Briefing paper

Exiting the permanent crisis in the global south

The case for a global financial reset in the wake of Covid-19

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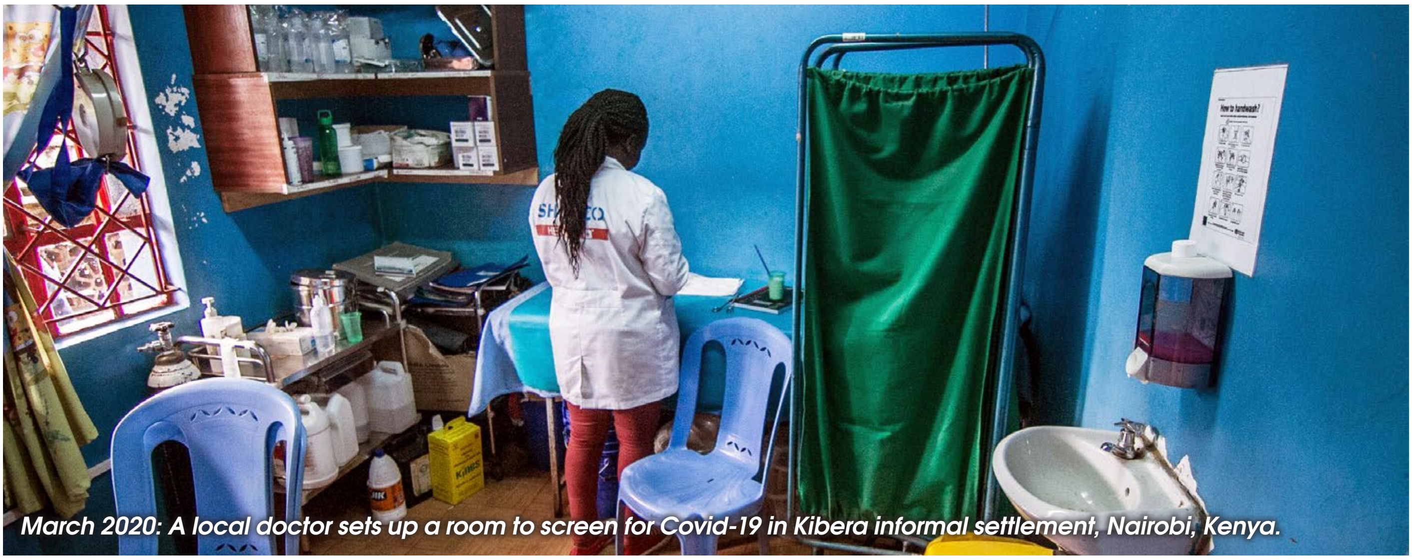

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March 2020: A local doctor sets up a room to screen for Covid-19 in Kibera informal settlement, Nairobi, Kenya.

Summary

Even in the wealthiest countries on earth, years of austerity combined with 'market knows best' ideology has hollowed out our ability to deal with coronavirus. But for many countries in the global south, the weakness of the public sector was not a democratic choice but was imposed by rich countries and international institutions like the IMF. This has created a permanent crisis in some parts of the world where, for instance, Burkina Faso has just 11 ventilators for 19 million citizens, Mozambique has no intensive care unit capacity, and Sierra Leone has 1 doctor per 50,000 of its people.

In order to make up for the 'lack' of public money, these countries have been told they need to attract private investment to pay for services like healthcare. And they've been told to give up any attempt at control over their economy, and 'leave it to the market'. Now, with capital fleeing to safety in the rich countries, commodity markets plunging and export markets collapsing, these governments are left with none of the tools being used by rich countries to intervene in their economies and protect their people.

The market has failed them. It's time for a global reset. We are calling for:

- **Immediate, unconditional debt cancellation** to free up government spending in these countries. We are calling for at least $40 billion in 2020, but suggest much more will be needed as the crisis pans out.
- An unprecedented package of support to build up **public healthcare services and welfare provision globally**.
- **A coronavirus wealth tax** to pay for these services short-term and tax justice to allow countries to pay for them in the long-term
- **A global reset:** fundamental reform to the global economy including sweeping new financial regulation, a radical reset in global trade rules, and government cooperation and intervention to fight climate change throughout the global economy.

