



COVID-19, Human Security, and Global Leadership

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Abstract

The need for coordination and integration of human benefit knowledge, as well as application in policy, continues to grow. Numerous warnings of a serious global pandemic have gone unheeded, and COVID-19 has spread across the world, mishandled by many political leaders. But the coronavirus may provide a possible pathway to effectively addressing the broader problems of human security and sustainability. Many isolated reports on COVID-19 have been published, but their impact is unknown. Leadership to deal with the pandemic requires breaking information silos, engaging stakeholders, and creating a “spider web structure” to coordinate efforts for ending or containing the virus. Assembling leaders associated with many of these COVID reports, with the explicit purpose of learning what works and what does not, what is being done and might be done, and how to improve outreach, could provide a valuable case study of a transformative knowledge system. If successful, similar roundtables could be arranged for those concerned with the broader realm of health security, and the still broader concepts of the Sustainable Development Goals and/or Sustainable Human Security. In an era of “truth decay,” however, transforming knowledge systems and promoting effective global leadership will not be easy.

Several questions and suggestions are offered here, that concerns the COVID-19 pandemic, the human security concept, and global leadership in the next decade. COVID-19 has clearly made many more people think about pandemics and the broader concept of health security. And, with effective global leadership, it could get many to think about the broader concept of human security, and transformative knowledge systems in general.

COVID as Lead Crisis. In a world of multiple crises, the COVID-19 pandemic has become the leading crisis because of its immediacy, palpability felt by many, and multiple impacts on all countries. The virus has already changed our world, especially for poor and marginal people, and is far from running its course. Despite new treatments and several vaccines that should be available in 2021, COVID may not even be near the half-way mark, as regards global cases and deaths. We should certainly be thinking about the “post-pandemic world”,¹ but we must first end or greatly diminish the nasty coronavirus.

COVID Reports to the Rescue? I have recently completed a survey of COVID reports, briefly summarized elsewhere in this issue of *Cadmus* (“Can 66 COVID-19 Reports Make a

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Difference?"), including a list of Highlights and the Organization Index that gives an overview of contributing organizations. They include five UN agencies (including a strategy update from WHO, and SDG scenarios from the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs) and two UN cross-agency groups (a joint effort by 43 UN organizations to promote sustainable development, and statistics on COVID from 36 international organizations). There are also expert reports from academic public health institutes (Johns Hopkins, Harvard, Columbia, Minnesota) and many other organizations in the US and Europe, including the EU's proposed recovery plan. I missed the Sept 2020 "COVID-19 Action Agenda" and "The Great Reset" from the World Economic Forum, to be included in the next update on COVID reports.

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I can see no evidence that any of these groups acknowledges any of the other groups!

Nor is it clear that most, if not all of these well-written, free, online, and generally brief reports substantially reach their intended audience. I have no idea if many—or any—make a difference.

Leadership for a Pandemic. Some have argued that there is a "global leadership vacuum," but the wide array of proliferating COVID reports is a prime example of an inefficient glut of competing leaders on the world stage. The late Harlan Cleveland, former president of WAAS, university president and social science dean at two other universities, wrote nearly two decades ago that the global "macrotransition" resulting from the spread of knowledge and information technology changes what it takes to bring people together to make something different happen.² Scores of books on leadership have been published since then, but Cleveland's book that nobody is in charge is still highly relevant to the current situation.

Viewed differently, the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University's Earth Institute has issued a concise two-page overview of three principles learned from the 9/11 disaster in NYC: Connect ("remove information silos"), Collaborate ("across levels of government and with key stakeholders"), and Create ("a spider's web structure of multiple leaders working with each other to coordinate efforts"). This, too, appears to be right on target for the COVID reports and global leadership in general.³

Phase 1 COVID Roundtable. Connecting COVID with the global leadership issue should start with the relatively simple task of breaking "information silos," engaging stakeholders, and convening a "spider web structure" of representatives from UN groups and many of the other research organizations issuing COVID reports, to meet virtually on several occasions in 2021 and 2022. The dual purpose is not only for each organization to describe what it has done and will be doing, but to learn from others. As argued by Oxford economist Paul Collier, the current epidemic is a classic case of "radical uncertainty," which leads our

thoughts to two basic questions: “how to face unknown unknowns,” and “how to face known unknowns.” Answers to the former are to build resilience while encouraging rival teams of experts. “Answers to the latter are to learn from others, while investing in finding out new information.”⁴ Explicit learning about what has been learned from each other’s COVID reports and outreach efforts, will be essential for better collaboration, and for the broader concerns in Phase 2 and Phase 3.

