

Current Concerns

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World leaders must unite in tackling COVID-19

by Joseph E. Stiglitz*



Joseph E. Stiglitz
(picture books.
cropped.web)

The public-health effects and economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in developing and emerging economies are only just becoming apparent, but it is already clear that the toll will be devastating. If the international communi-

ty wants to avoid a wave of defaults, it must start developing a rescue plan immediately.

As it spread from one country to another, the novel coronavirus paid no attention to national frontiers or “big, beautiful” border walls. Nor were the ensuing economic effects contained. As has been obvious since the outset, the COVID-19 pandemic is a global problem that demands a global solution.

In the world’s advanced economies, compassion should be sufficient motivation to support a multilateral response. But global action is also a matter of self-interest. As long as the pandemic is still raging anywhere, it will pose a threat – both epidemiological and economic – everywhere.

The impact of COVID-19 on developing and emerging economies has only begun to reveal itself. There are good rea-

sons to believe that these countries will be ravaged far more by the pandemic than the advanced economies have been. After all, people in lower-income countries tend to live in closer proximity to one another. A higher share of the population suffers from pre-existing health problems that render them more vulnerable to the disease. And these countries’ health systems are even less prepared to manage an epidemic than those of the advanced economies (which have hardly functioned smoothly).

A March 30 report from the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development offers an early glimpse of what lies in store for emerging and developing economies. The most successful of them rely on export-led growth, which will now collapse as the global economy contracts. Not surprisingly, global investment flows are also plummeting, as are commodity prices, indicating a tough road ahead for natural-resource exporters.

These developments are already being reflected in the yield spreads on developing countries’ sovereign debt. Many governments will find it exceedingly difficult to roll over the debts coming due this year on reasonable terms, if at all.

Moreover, developing countries have fewer and harder choices about how to confront the pandemic. When people are living hand to mouth in the absence of adequate social protections, a loss of income could mean starvation. Yet these countries cannot replicate the US response, which features (so far) a \$2 trillion economic package that will blow up the fiscal deficit by some 10% of GDP (on top of a pre-pandemic deficit of 5%).

Following a virtual emergency summit on March 26, G20 leaders issued a communiqué committing “to do whatever it takes and to use all available policy tools to minimize the economic and social damage from the pandemic, restore global growth, maintain market stability, and strengthen resilience.” To that end, at least two things can be done about the dire state of affairs in emerging and developing economies.

First, full use must be made of the International Monetary Fund’s Special Drawing Rights, a form of “global money” that

the institution was authorized to create at its founding. The SDR is an essential ingredient in the international monetary order that John Maynard Keynes advocated during the Bretton Woods Conference of 1944. The idea is that, because all countries will obviously want to protect their own citizens and economies during crises, the international community should have a tool for assisting the neediest countries without requiring national budgets to take a hit.

A standard SDR issuance – with some 40% of the SDRs going to developing and emerging economies – would make an enormous difference. But it would be even better if advanced economies like the United States donated or lent (on concessional terms) their SDRs to a trust fund dedicated to helping poorer countries. One might expect that the countries providing this assistance will attach conditions, in particular, that the money not go to bailing out creditors.

It’s also crucial that creditor countries help by announcing a stay on developing and emerging economies’ debt service. To understand why this is so important, consider the US economy. Last month, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development announced that there would be no foreclosures on federally insured mortgages for 60 days. In essence, this policy is part of a broader “stay” on the entire US economy as a response to the COVID-19 crisis. Workers are staying home, restaurants are staying closed, and airlines are all but shut down. Why should creditors be allowed to continue racking up returns, especially when the interest rates they charge should have already created a sufficient risk cushion? Unless creditors grant such a stay, many debtors will emerge from the crisis owing more than they can possibly repay.

Such stays are just as important internationally as they are domestically. Under current conditions, many countries simply cannot service their debts, which, in the absence of a global stay on repayment, could lead to massive, rolling defaults. In many developing and emerging economies, the government’s only choice

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UNCTAD calls for extensive aid programme for developing countries

ef. On 30 March the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, UNCTAD, presented its report: "The Covid-19 Shock to Developing Countries: Towards a 'whatever it takes' programme for the two-thirds of the world's population being left behind." The press release says: "With two-thirds of the world's population living in developing countries (excluding China) facing unprecedented economic damage from the COVID-19 crisis, the UN is calling for a US\$2.5 trillion package for these countries to turn expressions of international solidarity into meaningful global action."

The amount corresponds in size to the amount that would have been delivered to developing countries over the last decade if countries in the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development had met their 0.7% Official Development Assistance (ODA) target (i.e. if they had paid their promised contributions).

The report shows that in the two months since the virus began spreading beyond China, developing countries have suffered enormous damage in terms of capital outflows, growing bond

spreads, currency depreciations and lost export earnings, including from falling commodity prices and declining tourist revenues. According to the report, the losses go far beyond the impact of the 2008 global financial crisis. For example, the prices of commodities, on which many developing countries heavily depend for their foreign exchange, have dropped precipitously since the crisis began. This year, the overall price decline has been 37%.

In view of the devastating effects of the crisis that are becoming apparent, UNCTAD proposes a four-pronged strategy "that could begin to translate expressions of international solidarity into concrete action."

Four-pronged strategy

1. A \$1 trillion liquidity injection; a kind of helicopter money drop for those being left behind through reallocating existing special drawing rights at the International Monetary Fund and adding a new allocation that will need to go considerably beyond the 2009 allocation made in response to the global financial crisis.
2. A debt jubilee for distressed economies. An immediate debt standstill

on sovereign debt payments should be followed by significant debt relief. A benchmark could be the German debt relief administered after World War II, which cancelled half of its outstanding debt. On that measure, around \$1 trillion should be cancelled this year overseen by an independently created body.

3. A Marshall Plan for a health recovery funded from some of the missing official development assistance (ODA) long promised but not delivered by development partners. UNCTAD estimates that an additional \$500 billion – a quarter of the last decade's missing ODA – largely in the form of grants should be earmarked for emergency health services and related social relief programmes.
4. Finally, capital controls should be given their legitimate place in any policy regime to curtail the surge in capital outflows, to reduce illiquidity driven by sell-offs in developing country markets and to arrest declines in currency and asset prices.

Source: www.unctad.org
from 30 March 2020

"World leaders must unite ..."

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is either to funnel more income to foreign creditors or allow more of its citizens to die. Obviously, the latter will be unacceptable to most countries, so the real choice for the international community, then, is between an orderly or a disorderly stay, with the latter scenario inevitably resulting in severe turbulence and far-reaching costs to the global economy.

Of course, it would be even better if we had an institutionalized mechanism for restructuring sovereign debt. The international community tried to achieve that in 2015, when the United Nations General Assembly adopted a set of shared principles with overwhelming support. Unfortunately, that framework lacked the necessary buy-in from key creditor countries. It is probably too late to establish such a system now for use in the current crisis. But there will inevitably be more crises down

the line, which means that sovereign-debt restructuring should be high on the agenda for the post-pandemic reckoning.

In John Donne's immortal words, "No man is an island ..." Nor is any country – as the COVID-19 crisis has made abundantly clear. If only the international community would get its head out of the sand. •

Source: *World leaders must unite in tackling COVID-19*, says Joseph Stiglitz: World Economic Forum, Switzerland, 8 April 2020

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“This is not a time for indifference”

Pope Francis’s Easter Urbi et Orbi message – excerpts

“*This is not a time for indifference*, because the whole world is suffering and needs to be united in facing the pandemic. May the risen Jesus grant hope to all the poor, to those living on the peripheries, to refugees and the homeless. May these, the most vulnerable of our brothers and sisters living in the cities and peripheries of every part of the world, not be abandoned. Let us ensure that they do not lack basic necessities (all the more difficult to find now that many businesses are closed) such as medicine and especially the possibility of adequate health care. In light of the present circumstances, may international sanctions be relaxed, since these make it difficult for countries on which they have been imposed to provide adequate support to their citizens, and may all nations be put in a position to meet the greatest needs of the moment through the reduction, if not the forgiveness, of the debt burdening the balance sheets of the poorest nations.

This is not a time for self-centredness, because the challenge we are facing is shared by all, without distinguishing between persons. Among the many areas of the world affected by the coronavirus, I think in a special way of Europe. After the Second World War, this continent was able to rise again, thanks to a concrete spirit of solidarity that enabled it to over-

come the rivalries of the past. It is more urgent than ever, especially in the present circumstances, that these rivalries do not regain force, but that all recognize themselves as part of a single family and support one another. The European Union is presently facing an epochal challenge, on which will depend not only its future but that of the whole world. Let us not lose the opportunity to give further proof of solidarity, also by turning to innovative solutions. The only alternative is the selfishness of particular interests and the temptation of a return to the past, at the risk of severely damaging the peaceful co-existence and development of future generations.