International co-ordination is desperately needed on a level last seen in the post-war settlement in 1945. This is not easy. We can, however, mobilise around those parts of the multilateral framework which provide for people's needs, like the World Health Organisation (WHO), and use regional integration to lay the groundwork for a better system.

Introduction

In the middle of a coronavirus crisis, the richest countries in the world are claiming wartime powers to direct economic activity, control markets, massively increase spending and support their public sectors. They will need to, if they are to have any hope of containing coronavirus, spare millions of lives and prevent complete economic collapse.

But sadly, these powers are largely unavailable to developing countries, which for the last four decades have been told that they do not need any control over their economies, and they cannot afford to build welfare states. With public health services often in a dire state, with populations unable to maintain basic necessities through lockdown and with ballooning debts and collapsing export markets, many developing countries could be completely overwhelmed by the coronavirus crisis and its economic repercussions.

This threatens millions of lives. And while this should be a primary motivation to act, politicians also need to remember that the coronavirus crisis exposes our interconnectivity like nothing before. We cannot insulate ourselves as the virus rampages through much of the world. We need unprecedented solidarity with the global south, including sweeping and unconditional debt cancellation, a massive injection of funding to build both emergency and long-term public sector capacity, and long-term fundamental changes to the way the global economy works, from financial policy tools like capital controls through to radical changes to international trade rules.

Most important, this crisis will not be the last. Further pandemics, climate change and soaring inequality require urgent and radical economic reform. Unwavering faith in markets will not solve these problems, but only exacerbate them. Dealing with this crisis requires a fundamental economic reset to build a world which puts human need ahead of corporate privilege and profit.

The permanent crisis in the global south

Even in the global north, years of austerity combined with 'market knows best' ideology has hollowed out our ability to deal with coronavirus. The USA is suffering greatly, not only because of the particular incompetence of President Trump, but because its market-driven healthcare system, controlled by big business, is the most inefficient in the world. In the richest country on earth, people are dying after being turned away from healthcare facilities because they don't have insurance.

But for many countries in the world, the weakness of the public sector - that part of our economy which provides safety from the whims of the market – was not a democratic choice. It was imposed ruthlessly from outside. On the back of the 'third world debt crisis' in the 1980s, a crisis fuelled by irresponsible lending by Western banks, the International Monetary Fund and World Bank forced 'structural adjustment' policies on dozens of countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. They effectively bailed out the banks, and insisted that the price was going to be paid by further impoverishing the countries concerned, demanding they carry out harsh austerity, sweeping privatisation, and give up on any attempt to manage their economies in the interest of their own people.

These policies created a permanent crisis in many countries, which were unable to build, for instance, the sort of public, universal healthcare systems that you find in much of the rich world. Just look at the number of doctors different countries employ, clearly something key in dealing with the coronavirus crisis. Britain has 28 doctors per 10,000 people. That's actually low for a developed country. Germany has 42, and Norway has 46. Even relatively rich developing countries have a small fraction of that number: 9 doctors per 10,000 people in South Africa, 8 in India.

But even that's fairly good compared to really impoverished countries. Take Sierra Leone – which was specifically told by the IMF in the mid-1990s to reduce public sector employees by 28% and limit their wages. Community health workers were slashed and today Sierra Leone has just 0.2 doctors per 10,000 people.

Across low income countries, the average health spending was only US$41 per person in 2017, compared with US$2,937 in high income countries – a difference of more than 70 times.

The World Health Organisation reckons that at least half the world's population lacks essential healthcare even in normal times. Where public systems don't exist, people are pushed into debt by medical fees when they fall ill, an often disastrous factor in healthcare in middle income and even high income countries like the USA.

