

## Culture, Values, and Identities

# Ten Questions for Governments—and Answers the Social Sciences Can Provide

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## Global Perspectives

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The dramatic interventions to fight the coronavirus pandemic undertaken by many governments all around the globe are unique since the Second World War. They massively restrict economic, civil society, cultural, and personal freedoms. So far the population has been willing to cooperate. In view of the huge current and future costs, it is crucial that citizens remain confident that there are good reasons for the measures. This trust is endangered if the population is unable to understand crucial aspects, and therefore insecurity grows. The costs to be borne vary greatly: permanent employees or civil servants are far less affected than restaurant operators, hairdressers, self-employed cultural workers, and most shop owners. Their confidence is based essentially on how well the following questions are answered. What guidance can the social sciences offer?

### PROTECTION OF THE SO FAR UNPROTECTED

1. How are the direct and indirect costs of an impending economic shutdown weighed against the risk of infection by the novel coronavirus? The famous health researcher Hans Rosling convincingly shows that the prosperity of people is highly correlated with their state of health and life expectancy.

2. Are indirect effects due to fear of bankruptcy, psychological stress, and panic attacks taken into account? How is the fear felt by trainees and students experiencing delayed degrees and worsened career prospects taken into account? What is the situation regarding marginalized persons, asylum seekers, and illicit workers?

3. What are the criteria according to which businesses have been closed? According to which criteria should they be reopened? For example, does it make sense to close DIY stores and garden centers and to stop selling flowers?

### PROTECTION OF RISK GROUPS

4. What are the effects of sealing off senior citizens? What about their mental and physical health when they are no longer allowed to receive grandchildren, other relatives, and friends, and when, in many cases, they are unable to handle technological media such as Skype? The overworked staff in health and old age centers can barely compensate for the suffering caused by pensioners' missing human warmth. Will lethargy, alcohol consumption, and drug abuse increase? And above all, will investigations look at whether the elderly and other risk groups want to be protected in this way?

5. Is it a question of supernormal deaths or also the quality of the years of life gained through the measures—that is, QUALY (quality adjusted life years)?

### INCREASED INEQUALITY

6. Is the increasingly unequal burden of young people and pensioners being taken into account? Young people already have to bear the growing burden of pensions because the retirement age has not been adjusted to longer life expectancy. Now young people must also bear a disproportionately greater economic burden of the shutdown compared to pensioners. Young people will receive lower pension payments compared to the older generations. Will this intensify generational conflict?

7. Will the draconian measures exacerbate social inequality in the education system? Two parents or well-educated parents can provide good quality homeschooling. Single parents or parents with little education are less able to do so.

8. Do these measures hit women particularly hard? Is it mainly women who look after their children at home and accept career disadvantages? Are low-paid carers and sales assistants subjected to multiple burdens?

### POLITICAL FUTURE

9. In the event of shock risks, the state and public administration are given additional power in a short period of time. The ratio of government expenditures to GDP increases. How will it be ensured that this power and the expenditures will be reduced just as quickly and completely once the crisis is over?

10. Are policymakers prepared to present a dossier in which they set out their assumptions and models and compare their consequences, allowing us citizens to form our own opinion?

Massive interventions into our daily lives due to the new coronavirus are probably inevitable. We are at war with the

virus. But—unlike in times of war—the imposed shutdown of economic, political, cultural, and social activities should also be an occasion to review the measures taken so far and to discuss them with citizens. What are the implications that come to mind for our understanding of societies, economic and political systems, everyday culture, and individual behavior as well as governance more generally?

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