This is not a time for division. May Christ our peace enlighten all who have responsibility in conflicts, that they may have the courage to support the appeal for an immediate global ceasefire in all corners of the world. This is not a time for continuing to manufacture and deal in arms, spending vast amounts of money that ought to be used to care for others and save lives. Rather, may this be a time for finally ending the long war that has caused such great bloodshed in beloved Syria, the conflict in Yemen and the hostilities in Iraq and in Lebanon. May this be the time when Israelis and Palestinians resume dialogue in

order to find a stable and lasting solution that will allow both to live in peace. May the sufferings of the people who live in the eastern regions of Ukraine come to an end. May the terrorist attacks carried out against so many innocent people in different African countries come to an end.

This is not a time for forgetfulness. The crisis we are facing should not make us forget the many other crises that bring suffering to so many people. May the Lord of life be close to all those in Asia and Africa who are experiencing grave humanitarian crises, as in the Province of Cabo Delgado in the north of Mozambique. May he warm the hearts of the many refugees displaced because of wars, drought and famine. May he grant protection to migrants and refugees, many of them children, who are living in unbearable conditions, especially in Libya and on the border between Greece and Turkey. And I do not want to forget the island of Lesbos. In Venezuela, may he enable concrete and immediate solutions to be reached that can permit international assistance to a population suffering from the grave political, socio-economic and health situation.”

Source: Pope Francis’ Easter message “Urbi et orbi” from 12 April 2020 (http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/urbi/documents/papa-francesco_20200412_urbi-et-orbi-pasqua.html)

UN Secretary-General: “End the sickness of war”

“Our world faces a common enemy: COVID-19. The virus does not care about nationality or ethnicity, faction or faith. It attacks all, relentlessly.

Meanwhile, armed conflict rages on around the world. The most vulnerable – women and children, people with disabilities, the marginalized and the displaced – pay the highest price. They are also at the highest risk of suffering devastating losses from COVID-19. Let’s not forget that in war-ravaged countries, health systems have collapsed. Health professionals, already few in number, have often been targeted. Refugees and others displaced by violent

conflict are doubly vulnerable. The fury of the virus illustrates the folly of war.

That is why today, I am calling for an immediate global ceasefire in all corners of the world. It is time to put armed conflict on lockdown and focus together on the true fight of our lives.

To warring parties, I say: Pull back from hostilities. Put aside mistrust and animosity.

Silence the guns; stop the artillery; end the airstrikes.

This is crucial: To help create corridors for life-saving aid. To open precious windows for diplomacy. To bring hope

to places among the most vulnerable to COVID-19.

Let us take inspiration from coalitions and dialogue slowly taking shape among rival parties in some parts to enable joint approaches to COVID-19. But we need much more.

End the sickness of war and fight the disease that is ravaging our world.

It starts by stopping the fighting everywhere. Now. That is what our human family needs, now more than ever.”

Source: <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/press-encounter/2020-03-23/transcript-of-the-secretary-generals-virtual-press-encounter-the-appeal-for-global-ceasefire> from 23 March 2020

Ceasefire in Yemen – also due to corona pandemic

For the Apostolic Vicar of South Arabia, the Swiss Bishop *Paul Hinder*, the first Covid 19 case in Yemen might paradoxically have a “positive effect” in resolving the conflict. In the recent past, international humanitarian organisations have raised the alarm over the catastrophic effects of a Covid-19 epidemic in the Arab nation, where there has been a war between the Saudis-backed government and the Houthi rebels since 2015. A conflict that has provoked the “worst humanitarian crisis in the world”. The new corona virus would have even greater devastating consequences on the population already struck by the conflict.

At the request of the Catholic news agency AsiaNews, Bishop Paul Hinder, responsible for the United Arab Emirates, Oman and Yemen, said that “the present pandemic and its horrifying risks also for Yemen may bring people of all involved parties to reason.”. Therefore, the bishop

added, “coronavirus could have indirectly a positive effect.”

Source: <https://www.vaticannews.va/de/welt/news/2020-04/jemen-bischof-paul-hinder-corona-erster-fall-frieden-waffenruhe.html> from 13 April 2020

While the corona pandemic claims thousands of victims worldwide, the plague could lead to peace in the worst humanitarian catastrophe today. UN mediator *Martin Griffiths* informed the UN Security Council that negotiations for a continuing nationwide ceasefire and humanitarian aid projects in Yemen were making great progress.

Saudi Arabia and its allies surprisingly announced a unilateral ceasefire of two weeks last week after UN Secretary-General *António Guterres* called for a global cease-fire to fight Covid-19. A long-term ceasefire is now fundamentally supported by both sides – the Alliance and the Houthi rebels – said Griffiths.

“We expect them to agree and formally adopt these agreements in the immediate future,” Griffiths said about the state of negotiations between the warring parties. The ceasefire announced by Saudi Arabia was a “clear commitment to a peaceful, political solution to the conflict”.

The Saudi military alliance has been bombing targets in Yemen since March 2015. Many civilians were killed again and again. An estimated 112,000 people have died in Yemen since the end of 2014, including 12,600 uninvolved in targeted attacks.

The remaining differences of opinion should now be bridged with all their might. Griffiths thanked the hostile parties for their open, goal-oriented, and rapid talks to resolve the five-year conflict. •

Source: <https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/politik/jemen-un-frieden-verhandlungen-102.html> from 16 April 2020

(Translation *Current Concerns*)

Ceasefire in South Sudan

SSOMA Response to UN Secretary General Call for Immediate Global Ceasefire in Armed Conflict Countries Related to COVID-19

cc. Since 2013, two years after independence, a war has been raging in the predominantly Christian Southern Sudan, which has so far left around 400,000 dead and about four million displaced persons. According to the UN Refugee Agency, 7.5 million people there are currently dependent on humanitarian aid for their survival. After numerous efforts, the first agreement in the peace process between opposition leaders in the alliance of the Southern Sudanese opposition movement and the government of the country was signed in Rome on 13 January 2020. This was the first time that all political parties in Southern Sudan had agreed on a ceasefire and a roadmap to stabilise unity and reconciliation in the country. The „Rome Declaration“ was made possible through the long mediating activity of the Rome based Community of Sant’Egidio and Pope Francis, who together with Anglican Primate Justin Welby, among others, has long been working for a peaceful solution in Southern Sudan. Despite the continuing violence, the various steps are an expression of the political will present in Southern Sudan and nourish the cautious hope for peace. The following statement by the Southern Sudanese opposition also follows on from this.

The Leadership Council of *The South Sudan Opposition Movements Alliance*

(SSOMA), comprising of *The National Salvation Front (NAS)*, *South Sudan United Front (SSUF)*, *South Sudan National Movement for Change (SSNMC)*, *The Real Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (R-SPLM)*, *National Democratic Movement Patriotic Front (NDM/PF)* and the *United Democratic Revolutionary Alliance (UDRA)*, takes note of and welcomes the statement by the UN Secretary General, *Antonio Guterres* of 23 March 2020, calling for global ceasefire in countries where there are armed conflict in order to fight coronavirus disease (COVID-19). SSOMA noted the declaration by the World Health Organization (WHO) that Covid-19 is a global pandemic affecting almost all countries across the globe. SSOMA has been monitoring the devastating effects of the pandemic on global Population and recognizes that a period of such catastrophe calls for humanity to unite and defeat the common enemy through solidarity and a shared response by all. SSOMA reiterates its concern for safety of the people of South Sudan at this critical moment and applauds the global efforts in response to the pandemic, including the work of humanitarian agencies and public health organizations mandated to facilitate access to medical care and humanitarian aid. In response to this situation, The South Sudan Opposition Movements Alliance

(SSOMA) hereby resolves and affirms the following:

1. SSOMA has already committed/recommitted itself to cessation of hostilities agreement (COHA) of December 2017 with the Government of South Sudan in Rome, Italy on 12 January 2020. Therefore, by this act, we align with the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General’s call of 23rd March 2020, for an immediate global ceasefire on all hostilities in all conflicts of the world, in order to collectively fight against the Coronavirus Covid-19;
2. That as South Sudanese citizens and members of a shared global community, SSOMA shall, during the period of COVID-19 pandemic, partnering with relevant bodies to facilitate humanitarian access to our populations by humanitarian agencies such as the United Nations Children’s Fund (*UNICEF*) and the World Health Organization (WHO) to allow for their work of dissemination of basic health awareness and practices that can prevent the spread of corona virus in South Sudan;
3. That SSOMA reserve the rights of self-defence if its positions come under attack during this period.