The consequences are shocking. Oxfam tells us that each day nearly 4,000 people die from tuberculosis. 1,500 are killed by malaria. Every day 16,000 children die before their fifth birthday. Women in Chad have a lifetime risk of maternal death of 1 in 16, while a woman in Sweden has a risk of less than 1 in 10,000. And while the Central African Republic has just three ventilators for its 5 million people, and Burkina Faso has 11 machines for 19 million citizens, 17 countries – including Angola and Mozambique – have no intensive care capacity at all.

This is a permanent crisis. When Mali's government has three ventilators per million people, how is it supposed to deal with the current pandemic?

The severity of the IMF's policies caused so much suffering and were such a disaster even in their own terms, that they were impossible to maintain forever. In recent years, the IMF has come to recognise the importance of healthcare spending and has employed positive language about 'poverty reduction'. But in reality, little has changed. Recent figures from the European Network of Debt and Development show 46 low income countries spending more on debt service than on healthcare, averaging 7.8% of GDP on public debt service to just 1.8% of GDP spent on public healthcare.

The conditions applied to IMF lending nowadays do tend to make exceptions for healthcare spending. But recent research suggests that this isn't having anything like sufficient impact, and permanent austerity has become a fact of life for many countries. Most governments are on track to reduce public spending as a percentage of GDP at least until 2024. Overall spending limits are still tightly controlled. Even in Greece, a comparatively rich country, in the wake of the eurozone crisis, the fact that the government was:

> *"forced to cut municipal budgets led to scaling back of mosquito-spraying programs, resulting in the re-emergence of locally transmitted malaria for the first time in 40 years. Public hospital budgets were reduced by 26%, leading to staff overwork, increasing waiting lists, and shortages of medicines and medical equipment. Prevention and treatment programs for illicit drug use also faced cuts, leading to increases in HIV infections from intravenous drug users."*

Examples from poorer countries abound. West African countries' response to the devastating Ebola crisis was restricted because of the damage done to counties in the region by IMF programs which reduced government expenditure, weakened health systems, and forced governments to rely on fees for medical services.

Leave it to the market

Not to worry, the West told these countries, it's true you can't invest in public services, but that doesn't matter because the market will provide. In the last 15 years there has been a push, with Britain playing a leading role, to use development funds to encourage the private sector to invest in poorer countries. This can happen by using public money to 'de-risk' activities for the private sector, creating new financial instruments, using public-private partnerships or advising countries to create 'business friendly environments'.

This strategy is best summed up in 'From Billions to Trillions: Transforming Development Finance Post-2015', published by the World Bank and others. It has been widely critiqued, including by Stamp Out Poverty in 2019 who warned that the belief that private investment would make up for a deficit in public funding was a "false promise (which) may detract…from other useful policy measures, such as focusing more efforts on mobilising domestic tax revenues or fighting tax avoidance instead."

So rather than directly supporting countries to build public services, or to help them collect taxation from the multinational corporations already working there, the idea is to use public money to make the opening environment 'more conducive' for intentional capital to invest. And along the way, the strategy risks further promoting financial power, including the shadow banking system, giving this sector - which is prone to volatility and unequal outcomes - a new role to play in public services and infrastructure, as well as deepening an unhelpful dependence on mining and fossil fuels.

In healthcare, public-private partnerships have proliferated, and are turning public needs into long-term income streams for financiers. The infamous Queen Mamohato Memorial Hospital in Lesotho is an instructive case. Initiated in 2008 to replace Lesotho's national hospital, and backed by the World Bank which said it would cost no more than the old hospital, it ended up consuming more than half of the annual health budget of Lesotho. That's three to four times the cost of the old hospital siphoned off into the markets. British aid spending still supports the establishment of private healthcare, despite repeated warnings which suggest it's much less effective than supporting public sector solutions.

The people of Lesotho and Sierra Leone aren't incapable of running decent healthcare systems. They are not naturally poor. They have been impoverished, first by centuries of empire, but more recently because they've been treated like guinea-pigs for free market ideology.

