate for a humanisticapproach, that focuses on maximizing human well-being (Khilji, 2019; Pirson, 2017). Julie Nelsen in her book entitled, “*Economics for Humans*” refers to moral and spiritual development, the creation of emotionally respectful relations among people, compassionate communities, and ecological balance and sustainability. I would also like to add responsible organizations and leadership (Maak & Pless, 2016) to this list . In order to take us away from our obsession with perfecting our machine-like systems, Nelsen (2006) offers the image of an economy as a ‘beating heart’. I believe commitment to the ‘beating heart’ would require us to rewrite our actions and interactions where we favor humility and respect over ego; wisdom, conscious and integrity over knowledge.

As we adjust to the new reality amidst COVID-19, I hope that we all find time to reflect on the essence of human progress. Is it the insatiable quest for individual material wealth that has left us divided and focused on self-interests? Or is it the desire to live humanistically in quest for collective human well-being?

Our response to the meaning of ‘human progress’ is likely to determine how we will continue to live, organize and lead through and beyond COVID-19- as we face other wicked problems.

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