Source: <https://www.nassouthsudan.com> from 9 April 2020

Why the OPEC+ deal is a many-splendoured thing

by M. K. Bhadrakumar*, India



M. K. Bhadrakumar
(picture ma)

Russian President Vladimir Putin delivered a speech proposing a summit in September of the “founder countries of the United Nations, the five states that hold special responsibility to save civilisation,” Jerusalem, Israel, 23 January 2020

A perfect deal is where all protagonists get something out of it. All oil-producing countries stand to gain if oil price rebounds. In bare bones, the OPEC+ group led by Saudi Arabia and Russia finalised in a nail-biting photo finish on Sunday an agreement to steeply cut oil production by a combined 9.7 million barrels per day to rebalance the supply and demand in the world market and nudge the prices to go up.

It capped days-long tortuous international negotiations that also included the US. Additional cuts are expected from producers outside the OPEC+ group. Experts anticipate that by the second half of the year, oil prices would be nearing \$40 per barrel.

The world’s oil producers are joining together for the largest cooperative production initiative in history. The tectonic plates are shifting in the geopolitics of oil.

Historically, the US rallied against the oil cartel as a threat to the American economy. But Washington not only joined the latest production programme but its success may actually hinge on the US, where oil production has doubled in a single decade.

President *Donald Trump* has held direct talks in recent days with the heads of Russia, Saudi Arabia and Mexico. Although US, the world’s largest producer, has not offered firm production cuts, Trump and the US Energy Department have emphasised that market forces will bring US declines.

That is to say, cuts can come from government action via corporate decisions, as companies either shut-in production or file for bankruptcy. The estimates are that the US production is projected to fall by 2 million barrels per day by year’s end and perhaps more. According to industry fig-

ures, the US’s drop in output could see exports shrinking from over 3 million bpd in 2019 to almost zero in the coming months, removing a key concern for both Russia and the Saudis amid fears of a US takeover of their traditional markets.

This meets with the declared twin objectives of Saudi Arabia — to defend its market share and also to kill if not slow down US shale oil production. The alternative for Saudis would have been to regain market share at enormous cost by producing enough oil to keep prices in the low to mid \$20s and sustain that for two years.

As for Russia, thanks to the deal, it will receive an extra of \$70-80 million dollars in revenues per day.

Trump tweeted on Sunday, “The big Oil Deal with OPEC Plus is done. This will save hundreds of thousands of energy jobs in the United States. I would like to thank and congratulate President Putin of Russia and King *Salman* of Saudi Arabia. I just spoke to them from the Oval Office. Great deal for all!”

Having said that, at its core OPEC+ deal stems from a matrix of understanding between Trump and *Putin*. Saudi Arabia understood that it had better stay out of their way. Putin sized up accurately how important it is politically for Trump to keep the shale industry afloat to preserve jobs. The industry employs over 10 million Americans and accounts for 7 percent of the US’ GDP.

The big question is, where is the quid pro quo? There has always been a lurking suspicion that Putin had a game plan while triggering the fall in oil price in such a contrived fashion that resulted in loss of billions of dollars of income for the Russian economy.

Quite obviously, the free fall of oil price precipitated an existential crisis for the US shale industry in an election year in America that sooner rather than later was bound to bring Trump onto the centre stage. Whether Putin choreographed it or not, that was exactly what happened.

As for Trump, a constructive engagement with Russia is something he all along wanted. Three precious years have been lost due to the Mueller investigations on “Russia collusion” and so on. But after successfully outmanoeuvring his opponents in the impeachment drama, Trump is now unbound. Putin understands that, too.

In this particular affair, Trump is salvaging the interests of Big Oil which carries enormous clout with the political class, think tanks, the media and the Wall Street — and, of course, the “Deep State”.

Simply put, it is inconceivable today that anyone in the Washington Beltway, howsoever Russophobic, would dare to protest against Trump negotiating one-on-one with Putin to salvage Big Oil.

There is a broad consensus among the American elite that Putin holds the key to unlocking the oil crisis that can severely damage the US economy when it is already heading into deep recession.

In fact, since April 10, Trump and Putin spoke to each other three times. Trump knows he is on the right side of history and his interlocutor can be trusted to keep his word. Trump’s tweet on Sunday (quoted above) drips with confidence. He is striding toward a detente with Russia.

On the other hand, with an eye on the US election cycle, Putin’s interest lies in wrapping up a big picture deal with Trump on Russian-American relations as quickly as possible because a potential *Joe Biden* victory in November would mean that the US doubles down on Russia.

Putin’s has set a September timeline. He has proposed the idea — and Trump has welcomed it — of a summit meeting of the permanent members of the UN Security Council in September “in any place in the world” to discuss global issues in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic.

Interestingly, on 10 April, even as the OPEC+ deal was being finalised, Putin utilised a session with the three-member US crew of astronauts (who will be taking over the International Space Station from the Russian team on coming Friday), to touch on Russian-American relations.

Putin said the cooperation in space is “is a vivid example of an effective partnership between our countries for the benefit of the entire humanity.” He then added,

“We are now also trying to organise work on current problems. I do not like speaking about this but I have to. I mean the fight against the pandemic, as well as the situation in the global markets. The President of the United States and I discussed these issues just yesterday, and we will speak more on that topic. So, fortunately, cooperation is developing, and not only in space but also in other areas.”

Most significantly, the Kremlin readout on the conversation between the two leaders two days later, on April 12, says that “Current issues of ensuring strategic security were also discussed.” The agenda of discussion has broadened and deepened dramatically.

Meanwhile, China is also positioning itself for the summit in September. Mos-

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Letter to  the Editor

Health protection of the population is the primary goal of Corona virus prevention and containment

The new Corona virus is spreading rapidly and in waves all over the world. The pandemic is currently presenting the health care system with an extraordinarily large challenge, with the most far-reaching and profound effects on the global economy since the Second World War. By 3 April 2020, over 1 million infections had been confirmed worldwide, including over 18,000 cases in Switzerland.

Unfortunately, there are always people at this memorable time who are prejudiced against the Chinese system and the Chinese Communist Party. Attempts are being made to void China's success and effectiveness in preventing and curbing the virus and China's contribution to world health.

Those who attack the Chinese system should ask themselves: Would the Corona virus really have been better controlled if it had first broken out in a western country? I ask those who accuse China of having acted too late: Which country in the world has taken measures against the spread of the Corona virus faster and more consistently than China?

Unfortunately, many countries remained idle even more than a month after

the virus outbreak in China, some even until 2–3 weeks ago. They allowed valuable time to pass, which ultimately favored global expansion of the virus.

China's remarkable success in combating the epidemic is based not on propaganda, but on the joint efforts and dedication of the entire Chinese people, including foreign Chinese, and on the friendly support of the international community. President *Xi Jinping* repeatedly stressed that China must collect experiences from such events and learn from them.

Faced with the virus, we need personal initiatives and the participation of the population, we need even more rapid, decisive and effective government measures. We need individual solutions from the government and population of every country, but even more we need targeted, strong cooperation of all humanity. Every system needs constant reforms and adjustments. Self-criticism, self-revolution and self-improvement are inherent qualities of the Chinese Communist Party in its continuous pursuit of progress and further development.

The Corona virus is a common, dangerous enemy of humanity that knows

no geographical and ideological boundaries. The greatest knowledge gain from the virus outbreak is that all of humanity forms a "community of fate" in this test, regardless of how many distinctions and differences the countries have in terms of religion, politics, geography, culture and other characteristics

We're all in the same boat. The highest priority now is to put aside all clichés that are not useful for the prevention and containment of the virus. Instead, the health protection of the population should be the gold standard. We should cooperate more closely to research and develop clinical diagnostics and treatments, effective drugs and vaccines as quickly as possible so that every single life can be saved. As in the past, in the present as well as in the future, China will always regard the protection of global public health as one of its most important tasks and will work intensively for it.

Zhang Fengye, Consulate General of the People's Republic of China in Zurich

(Translation *Current Concerns*)

"Why the OPEC+ deal..."

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cow consulted Beijing before making the proposal on the summit. (Putin acknowledged that Moscow had proposed the summit to "several of our colleagues and as far as I understand, saw a positive reaction.") Beijing was quick on its feet to voice support (within twenty-four hours) to Putin's proposal regarding the summit to resolve global challenges.