The market collapses

Healthcare is just one example. But of course, coronavirus is no longer simply a health concern. The crisis will wreak devastation on the global economy. The same free market snake oil which has devastated the public sector has also deprived governments in developing countries of the ability to control their economies as a whole. They were told they didn't need to control finance flowing in and out of their economies because the market would find an equilibrium. They were also told not to try to produce essentials, but let goods flow freely across borders - that they would be able to depend on the international market to provide their people with what they need.

Today, that advice has been shown to be a lie. Finance has taken flight, back to the West, to be protected by massive state intervention, in countries where such policies are still possible. The price of commodities, on which so many countries were told to depend for their income, has collapsed. Exports and international currency have dried up. In a particularly telling sign, at the end of March ratings agency Moodys declared South African bonds to be 'junk'. So while the US and Europe can borrow for free, countries like South Africa will have to pay astronomical rates to obtain the funds they so desperately require.

In fact, the collapse of the markets is unprecedented. The Financial Times reports that:

> *"According to the Institute of International Finance, foreign investors have withdrawn $95bn from stocks and bonds since they woke up to the crisis on January 21. That is four times the outflows in the same period after the start of the 2008 global financial crisis."*

The UN Conference on Trade and Development, UNCTAD, reports that commodities, on which many developing countries are still reliant, have seen prices fall by 37% and that developing countries (excluding China) will lose nearly US$800 billion in export revenues as export markets collapse in 2020. Added to the serious outflows and collapse of prices and export markets, many southern countries were already facing a debt crisis. Again, UNCTAD warns that total developing country debt stock reached 193% of GDP at the end of 2018, compared to just over 100% in 2008. Before the end of 2021, $562 billion is due for repayment by governments in low and middle-income countries, with the vast majority falling due this year.

Therefore this isn't just a problem for very poor countries. In India, capital outflows in March alone were larger than the outflows witnessed during the entire year of 2008. What's more, if India tries to follow the USA and Europe and lower interest rates, it could make matters worse. The country is caught in a bind, and has recently tried to deregulate its financial market to encourage capital to stay, but in so doing, as policy expert Kavaljit Singh warns, it is simply making itself more reliant on the volatile markets.

These countries have been told, again and again, 'the market will provide'. They now get to watch as the very countries that told them these lies abandon market principles altogether.

What do we do?

In recent days, we have heard calls to apply the same type of stimulus packages we've seen in the rich world to the developing world. African leaders have called for $100 billion of debt cancellation. UNCTAD has called for a $2.5 trillion stimulus package and the reintroduction of capital controls to give developing countries the power to intervene to control the money markets. Oxfam has called for 10 million more doctors and the requisitioning of private sector health facilities to be put into public service immediately, as we've seen in Spain.

These calls are right, and every effort must be made to secure this unprecedented funding. But this can't be a one-off, temporary answer to coronavirus. If we're to not only contain the spread of Covid-19 but get beyond the permanent crisis which afflicts so many countries, we need these policies to effect a revolution. Developing countries must be able to invest in permanent public welfare provision – healthcare, education, safety nets – and to pay for them through taxation if they're ever to eradicate poverty. They need to be able to exercise control over their economies if they're to have a hope of making those economies work for their own people.

What we're calling for:

1. Debt cancellation

Even before the debt crisis, many countries in the global south were at serious risk of high debt levels turning into a crisis. After the 2008 crash, finance poured into developing countries to benefit from the higher returns on offer there. The media talked up a 'financial miracle', but much of this financing was not sustainable and led to huge debt burdens.

With the rush of capital out of the global south during the coronavirus crisis, this debt is now seriously unsustainable. Debt that needs to be dealt with includes:

- **Multilateral debt**, including that owed to the IMF and World Bank. These institutions should offer an immediate cancellation of all principal, interest and charges for the remainder of 2020 for all countries in need, notably lower income countries, but also countries outside this group which are suffering particularly acute debt distress.
- **Bilateral debt**, from other countries including Britain but also new lenders such as China, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. These countries should also cancel all principal, interest and charges for the remainder of 2020 for all countries in need. Ideally debt cancellation should be co-ordinated between lenders but should not wait for them all to agree.
- **Private debt**, from banks and private institutions. This is significant because it comes with high rates of interest. Dealing with this requires borrowing counties to simply stop making payments. Governments are often scared to take this action because of the repercussions, so richer countries should support moves to suspend payments. It is of particular concern that speculators could already be buying up this debt very cheaply in order to sue countries at a later date. The UK and New York are the two jurisdictions which these 'vulture funds' regularly use, so legislation in these two places could prevent such speculation.

