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## Navigating an unknown enemy

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What if we are unable to develop a vaccine?

Do you know why we -- human beings -- often overeat chocolates even when we know that they might be harmful for our health? Insights from evolutionary psychology suggest that our early ancestors, who lived in trees or criss-crossed the plains of Africa, are the real culprits behind it.

This is because, they rarely found sweet fruits for their diets as most of them lived as scavengers - eating bone marrows of dead animals. And while hunting big animals like mammoths or a deer became possible only when the early humans invented projectile technology more than 30,000 years ago -- the real treasure pot was when they accidentally found a branch full of strawberries or mangoes hanging on a tree, which they most certainly over consumed.

Those habits, from our deep past, have somehow survived the great leap that the humans have undertaken over the last 315,000 years and it defines us in ways which we often do not fully appreciate.

The idiosyncratic gestures that shape how we eat with each other, speak to each other, and connect with each other are often created by the norms that came into play in early human history -- and has slowly defined who we are as a species.

Hence, it is not surprising that Covid-19, which is now a global pandemic -- is becoming such a tiring exercise for so many of us, not only because our hospitals are getting flooded with patients, but since it is asking us to change our social behaviour in ways that are extremely non-human. Human beings are not programmed to sing from their balconies and show love and affection at an arm's length. Rather, complex societies and alliances were formed when strangers bonded over singing and dancing around a fire and when we dined with each other to symbolize our trust in friends or new alliances.

Consequently, the psychological dent that this pandemic is having on our mental health is often not understood by the policy-makers -- who are very rationally and correctly demanding more social distancing to prevent an exponential growth in its spread that our health care systems cannot cope with.

In some sense, an unknown enemy has given us today a new mirror to see our reflections. And while I do not like asking what silver linings are associated with this tragedy that has already taken thousands of lives, the pandemic does make us look at ourselves as one single species -- not carved by our borders drawn up by history or our territorial instincts or the ethnicity we have inherited from our ancestors.

More importantly, Covid-19 tells us and reminds us once more that what has saved human race in the past and will save it in the future is our ingenuity that makes us understand the micro-machineries of nature and our ability to cooperate and adapt to new circumstances.

But what is the nature of this new future to which we must adjust? How will human societies function if this virus keeps reappearing and a vaccination never gets invented?

This possibility must be explored if we want to develop contingencies for the human society as a whole. In the best-case scenario, the humans develop a vaccine and life returns to its old ways sometime in the near future. However, what will happen if the vaccine is never invented?

There is a definite case for readjusting how we operate socially while we inject more normalcy to how we function, but that would also mean accepting higher risks to our lives. But, why should we be reluctant to accept higher risks to start re-engaging in our social, economic, and political fabric? Did not our ancestors navigate an even riskier world when there were no vaccines?

Of course, modern technologies and medical protocols can greatly enhance our scope to reconfigure the social, economic, and political “response framework” effectively to any new outbreaks of this disease. Moreover, it is likely that we have to start accepting a world where neighbourhoods and towns going into complete lockdown becomes a new normal.

But it also means that if the worst case -- no vaccine -- scenario does become the final reality, we will all have to go back to the drawing board collectively and develop a plan B that involves taking more risks.

It is also essential that international bodies like the World Health Organization (WHO) as well as the international lending agencies accept that the nation states that are now dealing with this pandemic harness very different economic systems, which shape the resources that they can mobilize internally to support their people who are affected by the economic consequences of this current lockdown protocol.

Hence, it is their duty to come up with different but effective health protocols that can take into account that countries like Bangladesh and India will not be able to survive economically with an overstretched semi-lockdown scenario even if it is the best health response to this pandemic.

Consequently, the time for formulating an effective but flexible health protocol for countries belonging to different levels of economic development is now, and there is a strong case for rethinking the one-size fits all health prescriptions that are coming from the international agencies. *Ashikur Rahman is a Senior Economist at the Policy Research Institute of Bangladesh (PRI). He can be reached at [ashrahman83@gmail.com](mailto:ashrahman83@gmail.com).*

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