All in all, therefore, we should not miss the wood for the trees. The OPEC+ deal is much more than about oil. It kickstarted a sequence of great-power cooperation involving the US, Russia and China, which would be far-reaching in the post-pandemic world politics.

Such convergence is a clear indicator of how the global pandemic and the global oil crisis remain deeply entangled, and the recovery of the US economy being linked to it. As the US Energy Secretary *Dan Brouillette* put it, the global oil crisis

is the shattering impact of COVID-19 and "transcends the interest of any one nation and requires a swift and decisive response from us all."

The world is witnessing here the spirit of internationalism accruing in the midst of a human tragedy on a scale perhaps not seen since more than a century. The pandemic has currently infected 1.6 million people and killed nearly 100,000, and has reached almost every corner of the planet. •

Source: *indianpunchline.com* from 13 April 2020

Health protection and economic success should not be played off against each other

by Karl-Jürgen Müller

Taking a look at Germany

It was balm for the human soul that, over the past five weeks, responsible representatives of authorities and political leaders have given absolute priority to working for people's health and lives and called on all citizens to participate responsibly. This is actually a matter of course - but after all that we citizens have experienced over the past decades, it is also a – rather late – positive surprise. The significant increase in the approval ratings for many of those responsible and their decisions must probably be attributed not least to this.

How thinking and mind can be unsettled

But everyone should know that this road is not guaranteed. Since gloomy reports about the economic consequences of the measures taken so far to protect health and life have increased and the calls for a significant relaxation of the previous measures have become louder, questions have crept into people's minds and hearts that can be unsettling and misleading: In view of bleak economic forecasts, can we afford to give priority to the protection of life and health? Isn't it that the initially feared exponential growth in the figures of infections and deaths has not occurred, that the measures taken so far have been successful enough (perhaps even exaggerated) and that the apex of the "crisis" has therefore been overcome? Don't we always have to take a certain risk in order to maintain our current level of living in future? Isn't it even true that a severe economic crisis like the one at the end of the twenties, beginning of the thirties has threatened life and health just as much as the corona pandemic does now?

Wouldn't it be better if for all those who do not belong to a "risk group"¹, i.e. above all for younger people, the existing restrictions were lifted so that they could resume their usual activities in full – with more health tests, of course, and with the possible retention of certain distance and hygiene rules? Shouldn't all shops be opened again and businesses be restarted so that the economy can get underway again? Don't the rest of us want to start living "normally" again? And shouldn't the 'risk groups' be even more 'protected', i.e. shielded more than before?

States have set up enormous aid programmes

The political leaders in countries such as Switzerland, Austria or Germany have tried to counter the undeniable econom-

ic problems with massive public financing right from the start of the first health policy responses to the corona pandemic. These aids range from greatly facilitated access to short-time working allowances² to state loan guarantees on very favourable credit terms and tax relief for SMEs and large companies to non-repayable emergency aid for small businesses³. The sum of the funds made up for this purpose exceeds anything previously experienced.

The German "Handelsblatt" titled on 22 March 2020: "Federal government: 1,2 trillion euros against the corona crisis." Formerly sensible regulations such as a debt brake or debt ceiling are currently no longer being met.

And as can be heard, the aid also reaches those affected at an unprecedented speed – in fact, quite "non-bureaucratic". Nevertheless, it is not possible to compensate for all the losses, there are also economic and social hardships. Many businesses, especially in the hotel and catering industry, will have great difficulty in surviving.

But many otherwise economically and socially disastrous consequences can still be cushioned. In the first week of April (as of 8 April 2020), for example, more than 7,000 companies applied for credit assistance. The amount of aid requested was more than 20 billion euro – although it must be added that more than 17 billion of this was requested by large companies. In Germany, the Federal States are responsible for processing applications and granting aids. In Saxony, by the beginning of April the competent authorities had received more than 14,200 applications for non-repayable emergency aid. A few days later, 3,000 applications had already been approved, and the money had already been transferred for 1,500 applications. The state of North Rhine-Westphalia reported on 1 April that 2,000 of the 8,500 applications received for public aid for small businesses had already been approved and that the rest would be processed within a week. In the state of Saxony-Anhalt 5,200 applications for non-repayable emergency aid for small enterprises had already been received within the first five hours of being able to apply. "As soon as possible", the state's Minister of Economic Affairs was quoted as saying, the applications should be processed and the money paid out.

"The German government is presenting a huge Corona emergency package" was the headline of the "Neue Zürcher Zeitung" on 23 March 2020. The same day,

Deutsche Welle said: "It will be more expensive than ever." Both are true.

The economic figures will go down

However, none of this will change the fact that a significant economic slump is expected in 2020. A few days ago, the Hamburg-based *Statista GmbH* published a compilation of more than 120 pages of data and forecasts about "Effects of the corona virus (Covid-19) on the economy."⁴ Of particular interest is the "ifo scenario calculation for the loss of added value due to the corona shutdown in Germany in 2020" and accordingly the "ifo scenario calculation for the decline in the annual GDP growth rate due to the corona shutdown in Germany in 2020." The Munich-based *ifo Institute*, a renowned economic research institute in Germany, assumes six different scenarios, each of which distinguishes between a "shutdown" – or "lockdown" in Switzerland – of one, two or three months. In the case of the loss of added value, the losses in the various scenarios vary between 152 and 265 billion Euros for one month "shutdown", between 255 and 495 billion Euros for two months and between 354 and 729 billion Euros for three months. In the case of a percentage fall in GDP, the figures accordingly vary between 4.3 and 7.5% for one month "shutdown" between 7.2 and 14% for two months and between 10 and 20.6% for three months.

The "worst-case scenario" looks even more drastic in a study commissioned by the Federal Ministry of the Interior as early as mid-March, which was originally intended for official use only but was made public in early April.⁵ The scenario is entitled "Abyss" and reads: "Containment of the virus epidemic is not successful. Exit restrictions are imposed for the rest of the year. This means a permanent reduction of economic activity to a lower level. A further reduction in economic activity is assumed after four months with output restrictions. In this situation, GDP would collapse by 32% and industry by 47%. With further intensifying second-round effects and the accumulation of negative expectations, an accelerated downward dynamic cannot be ruled out. This scenario is tantamount to an economic collapse whose social and political consequences are hard to imagine."

Resistance to another „shutdown“...

Such "forecasts" are the starting point of the critics, who use economic "argu-

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ments" to argue against a continuation of the previous attempts to contain the corona pandemic. They claim that, now that one month of "shutdown" has already passed, a second or even third month with an expected GDP decline of 20% or even more cannot be handled and is therefore not to answer. But perhaps the critics are also overlooking something essential, just as the study by the Federal Ministry of the Interior formulated it as the starting point of the economic abyss: "Containment of the virus epidemic will not succeed." Here it becomes clear how important the protection of health and life is for a functioning economy that wants to call itself "humane."

An example of the viewpoint of such critics is the "IW-Report 13/2020" published on 7 April 2020 by the German *Institut der Deutschen Wirtschaft* (German Economic Institute), which is close to employers, entitled "Ein Überblick über aktuelle Konjunkturstudien zur Corona-Krise"⁶ (Overview of Current Economic Studies on the Corona Crisis; German) The IW-report speaks of a "large-scale increase in testing and treatment capacities" and the special protection of "risk groups." However, the conclusions are primarily concerned with stimulating the economy: the resumption of schooling and childcare

is therefore „of fundamental economic importance, because only in this way can parents pay the necessary attention to their employment.“ The report goes on: "As soon as possible, commercial transactions and currently prohibited services should be allowed to resume. [...] In order to be able to restart industrial production, complex added value networks must be reactivated. This requires that companies remain in the market [...]. The complex added value chains are based on the international division of labour and the associated international exchange of goods. Borders for goods must be kept open and, where necessary, reopened without friction; this also applies to the exchange of labour close to the border [...]."

How exactly further infections with the corona virus are to be avoided or whether further infections are to be approvingly accepted is not said."

... and future perspectives

An interview with a consultant of German family businesses shows that things can be weighted differently.⁷ She says, "With their long-term perspective and solid capital base, family businesses can go through hard times like this for a while." When asked why family businesses are more successful than others are, she answers: "First, the equity ratio of family businesses is now – after the financial crisis in 2008 – often over 40%,

which provides financial scope. Second, independence from the capital market – and thus also from nervous investors – enables companies to plan for the long term and to act with foresight and much more calm. Third, small and medium-sized family businesses are active internationally, but not always completely globalised, so that they are dependent on supply and value chains from continents far apart." Conclusion: There are "many family businesses, which have great opportunities right now due to their business model."