All debt cancellation must be **unconditional**. In the past, debt cancellation has been tied to 'free market' and pro-austerity conditions which end up constraining government spending and reducing their power over their economies. This would be totally counter-productive given that at present, governments desperately need economic space to deal with the crisis. The whole purpose of debt cancellation is a rapid release of funds which governments can use to bolster public expenditure, especially to maintain and increase social protection and health spending.

Jubilee Debt Campaign estimates that such cancellation of external debt payments in 2020 for 69 lower income countries would save over $40 billion in 2020, but that a figure of nearer £300 billion will require write down in the longer-term.

2. An unprecedented package of support for public services

While debt cancellation is vital, it won't provide sufficient funding on its own. Other forms of emergency funding will be required. Long-term, countries need to develop a strong tax base, discussed below. But short-term, they will require significant resources which can help: build strong public health services, develop welfare nets to protect people through the crisis and support economies through the medium-term economic crisis.

Relying on private sector investment has failed to provide the world with universal public health services. We need a rapid injection of funding to scale up public health services as quickly as possible. Oxfam is calling for the recruitment of 10 million new health workers, and the requisitioning of private health facilities as necessary. But these should not be seen as temporary measures. Indeed, the WHO has already said that countries in the global south need more than 23 million additional health workers and to build more than 415,000 new health facilities, if we're to provide decent healthcare to all.

Income support and stimulus measures should be an essential component of a funding package, as this is vitally needed to stave off a looming food crisis.

Emergency funding can achieve positive results, but if the public support is suspended once coronavirus has been contained, those countries will simply return to their permanent crises, and find themselves unable to cope with the next epidemic that comes along. It's vital that this emergency funding contributes towards stronger public services long term.

While the funding required is large, it is still a small amount in relation to the stimulus being injected into rich country economies. And there are relatively simple ways of injecting cash into the global economy. One idea is for the International Monetary Fund to issue some of its reserve currency, known as Special Drawing Rights, to its members.

The UN has called for $1 trillion of this IMF currency to be injected into the economy, freeing up spending space in developing countries to pour into its health response. Sadly, the US is currently blocking such an issue, on the basis it would help countries it dislikes such as Iran.

3. A coronavirus wealth tax – and tax justice

The economic thinking of recent times has focused on encouraging financial investments, normally by pushing the risk of investment onto the public sector and allowing the private sector to walk away with the profit. There's surely a more effective way. If the wealth exists in the private sector, taxing that wealth is the most effective way of redistributing it.

Since the financial crisis in 2008, the massive government intervention in the economy has not been used to make the economy work in a more equitable way. In fact, the majority of people have continued to lose out as wages have risen very slowly, while profits and dividends to the wealthy have risen rapidly. In 2019, big banks globally spent $325 billion in dividends to wealthy shareholders and share buybacks to keep the price of shares high. Figures from the Centre for Research on Multinational Corporations (SOMO) show that JP Morgan Chase was the most profitable investment bank in 2019, making $36.4 billion in profits, up 12% on the previous year, and paying an effective tax rate of only 18%.

These bumper returns, fuelled by both four decades of deregulation and then massive public support including quantitative easing in the period after the 2008 crisis, have largely been passed onto wealthy shareholders. Yet today, governments are being asked to step in again to prevent economic collapse right across the economy. We must ensure that this is not another public bailout of investors.

