

Dialogue & Trust Matter – How Can We Reconstruct a Post-Pandemic Society?

By Kazumasa Kusaka

What has the Covid-19 pandemic destroyed and irreversibly changed? The competition between the speed with which the virus mutates into new variants and the research and development of vaccines has been growing. Nations where vaccines are readily available for their people, a post-Covid economic expansion, a V-shaped recovery of sectors asymmetrically affected, and the movement of people with Covid-19 vaccination passports can all be expected from now on. With progress in developing curative medicines, it is being perceived that Covid-19 will become a disease like influenza. That is, while global annual casualties from influenza are around 290,000 to 650,000, annual vaccinations and effective medicines have largely erased the fear of it from societies, which can now live with the virus. This back-to-normal scenario is predicted by some people from a public health perspective.

However, the wounds caused by the pandemic to communities have been deep and strong. Social distancing, which runs contrary to human nature and communicating face to face, has exhausted both individuals and communities. Can a post-Covid society fully return to its pre-pandemic state?

Countries that have seemingly succeeded in containing Covid-19 were often authoritarian states, while countries with democratic systems have suffered huge human casualties due to hesitation over implementing heavy-handed contact-tracing and full lockdowns. Many citizens, especially the younger generation, have lost trust in politics and government, and disagreements among scientists have also spread. Income disparities and social polarization have become more visible. In the United States and many other countries people are increasingly divided not only in their views on policy issues and attitudes toward government and society but also in their perceptions of the same factual reality. In politics, “perception is reality” is a well-known proverb.

A brighter narrative is as follows. Science regains the public's trust that it is succeeding in timely development of effective medicines. Institutions like the WHO or the G7 also recover trust through effectively organizing international cooperation for vaccination supply to help countries in need. And as a result, confidence in domestic and international institutions is restored.

The lessons we learn from this crisis may critically shape our future. But when countries claim the exclusive legitimacy of the “facts” and when authoritarian and democratic nations are diametrically opposed, how can ordinary citizens arrive at balanced political and social judgements? We know that our perspective is defined by the organizations we belong to, by the expression “where you stand depends on where you sit.” So can we keep insisting on our own position against an opposing one, like a broken record? Here, the keyword is dialogue – from the

Greek *dia logos* meaning “through words” or speech: the process of talking to reach an understanding to help solve problems. Activism campaigns have often proved effective in enlightening societies; the next step should be for dialogue to explore solutions among groups with different viewpoints. Is this a dream?

In US presidential debates, the nominated candidates of both parties seek broader support among middle voters, paving the way for a new president to enjoy a wider back-up. A typical wedge issue is the choice between big government with high-level welfare and small government. But when someone promotes “small government and high welfare service” it needs to be pointed out that there is no way to achieve a welfare state with low taxes.

Another case is nuclear power generation where sharply opposing views prevail. Stakeholders are not regarded as trustworthy due to past performance and behavior. Even though nuclear is a CO₂-free source for both power and heat, as well as hydrogen supply, now with simplified safety and non-proliferation Small Modular Reactors or high-temperature gas cooling reactors being promising options, government or industry are not well positioned to communicate to opposing groups.

This is where think-tanks and academics can play an important role. It is infrastructure which enables political or social judgements to be significant on the level playing field. Political leaders themselves are often slaves to opinion polls. This is exactly like the functioning of the market. Quality, volume and price are essential information for the choice of consumers. Even in beer or wine, German law requires serving glasses to have scale marks to protect drinkers!

Trust matters. This is the *raison d'être* of think-tanks and academia. In times of increasing polarization, transparency and accountability are the key words.

At the symposiums Japan Economic Foundation hosts, it is customary for me to make remarks that my benchmark of success is whether participants have changed their views on any topic discussed in the symposium when they leave the conference room after having listened to the discussions. My favorite reference is the “second law of thermodynamics” that says when hot water and cool water are mixed, “each” of them should change through mutual influence; whereas a broken record just keeps on repeating itself. Promoting such dialogues is an essential role of think-tanks.

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