Entrepreneurs and companies had five weeks to reflect on how to adjust their future economic activities to the reality of the corona pandemic and, if necessary, to adapt them. This was and is a big challenge and needs support from the state, and from all citizens. A particularly big problem for the German economy is the fact that around 50% of German value added has been generated by exports in recent years. Many German companies also depend on international supply chains. The pandemic has affected the entire world, with severe restrictions and economic slumps in all countries, affecting German sales abroad and making previous investments for German companies more difficult. There are German companies, for example in the automotive industry, which are able to deal adequately with the risks of infection by the corona virus in their own factory buildings, but which are nevertheless unable to produce at present because suppliers have dropped out or customer bases have broken away. Therefore, supporting other countries is also conducive to your own country.

It is therefore important to find ways to do business in times of the corona pandemic in such a way that health and life of all employees and customers are optimally protected. Business associations such as the *Association of German Chambers of Industry and Commerce* (DIHK) have established websites where companies can get information on many issues related to the Corona pandemic.⁸ This would also be an opportunity to provide practical examples of what companies can do to restart or maintain operations while protecting health and life.

Conclusion: Responsible action also means independent thinking

Everyone would like to see that the measures restricting economic life are withdrawn as soon as possible. It is not necessarily the case that there has to be a conflict between the protection of health and life and economic success. On 13 April the *German National Academy of Sciences (Leopoldina)* published

Support of the the economy and protection against the infection

km. In a telephone conference on 15 April 2020, the Federal Chancellor and the heads of government of the Federal States agreed on key points for further "restrictions on public life to contain the Covid 19 pandemic"¹. However, these key points do not only include "restrictions", but also easing of restrictions on the business activities of and other support measures for companies. From 20 April, for example, Shops with a sales area of up to 800 square metres and, irrespective of the sales area, car dealers, bicycle dealers and bookstores can reopen. In doing so, they must comply with "regulations on hygiene, access control and avoiding queues." In the service sector, hairdressers should prepare themselves to resume operations from 4 May onwards under the same conditions and by "wearing personal protective clothing." Companies that have problems with suppliers are also to be supported. The resolution states: "The federal and state governments support the economy to restore disrupted international supply chains. For this purpose, the federal and state ministries of economics are setting up contact points for affected companies. These are intended to contribute at the political level to

ensure that the production and delivery of required supplier products can be resumed smoothly wherever possible." All this is subject to the protection of public health. At the beginning of the resolution it says: "For the time to come, the guiding principle of our actions is that we want to protect all people in Germany as well as possible from infection." (Translation of all quotes *Current Concerns*) The concept of immunising as many people as possible through an infection over a long period of time and thus also protecting the so-called risk groups from infection ("herd immunity") is not being pursued. It explicitly states: "Achieving a timely immunity of the population against Sars-CoV-2 without overburdening the health care system and the risk of many deaths." On 30 April, there will be another meeting to discuss whether the new decisions have proved successful.

We citizens are also called on to take part in this examination.

¹ <https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/973812/1744452/b94f2c67926030f9015985da586caed3/2020-04-16-bf-bk-laender-data.pdf?download=1> from 15 April 2020

Decentralised organisation and production for the benefit of all – not only in times of need

by Christian Fischer, Cologne

The current situation makes us all aware of the mutual dependence of human life and thus raises fundamental questions: The boundlessness of the virus is one thing, the problem of concentration, monopolisation and centralisation of our economic production is another. This has not just been the case since the Corona crisis, but now in our Western countries we have become more aware of how quickly such questions can become existential.

The current pandemic-induced restriction of social contacts is a recess that we have not yet experienced in this way, but which many of us can bear for a while. After all, we have means of communication and supermarkets and pharmacies where we can usually still find what we need. We also help older people who are more dependent on helpers than usual. This works surprisingly well; helpfulness has developed spontaneously and help was organised quickly in many places.

But in the medical and nursing field we face more difficulties – here, more and more staff are being lost because they are subject to an increased risk of infection; at

the same time, more medical and nursing staff will be needed in the foreseeable future. The difficulty lies in the nature of the matter, an infectious disease. Apart from this, the Covid 19 pandemic also prompts fundamental considerations: How centrally or decentrally should our social and economic life be organised? Is the crisis not a real test for this question?

Centralisation creates dependence and injustice

For some time now centralisation has been taking place in political and social life. Legislative powers have been transferred from national parliaments to an EU Commission, economic concentration processes are taking place at the expense of small and medium-sized enterprises, hospitals are being closed or have to specialise in such a way that some medical services are no longer available close to the citizens, production is being relocated to cheap locations somewhere in the world, for example, Germany's steel and textile production decades ago, and more recently pharmaceutical production, to name but a few examples. International dependencies have already developed

on the labour markets to such an extent that the coverage of care needs for the elderly and sick or harvesting assistance for vital agricultural products no longer functions without permanent or temporary workers from abroad. Conversely, however, many people do not even ask themselves how the people in need of care in Eastern Europe are actually provided for under these circumstances. Or how agriculture and small-scale trade can flourish in Africa if we ship our subsidised overproduction there and sell it off. Or what it means when agricultural production areas in poorer countries are converted into energy production areas for richer countries. Redistribution takes place on a large scale; the richer countries can obtain good and cheap supplies worldwide; the others can see how they get by. The globalised free trade system works in a similar way to the soccer world: if a talented player turns up in a small second-division club, he is soon bought by a big first-division club, and the small club remains what it is. A weak club does not get up, a strong club becomes even stronger.

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its third, 18-page ad hoc statement on the corona pandemic entitled "Coronavirus Pandemic – Sustainable Ways to Overcome the Crisis."⁹ The Leopoldina advises the German Federal Government. She also writes: "In principle, there is no contradiction between protecting health and the immediate resumption of public life, which has been largely suspended. In fact, the two are mutually dependent."

Whether the recommendations of the Leopoldina meet this requirement may remain open here. Even with this top-class advisory board, you can perceive not only political approaches without any alternatives, which every citizen is welcome to call into question (for example, with the plea for accelerated digitisation in the education sector or for restructuring the economy in the direction of a "European Green Deal"). The request to every citizen to take part responsibly includes independent thinking. Such thoughts may also go in the following direction.

It very likely also depends on the way we want to do business in the future, so

that there are no longer conflicts between protecting life and health and our way of doing business. When can we say that an economy is successful? Does it just depend on sales, growth rates and international interdependencies? "Property entails obligations. Its use should also serve the public good", says Article 14 of the German Basic Law. It cannot be denied that the common good is no longer safeguarded when health and life are no longer protected. The corona pandemic can certainly be a bitter occasion to think outside the current box.

¹ When talking about "risk groups" in the context of Covid 19 disease, we are talking about statistically determined probabilities of infection with a severe course of the disease, and this according to the current, rather imperfect state of knowledge. Nobody can guarantee that an infection with the corona virus cannot lead to a serious illness or even end fatally for people who do not belong to one of the risk groups. Is it therefore not advisable for everyone to avoid infection with the virus as far as possible?

² The "Aachener Zeitung" reported on 9 April 2020, that the number of companies in Germany that have announced short-time work as a result of the corona pandemic had risen to 650,000, compared to only 470,000 companies on March 27. It is esti-

ated that the number could rise to 6 million short-time workers in the course of the year.

³ An overview for Germany is provided, for example, by the text of the Federal Ministry of Finance "Questions and Answers on the billion-euro protection shield for Germany" (German) from 6 April 2020 (<https://www.bundesfinanzministerium.de/Content/DE/FAQ/2020-03-13-Corona-FAQ.html>). In contrast to Switzerland, small enterprises in Germany with up to 5 employees can apply for up to 9,000 euros and with up to 10 employees up to 15,000 euros in one-off, non-repayable emergency aid. The amount of the benefits depends on the monthly turnover in 2019, for which a total of 50 billion euros will be made available.

⁴ <https://de.statista.com/statistik/studie/id/71344/dokument/auswirkungen-des-coronavirus-auf-die-wirtschaft/>

⁵ The 17-page study is entitled "Wie wir Covid-19 unter Kontrolle bekommen" (How to get Covid-19 under control) and can be found as a file on the FragDenStaat website (<https://fragdenstaat.de/dokumente/4123-wie-wir-covid-19-unter-kontrolle-bekommen/>).