Other industries will make handsome returns precisely because of the crisis. Big Pharma is already one of the most profitable sectors in the world, yet in our current system these profits don't translate into higher spending on research and development of drugs, least of all in treatments for diseases which tend to kill 'poor people'. Rather Big Pharma invests in its own shareholders' wealth. A total of $1,540 billion was issued to shareholders between 2000 and 2018, of which $676 billion was spent on repurchasing the company's shares to keep stock prices high and $864 billion on dividends. This dwarfs research budgets.

Many of the biggest high-tech companies are also expected to cash in. Conference app Zoom has seen its share price more than double, and the company is said to be worth $42 billion, while Netflix, Facebook and Microsoft are all expected to benefit greatly from the lockdown, both in immediate sales and in the incredible personal data troves we're all handing over to these companies. Amazon, which is effectively a private monopoly running publicly needed infrastructure, is thought to be making as much as $10,000 a second during the crisis, while the paper fortune of CEO Jeff Bezos swelled by $13bn in a single week, bringing his fortune $145bn.

A special tax could recoup desperately needed funds so that governments around the world can respond to the crisis. A 'Corona Wealth Tax' (or 'Survival Tax') should be swiftly introduced as explained below. The proposal from SOMO is for a tax which would be imposed on net earnings for the year 2019 and would elevate the average effective tax rate to 35% (from its current average of 18-22%). It could be paid by retaining profits and not paying dividends and share buybacks in 2020. Developed countries should agree to allocate a part of the Corona Tax revenues to developing countries suffering from COVID-19.

The tax could also provide leverage for governments to exert control over the corporate sector. For instance, they could exempt banks which withhold profits (meaning they cannot pay dividends or bonuses or engage in share buybacks or tax dodging) in order to give interest-free loans to small businesses. Large non-financial companies could be exempt on the condition they withhold profits to retain workers, support supply chains and fund their transition to fossil-free production.

The wealth tax is an emergency measure and isn't a substitute for establishing proper progressive taxation on corporations and wealthy individuals. This is the only sustainable long-term way to pay for the public services which the world so desperately needs. But it could be a step on the way to normalising higher rates of tax and clamping down on tax havens. Countries should also immediately move towards instituting a financial transaction tax, which would discourage high frequency and speculative short-term trading, which will help support the longer-term sustainable economy. The income could, again, be used for health budgets, and for financing socially and environmentally sustainable activities.

4. A Global Reset

For decades, the financial system has been deregulated, preventing governments from exercising the control they need over their economies, and embedding a short-term, crisis-prone logic right at the heart of the global economy. Economist Dani Rodrik has argued that open markets can only work when governments intervene to redistribute wealth, build welfare states to protect people and engage in domestic planning and investment. But for 40 years, governments have been told not to use these tools but rather to allow the market to work its magic. The result is unprecedented levels of inequality and disastrous climate change.

To deal with these chronic problems, and allow countries to be properly prepared for the next epidemic, we need a radical reset of the global economy. Some of the measures above are a good starting point for that reset, but we need to go further and ensure these changes go well beyond the short term. This is a huge agenda, but some of the important elements include:

- **Financial regulation**. Countries of the global south must not be prevented regulating and controlling finance. So-called capital controls allow governments to regulate international capital flow and protect their economies from the chaotic behaviour of international markets. This 'interference' in the workings of the markets has been strongly discouraged for many decades. It's time this ended. Governments must be able to intervene in international markets to aid stability and equity. This includes using tools that prohibit damaging speculative financial behaviour – behaviour which proliferates in the global economy at the best of times, but particularly during crises. For instance, governments should currently control so-called 'short selling' where financiers bet on the price of an asset collapsing, often allowing speculators to profiteer from crises.
- **A new debt system**. For too long debt has been considered the moral responsibility of the debtor, allowing creditors to behave in downright reckless ways, and impose punishments on debtor countries. This is deeply unhelpful. In the global economy, the creation of debt is a financial tool, not a matter of morality. Companies and countries regularly go through debt write-downs and debt restructures. Debt should not be seen a moral obligation on one party, but an arrangement between two parties with both sharing responsibility. In particular, putting debt payments ahead of saving lives cannot possibly be justified. In order to create a more sustainable debt system, we call for the creation – at a UN level – of a systematic, comprehensive and enforceable process for sovereign debt restructurings, preventing the build-up of unpayable and illegitimate debts which maintain poverty and inequality at a global level.
- **Clamp down on tax havens**. Tax dodging has robbed countries of phenomenal amounts of funding which they need if they're to build up proper public services and welfare systems. Big corporations and wealthy individuals scour the world looking for places to stash their cash where they can pay low or even zero taxes. We need global coordination to clamp down on tax havens, but steps can be taken by individual countries straight away.
- **Rethink global trade rules**. Global trade rules have stripped governments of the power they need to make their economies work for their own development and their people's needs. We are now seeing the collapse of this system, as international markets are unable to provide for solutions to the problems we face. Nationalistic export restrictions on essential goods should be resisted as they simply push supply problems onto other (usually less powerful) countries. But countries should take action to increase their production of food and other essential products, and ensure their availability to everyone. When it comes to medicine production, including a vaccine for Covid-19, countries must avoid intellectual property protection which prices medicines out of reach of most people and simply allows big business to profiteer from health crises. Conditions must be applied to impose open licenses on drugs and if necessary, compulsory licenses must be applied to override patents. Longer-term, we need to radically reorient our trade system, replacing rules that demand endless liberalisation and regulation with an international trading system which can regulate big business in the interests of public need, including protecting the environment.
- **A just ecological transition**. So many of the policy tools being deployed to fight coronavirus are necessary longer term to halt climate change and reduce inequality. We should make the most use of these tools, not to get 'back to business as usual' as soon as possible, but to begin building a sustainable economy. That means that when

businesses are saved from collapse the government must use its ownership of those businesses to demand they embark on a transition away from fossil fuels, that they offer decent pay and conditions for their workers and that they pay their proper share of taxes. In some instances, public ownership should be permanent, preventing the market from allocating resources which are needed to live a dignified life or to build a fairer society – transport or energy companies might fall into that category.

International cooperation is desperately needed on a level last seen in the post-war settlement in 1945. But this isn't easy given many world leaders are more interested in whipping up racism and xenophobia than getting a grip on the crisis. Even basic diplomacy has become a challenge. In the absence of international cooperation, countries will have to take what actions they can, including building centres of regional integration. But it's also necessary to defend those parts of the multilateral system where a different sort of coordination is possible.

The World Health Organisation has been desperately underfunded and sidelined for many years, making it impossible to coordinate an effective international response to this pandemic. President Trump has further tried to undermine the WHO even as the crisis rages, and indeed has succeeded in suspending US funding to the organisation. We need to urgently rethink internationalism, drawing out a set of institutions and policies separate from those that have driven corporate globalisation, towards those that prioritise coordination around key human needs, like the WHO.

Conclusion

As frightening as this crisis is, there is hope. For a start, coronavirus has shown us that, although the disease will affect us very differently, we can't entirely insulate ourselves from the injustices of the world we live in. Allowing contagion to go unchecked across the most impoverished countries is not only repellent, it will prevent us from containing this disease everywhere. To some degree, the virus shows that we are only as safe as the most vulnerable members of our society.

Second, the hypocrisy in the global economy has never been as stark as this. When developing countries see that rich counties couldn't give a damn about market principles when their own societies are threatened, there is every chance that we can effect a permanent change in the mindset of people everywhere.

And this change must happen. Because coronavirus was an accident waiting to happen. It won't be the last pandemic, maybe not even the worst, and our ability to deal with these vulnerabilities stems directly from a short-term economic logic which prioritises profit ahead of public good. In fact, the climate emergency risks far more lives than coronavirus. The market can't solve that problem either, it can only make it worse. So for the good of all humanity, we have to see coronavirus as a wake up call. The market will not save us.

Take action

To find out how you can help tackle corporate power and become part of a movement for real change visit globaljustice.org.uk

Global Justice Now

Global Justice Now campaigns for a world where resources are controlled by the many, not the few. With thousands of members around the UK, we work in solidarity with global social movements to fight inequality and injustice.

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