

The COVID-19 Pandemic Is leading to a Crisis in the Established Order All Around the World

*Rafael Gómez-Escoto
Universidad de El Salvador*

In a few weeks we have observed dramatic changes all the world around, ranging from measures of social distancing through national quarantines, the closure of borders and airports, to severe limitations on movement freedom by cities lockdowns and military states of siege. All these preventive measures, established for sanitary purposes to stop the evolution of the pandemic, are causing serious economic, social and geopolitical effects, to that point of seriously considering the possibility of a collapse of the world economic order.

As never seen before in the last decades, we are facing a situation that goes faster than any possibility of reflection, planning or action, of any government. In the national context, despite some mistakes made in handling the crisis, people are recognizing the successes of government of El Salvador, so far, in containing the pandemic. The interest of all of us, should be focused in the improvement of this management, and not simply destroy for political reasons the positive things that have been done. Regardless of whether or not we agree with the President of the Republic, it is about saving lives, and mitigating the pernicious effects of the pandemic on the population.

Evidently the virus is exposing the precariousness of our Health System: a model of health service, curative and non-preventive, assistance-oriented, fragmented, and neoliberal approach, which is not capable of satisfying the fundamental health needs of the population. Access to quality health in our country depends on the economic capacity of the people.

Social distancing and quarantine of suspected cases, are clearly necessary strategies to "flatten" the theoretical curve of virus infection, in order to alleviate the foreseeable collapse of the health system to care for the sick, even the most severe patients, which mostly will require intensive care with artificial respirators. However, the models indicate that flattening the curve implies maintaining and even tightening for longer time these measures, with socio-economic serious consequences. A country like El Salvador could hardly be quarantined for more than two months. The economic collapse will not take long, and despite government aid for poor people, hunger will force a big part of the population to break the quarantine, changing the scenario of the pandemic, and quickly moving it to more critical scenarios of high infection among the population. Without any type of containment measurements, El Salvador could easily have up to 20% of infected population at the highest peak of the curve, according to the most conservative calculations.

Consequently, we have to be creative, prepare for the worst, but trusting that as a nation we will be able to do our best in order to cope the crisis. It is necessary to organize ourselves in a kind of war economy, following the instructions of the authorities, invoking the solidarity of the Salvadorans, the effective cooperation of the business sector, and the reorganization of business and government activities, to maintain supply chains of food, medicine and other basic supplies. It is necessary to maintain the salaries of public and private employees, and to the extent as possible, organize their work so that people can work from home.

What will the world be like when we get out of quarantine and the pandemic is under control?

The pandemic, like any other extreme event, should be forcing us to think not only about the virus, but also to interpret the entire context. The economic, social and geopolitical effects that the health crisis unleashed by the COVID-19 is already having, highlight the great inequalities between countries and social groups, and it seriously poses the configuration of a global crisis to the current development model.

The whole world, and specially the poor and underdeveloped countries, are obliged to rethink the way we live in society. The pandemic has not only unveiled our serious vulnerabilities, but has also shed light on the destructive effect that our very presence as human and social beings has on the planet and nature in general. With quarantines across entire nations, social distancing, and reduced emissions from vehicles and factories, global air pollution is dramatically decreasing, and nature in general is taking a breath.

Without considering apocalyptic or conspiracy theories, it seems clear that we will emerge into a different world, in which we will have to rethink our socio-economic order, and the way we do things.

The crisis we are facing, is the opportunity to transform the economic and political system towards a more humane and supportive society. The educational system must undergo a deep reform towards quality and access to education for all citizens, with emphasis on values and the ability of learning to learn and adapt to new environments. The traditional classroom with teachers giving master classes will tend to change dramatically. The flexibility offered by new technologies will grow in importance in the educational field. Some of today's traditional professions will tend to be replaced by others related to the natural sciences, statistics, computing and artificial intelligence.

The commercial and service interrelationships will be dramatically modified. Office work and other public services may be accomplished from home. Paper money will eventually disappear, giving way to an expansion of online transactions. Citizen control and the security of cities will be under the control of intelligent systems, all this with new dangers and underlying threats of insane social control. The way we produce our

food will also undergo huge changes, from massive chemical agriculture, to small-farms and home agriculture, chemical-free, taking advantage of small spaces, and making better use of available land and water.

The way we live will have to change too. Better use of land and territorial ordering, vertical urbanization with optimization of spaces and green areas, better use of energy and deposition of waste, it will force us to transform our home spaces and the way of living and how we organize ourselves in communities.

We are about to go through an historical inflection that could allow the transformation of the current obscene system of exploitation of the natural resources and accumulation of capital in a few hands, to a different and more equitable distribution of the wealth, produced by the effort of the working class, and based on the sustainable use of the resources available on the planet.

Dr. rer. nat. Rafael Gómez Escoto
Escuela de Física
Universidad de El Salvador