⁶ https://www.iwkoeln.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Studien/Report/PDF/2020/IW-Report_2020_Konjunkturstudien_KW14.pdf from 7 April 2020

⁷ "Was bedeutet Covid-19 für Familienunternehmen?" (What does Covid-19 mean for family businesses?), <https://www.pwc.de/de/mittelstand/was-bedeutet-covid-19-fuer-familienunternehmen.html> from 13.3.2020

⁸ <https://www.dihk.de/de/aktuelles-und-presse/coronavirus/faq-19594>

⁹ https://www.leopoldina.org/uploads/tx_leopublication/2020_04_13_Leopoldina_Coronavirus_statement_3_en.pdf

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Nevertheless, globalisation and the centralisation that goes with it are seen by some as an inevitable course of history, if not desirable progress. Indeed, in this re-distribution programme, even the weaker ones get some products that they did not create on their own, such as mobile phones; but the stronger ones benefit disproportionately. At least as long as "things go well".

Especially in times of crisis, however, the networking and centralisation of economic activities become visible as a system of dependencies that can tip over into the opposite direction. Medicines for Europe are mainly produced in China. Our clothes are made in Bangladesh. Gas and petrol come from other continents. And even daily food crosses borders, which appear as such in the crisis. The international division of labour creates countless other examples of what can happen, especially for our rich countries, when things are not going so well, when borders do not exist just on paper.

Independence needs decentralised basic services

Of course, as a counter-example, the other extreme cannot serve as a model, as if we could live today in small units almost as self-sufficiently as a farm a thousand years ago. But since our economic and social life is man-made, we can and must, within certain limits, consider how we want to shape it.

A look at France

"According to a survey published on Monday by the polling institute Odoxa, around 9 out of 10 people surveyed would like to see a re-nationalisation of industry and food supply - even if that means higher prices. For more than half of them, this is also the most important consequence to be drawn from this crisis."

Source: «*Neue Zürcher Zeitung*», from 15 April 2020

A greater decentralisation of vital production processes would in any case mean greater independence, i.e. more sovereignty. Can we really not afford to have as many well-equipped hospital sites as we had 50 years ago? Why can we not support vital production and services at local or regional level in the sense of basic services, even with tax money if we could support "systemically relevant" banks with billions? These are questions for policy makers, i.e. indirectly for us citizens. And why do we increasingly have to have our goods delivered from some central warehouses by a global corporation, while at the same time retail stores in our vicinity have to file for insolvency? This is a question for us citizens directly.

We decide how our economic life is organised. These are political decisions whether decentralised structures for the supply of "central" goods are supported or disrupted. At present, tendencies towards decentralisation and correspondingly "low-threshold" self-determination are being fundamentally devalued propagandistically as "seclusion", lumped together with malicious nationalism and stirred into yesterday's old-fashioned federalism anyway. That is the hip "narrative".

The fact that it is the task of the state to protect its citizens and let them live in freedom is almost a violation of human rights in the eyes of these narrators, because all non-citizens will be excluded...

A more decentralised organisation would be in everyone's interest: political decision-making would be closer to the citizens and the production and trade of existential goods would be much more flexible. If a shortage arises in one place, a neighbour who has "systemically relevant" products and services of his own can help quickly. In contrast, a centralised care system, which relies only on the international division of labour even for basic services, is much more likely to collapse abruptly. The nearest "neighbour" capable of helping is far away and quickly overloaded if additional demand comes from all sides. Especially if it has been "optimised" for the standard case, not even considering an emergency case.

Fear of partitioning seclusion and siege mentality can only be imputed to the suggested proposal by those who themselves have a correspondingly poor view of human nature. In fact, it is precisely in the Corona crisis that we are seeing that independent and healthy neighbours are willing to help others where ever they can. That is human nature. This aid is all the more successful if important competences are broadly distributed in many places, not fragmented into widely dispersed and maximally profitable centres.

Incidentally, this also affects the immediate social relationships. In functional and somewhat manageable units, internal social relations are more direct; people know each other better. It makes a difference whether I can talk to my butcher or baker or whether I get my sausage and bread from a huge supermarket shelf or even have it delivered "from the Internet". Personal acquaintance helps even when there is a risk of infection. You communicate with each other and know more about each other – more and especially more important things than you can tell each other in Facebook chats lasting for hours.

A more decentralised economic organisation for basic services and goods not only leads to more flexibility in the crisis, but also to more justice in normal circumstances. More existentially independent units are not so easy to weaken, and they often have less ambition to weaken others.

The political intent to support such structures, or to create them at all, requires a rethinking of economic policy and may require decisions contrary to economic "reason" – as long as this reason only means short-term profit. The creative will to shape an economic structure that is oriented towards the common good, fair, secure supply, i.e. decentralised for crucial services, needs politicians who are not satisfied with being "shaped" by even the strongest lobbyists. First of all, therefore, we need citizens who can produce such politicians. That would be the self-realisation of a sovereign citizenship.

Corona crisis: We get to look forward to the future again

Prospect of gradual relaxation measures for the Swiss economy

Dr iur Marianne Wüthrich

On 8 April, Federal President Simonetta Sommaruga announced a slow reopening of economic life from the end of April onwards, although the focus would of course remain on public health. In the “Focus SME” programme of 6 April, Hans-Ulrich Bigler, Director of the Swiss Trade Association (SGV), and Daniel Kalt, Chief Economist at UBS bank, discussed the current situation of SMEs and of the working population in Switzerland and voiced their first ideas on a “smart restart” of the economy. A number of industry associations belonging to the SGV have submitted project drafts to the Federal Council for a controlled reopening of their businesses, in compliance with the prescribed measures on distance and hygiene. This makes sense, because the experts in the various sectors have the best knowledge of their working situation, possible restrictions on direct contacts as well as of any sensitive issues.

So things should slowly start to pick up again. But before we deal with the above-mentioned statements and concepts intended to get the Swiss economy going once more, there is a need for a charitable pause. We Swiss are in the fortunate position of already being able to plan ahead again. We owe this in part to the well-functioning Swiss model, which has been built up by our people and is supported jointly even in difficult times. But in part we are also indebted to fortunate circumstances in the past and present. Whatever the case – we have every reason to be grateful and also to think of others. When the world around us is on fire, when there are countries in which thousands and thousands of sick people do not receive the care they need to survive, so that they die miserably, we Swiss should look beyond our own backyard and fulfil our humanitarian obligation towards our fellow human beings.

Before Easter, Federal President Sommaruga gave out a warning by way of the media: the measures taken so far to contain the corona pandemic are having an effect, she said, but we are still a long way from reaching our goal.

Gradual relaxation – but health issues are not to be sidestepped in favour of the economy

The Federal Council announced the following two decisions at the media conference of 8 April 2020:

1. The existing measures would be continued until 26 April.
2. The Federal Council had instructed the Federal Department of Home Affairs, in cooperation with the Federal Department of Economic Affairs, Education and Research, to draw up a concept for the step-by-step implementation of the relaxation measures. The Federal Council would discuss the concept at its next meeting on 16 April and would address the media again on 17 and 18 April. It was thought to be possible for the first stage of relaxations to take place before the end of April.

Federal President Sommaruga clearly stated: “This concept is not about sidestepping health in favour of the economy. As in the past, the Federal Council will continue to focus on public health”. Only as far as health was assured would the Federal Council allow relaxation in order to keep the economic damage as low as possible.

Assessment of federal support measures by business representatives

In “Focus SME” of 6 April, Hans-Ulrich Bigler, former National Councillor (Free Democrats) and Director of the Swiss Trade Association, and Daniel Kalt, Chief Economist Switzerland at UBS, praised the Federal Council’s package of measures as very effective emergency aid for SMEs and employees.¹ Bigler said that the message given out by the trade sector that “500,000 SMEs are too many to fail” had reached the Federal Council. According to Daniel Kalt, the measures adopted are very efficient by international comparison. In particular, partial unemployment benefit is an effective instrument for preventing high unemployment. As opposed to this, for example in the USA, ten million people were put on the street within two weeks, due to the hire-and-fire mentality.

However, both discussion partners pointed out that we will all soon need a perspective for a gradual revival of the economy, of course hand in hand with a continuation of the health policy. Twenty-five per cent of the workforce is partially employed, unemployment is rising, and many companies have no income, yet must continue to pay their overhead costs. Loans guaranteed by the federal government will have to be repaid after the crisis: “That is as it should be,” remarked Hans-Ulrich Bigler, but the companies will then also lack this money for necessary investments.²

Two days after this discussion, the Federal Council announced the plan for a gradual normalisation of the economy that Bigler and Kalt had called for, taking into account the epidemiological situation, and they substantiated it on 16 April (see box).