Phase 2 Health Security Roundtable. Learning from the COVID roundtable should inform thinking about the wider “health security system,” stressing links to food security, economic security, environmental pollution, health care systems, and public health preparedness for future pandemics.⁵ Phase 1 especially, and Phase 2 are likely to be supported by WHO, and perhaps other organizations too. If this cross-sector effort appears successful in generating fresh approaches, a green (or cautious yellow) light can shine on the still broader Phase 3.

Phase 3 Human Security, SDGs and SSG Roundtables. Recent interest has been expressed in the “Human Security” concept, which has languished since being introduced by a 2003 UN report.⁶ It was intended as a people-centered paradigm and as a comprehensive approach to tackle threats in an integrated manner, linking development, human rights, and national security. A new effort may be underway for “Sustainable Human Security,” which adds the widely used “S-word”. It could become a supplement to the UN’s 17 Sustainable Development Goals, a complement to the SDGs, or a competitor, in that the SDGs do not mention security in any form other than “peace” in Goal #16. The broad scope of both security and sustainability concerns is amply illustrated by the 2,000+ organizations described to varying degrees in *The Security & Sustainability Guide* (www.securesustain.org). To make any meaningful progress, a series of roundtables will likely be needed, with some coordination between them.

Case Studies of Transformational Knowledge Systems. Much has been recently written about the necessity of transformations to meet the SDGs, and about transformational knowledge systems.⁷ A thorough study of the COVID reports, as well as selected books and articles on COVID, can illuminate whether this knowledge system leads to significant action, and barriers to doing so. If successful, moving on to case studies of the health security system and the still broader human security system can benefit our understanding of transformational knowledge.

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Notes

1. Fareed Zakaria, *Ten Lessons for a Post-Pandemic World*. (New York: W.W. Norton, Oct 2020), 308p.
2. Harlan Cleveland, *Nobody in Charge: Essays on the Future of Leadership*. Foreword by Warren Bennis. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 236p.
3. *Crisis Leadership for a Pandemic: COVID-19*. National Center for Disaster Preparedness (Earth Institute, Columbia University, May 2020), 2p.
4. Paul Collier, “Models and Muddles: Public Policy and the Coronavirus,” *TLS: Times Literary Supplement*, 24 April 2020, p.4.
5. *A World in Disorder: Global Preparedness Monitoring Board Annual Report 2020*, GPMB c/o World Health Organization, Sept 2020, 51p.

6. *Human Security Now: Final Report*, Commission on Human Security, United Nations, 2003
7. Ioan Fazey *et al.*, "Transforming Knowledge Systems for Life on Earth: Visions of Future Systems and How to Get There," *Energy Research & Social Science*, Vol 70, Dec 2020 (Elsevier Enhanced Reader, 18p). The "*et al.*" of this remarkable statement includes some 100 individuals and 200 organizations! Future systems should be "much more collaborative...able to work with values and systemic issues...creatively accelerating learning about working with intractable challenges," and more. But the focus is on "formalized knowledge systems" (universities and research institutes) seen as "arguably failing humanity."

All well and good, but there is another approach looking at knowledge itself, exemplified by *Knowledge Futures* edited by former WAAS president Walter Truett Anderson (*Futures* Special Issue, 39:8, Oct 2007), derived from the 2005 WAAS meeting in Zagreb. The nine essays included my contribution on "The Future of Human Benefit Knowledge: Notes on a World Brain for the 21st Century," (pp.955-962), updating the 1938 World Brain proposal by H.G. Wells for "an adequate knowledge organization." Also of note is "Strangers in a Strange Land: Knowing, Learning, and Education for the Global Knowledge Society" by Maureen O'Hara (pp.930-941), on the need for developing transdisciplinary expertise to meet the challenges of modern life.

And yet another approach, on the failures to embrace knowledge, is provided by Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael D. Rich in *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life* (RAND Corporation, 2018, 301p), on the erosion of civil discourse, political paralysis, increasing disagreement about facts and data, spread of disinformation, and more, which is also applicable to other countries.