No cost-benefit analysis when human lives are at stake

In the Focus-SME discussion round, the moderator also raised the question whether the stringent restrictions on economic and personal freedom applying today can be considered proportional. *Claudia Steinmann*: “[...] the discussion about proportionality and a cost-benefit analysis, although economists always conduct one, is somehow not or not yet allowed.” *Daniel Kalt*: “Yes, of course, to a certain extent people shy away from this ethically sensitive question. De facto that is what we [meaning the economists, mw] do: we balance human life against economic damage, and nobody likes to talk about things like that.” This shows that this kind of cost-benefit thinking is probably not his cup of tea. However, we must object when Daniel Kalt adds that the Federal Council “has a very difficult task as they must balance competing values” here, because they have to decide how much economic damage we should allow in order to save human lives.

The Federal Council must never ever make such a decision. Instead, Ms Sommaruga clearly stated on 8 April what must come first, namely the health of the population. We citizens will closely monitor the further course of events and commit politics and business to this.

Industry associations are preparing for the resumption of their economic activities

In its press release of 6 April, the Swiss Trade Association (SGV) calls for a “smart restart” of the economy, i.e. “the majority of the population should gradually resume normal activities, depending on the epidemiological situation”.

This is to be combined with appropriate health care control measures and coronavirus testing.³ The first concrete drafts submitted to the Federal Council by industry associations are fascinating to read. These were presented by the Trade Association on 7 April, and the association demands that “industries with increased customer contact should be allowed to themselves

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identify suitable measures that will enable them to comply with health protection for customers and employees”.⁴

The Federal Council will probably have no objections to this; on the contrary, they will be dependent on the practical assistance of trade and industry to be able to act. Let us take a look at the industry associations’ first illustrative concepts.

Example sports specialist shops

The industry association ASMAS demands in its project paper that sports shops and facilities be opened as quickly as possible, so that they will be able to reduce overflowing seasonal inventory levels. Above all “businesses that trade mostly in summer have a massive liquidity problem. In addition to wage, rental and other running costs, outstanding accounts for seasonal deliveries, which had to be ordered 6–8 months in advance, are the most pressing at the moment.”⁵ This means that companies now have to pay for a large volume of goods of which they will at best still be able to sell only a small proportion. Today it is still unclear whether sports facilities can be opened soon.

Sports shops have the advantage of being able to take over most of the solutions proposed by the grocery stores, such as determining how many people (employees and customers) will be allowed

per square metre of sales area, or the use of disinfectants and protective equipment in the checkout area and the staggered arrangement of staff breaks.

In addition, according to the project paper changing rooms in sports shops will have to be disinfected “regularly”. (Note: the correct term would be “after each customer”). Similar solutions should be defined for clothing stores.

Finally, there is the association’s question: “Should the use of disposable gloves, protective masks, baseball caps with face shield be compulsory?”⁵ Comment: These measures must be considered for the protection of employees and customers in all sectors.

Example car sales

In its sales concept, the *Swiss Motor Trade Association* AGVS focuses on telephone and online advice and the presentation of the cars via Skype on the one hand, and on strict measures for the indispensable contact between seller and customer in the sales process on the other.

The association’s experts have included all conceivable measures: the limited number of customers in the salesroom (with advance notice) or on the used car lot; closed vehicles that are opened for a viewing by the salesperson with a disinfected key; disposable steering wheel covers and other protective material as well as disposable gloves for viewing and test driving; then disinfecting of the entire in-

terior of the car. The introduction before the test drive will be carried out with the observation of the necessary distance or by video.⁶

Example hairdressing businesses

It goes without saying that *CoiffureSUISSE*, the Association of Swiss Hairdressers, has a harder time finding solutions than the sports or car trade, since direct physical contact between hairdresser and customer is unavoidable. The hairdressers are all the more relieved that they will soon be able to open their hair salons again. Commenting on their difficult situation, *coiffureSUISSE* writes: “The hairdressing industry has effectively been reduced to zero since the professional ban on 17 March, including the industry’s supply sectors. This industry, with around 13,000 SMEs and 11,000 official employees, operates with low profit margins and is therefore one of the first victims of this new FOPH⁷ ‘lock-down’ health strategy.⁸ It is understandable that, because of the low level of profits in this profession one is hardly able to build up reserves. Most businesses have applied for federal guarantee loans, practically all self-employed hairdressers receive substitute daily income allowances (but only for a limited time), employees receive unemployment benefits or – if they have not

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Stepwise opening of companies and schools**Media conference of the Federal Council on 16 April 2020**

mw. Since measures to contain the coronavirus are working, the spread of the virus has been slowed down and hospitals are currently not overburdened, the Federal Council has decided on initial relaxations. Gradual relaxations are planned trying to avoid a rapid rise of infections. This will give the affected sectors a prospect and the opportunity to get prepared. However, the Federal Council will decide on further stages in an ongoing manner, based on the current health situation.

Three phases:

- From 27 April 2020, hospitals will be able to perform all surgeries again, including non-urgent ones. Hairdressers, hardware stores, garden centres, flower shops and gardening shops can reopen. Restrictions on the range of products in grocery stores will be lifted.
- On 11 May 2020, compulsory schools and shops will be reopened – if the development of the situation allows it. The Federal Council

intends to decide on this on 29 April.

- From 8 June 2020, secondary schools, vocational schools and universities as well as museums, zoos and libraries will reopen if the situation permits. The Federal Council will take a more detailed decision on 27 May.
- The Federal Council has not yet decided regarding further stages. The opening of restaurants will probably take longer. In one of its next sessions, the Federal Council will decide when larger events will be possible again.

Two important prerequisites

1. Before opening, shops need to present a convincing protection concept regarding how customers and employees are protected.
2. It is imperative to prevent any setbacks. What was achieved due to the support of the population must not be put at risk. The Federal Council therefore asks the popu-

lation to continue to adhere to the distance and hygiene measures.

Return from emergency law to an ordinary legislative process

When asked about new emergency law, Federal President *Sommaruga* stated that the Federal Council intends to slowly get out of the extraordinary situation, deciding on as little new emergency laws as possible and planning the return to ordinary legislature. All emergency ordinances are limited in time, sometimes to six months, sometimes to three months. The parliamentary commissions are beginning to meet again; on 4 May the special session of parliament will start, followed by the summer session in June. Political decisions of great financial importance are at stake, as well as interventions in people’s fundamental rights. Now the decisions are again to be made in the way that is customary in our country, by Parliament or even by the people.

Corona crisis and rejection of an unbridled globalisation

mw. In a recently published newspaper commentary, *Daniel Kalt*, Chief Economist of UBS – a globalised giant par excellence – interestingly revealed the dangers of globalisation in clear words. In the 21st century, he says, humanity has already had to experience on several occasions that “globalisation has become a systemic risk”. Kalt first mentions the financial crisis of 2007/2008, which originated in the USA and almost led to the collapse of the financial system due to its enormous interconnectedness. A good decade later, the drastic global containment measures resulting from the Sars-CoV-2 virus had led to an “extremely synchronous and deep global recession”. As a result, especially in the Western industrialised coun-

tries, “broad sections of the population have come to realise that unbridled globalisation generates more losers than winners in the less educated working population through the almost uninhibited worldwide exchange of capital, goods, services, know-how and, above all, labour.

Kalt points out that in recent years the governments of many nations have once again placed their national interests and the protection of their own production more strongly in the foreground (e.g. America-first doctrine, Brexit, US-China trade dispute).

The corona-induced shock wave has now also led to an increasing “awareness of the enormous dependencies in a globalised supply chain structure” in many compa-

nies. This is where the demands of critics of globalisation come together, with originally different motives: “The concerns of those circles who are calling for greater sustainability in our economic system go hand in hand with more local production.”

It is gratifying and encouraging for any critical contemporary that even an economist in the service of a major globalised bank can maintain and publicly express his independent thinking.

Source: Daniel Kalt, Chief Economist of UBS Switzerland. “Was wird dereinst in den Geschichtsbüchern zu den Folgen der Corona-Krise stehen? Ein Gastbeitrag” [What will future history books write about the consequences of the corona crisis? A guest editorial], in: St. Galler Tagblatt from 2 April 2020

“Corona crisis: We go to look ...”

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even been dismissed – partial unemployment benefits.

The association proposes that persons from risk groups should not be served in the first phase. The Hairdressers’ Association offers to distribute protective and disinfectant products to its members. In addition to many protective and hygiene measures, a whole range of other considerations are listed, for example customers should bring their own magazines and hang up their jackets on the coat rack themselves (point 9).

In fact, there are a number of problem areas in the hairdressers’ work: For example, the shop owner is responsible for turning away older customers (point 6.2) – in practice this will probably not be so easy. And although good protective devices may be used, the special situation remains that hairdresser and client are very close to each other over a longer period of time and that there is direct physical contact. – This situation is similar to that of the dentist, whom people currently only call on in emergencies, but not, for example, for their routine dental hygiene.

Who will monitor compliance with measures proposed by the trades?

The concepts of the trades presented here, especially those of the sales branches, appear well thought-out and seem to provide good protection. In the meantime, other suggestions have been added: from the re-

tail, photo and shoe trade, from driving instructors and the fitness industry.⁹

In the meanwhile, large proportion of SMEs and the working population are now in an extremely difficult economic situation, and this cannot leave anyone untouched. Nevertheless, the open question remains:

How is it to be possible to keep under review all those businesses that are understandably pushing back onto the market, so as to assure that they are actually complying with the strict rules for hygiene, protection and distance? Is there no danger of some precautions that make the usual work processes more complicated and uncomfortable just quickly being omitted in the hustle and bustle of everyday life? The first objective must still be the health protection of the entire population. Is it up to the citizens to draw attention to weak points in practice or to cases when the concepts are not implemented consistently enough? Or do we need a more in-depth discussion among the population so that we will all become even more aware of the seriousness of the situation? •

¹ “Focus on SMEs. The programme for business and society”. Editor: Corinne Aeberhard, Swiss Trade Association SGV. Moderation: Claudia Steinmann, *Tele Züri* of 6 April 2020

² *ibid.*

³ “Exit strategy from the corona crisis: ‘Smart Restart’”, *press release SGV* of 6 April 2020

⁴ “Exit strategy from corona crisis: Sectors show how ‘Smart Restart’ works”, *press release SGV* of 7 April 2020

⁵ ASMAS Sports Retail Switzerland. *Preliminary project paper* of 7 April 2020 (ASMAS pb)

⁶ Swiss Professional Automobile Union UPSA. *Covid-19 measures in the automobile sales process*. Version 1.1 from 7 April 2020

⁷ Federal Office of Public Health

⁸ CoiffureSUISSE, Association of Swiss Hairdressers. Introduction concept Covid-19 phase X+1 of 7 April 2020

⁹ “SGV calls for a ‘Smart Restart’” with a starting signal on 27 April”, *SGV press release* of 15. April 2020

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Definitely no “let’s go back to business as usual”

The corona pandemic: A rethink

by Dr phil Winfried Pogorzelski

Since last December, the coronavirus has caught not only China cold, but now the whole world. Who could have expected that the pandemic would affect us to such an extent that our social life would be at a standstill for weeks, if not months? Nevertheless, there were unmistakable signs and harbingers; in the meantime, there is agreement across all borders that the pandemic is a caesura of unimagined force, after which much, if not everything, will no longer be as it was before.

Harbinger “SARS”

In 2002 and 2003, the first pandemic of the 21st century, originating in China, spread throughout the world, causing severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), which was declared defeated by the WHO in May 2004. A good 8,000 cases occurred worldwide, with almost 800 deaths and 7,200 recoveries.¹

Planning games in Switzerland...

Among other things, this event may have prompted those responsible to run through scenarios in order to be better prepared for the future, for example in Switzerland and also in Germany. All 26 cantons were involved when it was announced in 2014 that a new type of influenza virus originating from Central Asia and with a high lethality rate was spreading across the globe at lightning speed. This exercise showed that the prevention plans were not up to date. A new national pandemic plan was developed, but when in May 2018 the head of the Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport (DDPS), *Guy Parmelin*, asked how well the cantons were now organised in this respect, it turned out that they had not done their homework. When *Viola Amherd* took over the DDPS in January 2019, other tasks were at the top of the priority list: defence against international terrorism and the procurement of new fighter jets. Then the corona pandemic spread at a speed that nobody had expected. The assumption was that in the globalised world economy, necessary raw materials such as ethanol and medical technology products such as face masks could be imported within a useful period of time. But then the cantons responsible for this were faced with the problem of supply bottlenecks. In other words, the plans were in place, but there was a lack of implementation because at the time of the exercise and afterwards, the focus was firstly on hospital planning, which had to deal with overcapacity and rising healthcare costs, and secondly on the constantly rising health insurance premiums.²

... and in Germany

Similarly in Germany an analysis of 2013, commissioned by the German government, assumed much more drastic, actually unrealistic conditions than we currently find in the corona pandemic: All age groups are affected to the same extent in the model, and the mortality rate is much higher. It is therefore explicitly emphasised that the reality of this scenario is limited. As far as the economic and social consequences are concerned, the developments are similar to those we are now experiencing: Stock market prices are falling dramatically, entire sectors of the economy are facing a veritable collapse, states are investing billions of euros, the EU is facing a test of endurance because the economically depressed countries of Italy and Spain feel abandoned by the richer North. The affected countries are facing massive supply bottlenecks for medical products.³

There will always be epidemics: What is to be done?

The WHO registers about 200 epidemics worldwide every year. There is a constant risk that one of them will turn into a pandemic with unforeseeable consequences for the economy, health and society worldwide. This is the reality that humanity must face now and in the future.

Responsibility across the board by each state for its citizens is therefore the motto. What is to be done in concrete terms? Health systems must be developed in such a way that they are better equipped to deal with the scenarios that threaten them. Concrete proposals for Switzerland, which can also be transferred to other states, have been made by *Ruth Humbel*, a health policy expert from the Canton of Argovia and a member of the National Council (CVP)⁴: Thorough revision of existing pandemic plans and reliable guarantee of their implementation in the event of a crisis. According to Ms Humbel, the production of important medicines should once again take place entirely in Switzerland. Of course, this also means no more sales abroad of companies that are essential for reliable health care here: The former serum and vaccine institute Berna Biotech was sold to a Dutch company in 2006.⁵

In addition, plans to reduce hospital capacity need to be reconsidered. This is symbolised by a decision of the Frauenfeld Cantonal Hospital: the demolition of the 200-bed high-rise building (a new building has been constructed) has been postponed. The population often vehemently opposes the closure of regional hospitals,

as was the case in Affoltern am Albis in May 2019, when almost three-quarters of voters voted in favour of maintaining the hospital. And last but not least, the Swiss Army, which provides indispensable services, must be maintained and cared for: The Border Guard Corps helps to secure the national border, and paramedics, 8,000 in number, provide support in the hospitals – an indispensable contribution in the current situation.

Unleashed globalisation no cure

And finally: definitive abandonment of the illusion that globalisation is merely a blessing for humanity, since everything that is economically viable – especially for global players – is of benefit to the world population. Of course, it is not only companies that benefit in terms of costs if they can produce their goods at locations all over the world and distribute them worldwide. We as end consumers also benefit when prices are low and consumer goods are available almost everywhere. But we also enjoy the fact that we can buy products that have been manufactured under conditions that we know and can approve of. With our buying behaviour we like to promote the prosperity of our region.

Every state bears responsibility for the well-being of its citizens, for the best possible health care and for the promotion of medical and pharmaceutical science. A pure focus on cost-effectiveness and profit orientation would be irresponsible, now and in the future.

Relaxation, but no all-clear

In the meantime the situation has eased somewhat: The number of hospitalizations for corona diseases is declining in Switzerland and Germany. Here in Switzerland as well as in Germany, there are enough free hospital beds due to precautionary measures in a special situation; the Covid-19 intensive care beds in Zurich, Basel as well as in the cantonal hospitals of St. Gallen, Lucerne and Argovia are not fully occupied.⁶ Fortunately, shortages are nowhere to be found, and that is a good thing. However, *Rolf Gilgen*, President of the Swiss Hospital Directors’ Association, emphasises that it is too early to give the all-clear. In the event of a renewed wave of infection, hospitals should be able to ramp up capacity for corona patients within two to three days.⁷ We can only concur with this view. •

The classroom – interactive or digital area?

by Carl Bossard

Home office is the name of the new modus operandi for work as well as for the schools. The digital classroom is experiencing an upswing. The euphoria is great however, it is going forgotten that education is also about relationships. Time for a pedagogical reflection.

Our non-stop society has unexpectedly stuttered and faltered, in many ways even come to a standstill. Due to the corona virus even classroom teaching has come to a standstill. However, the approximately 1.3 million school children throughout Switzerland are supposed to continue to their school work from at home as if they were still at school. They work at home, supervised and accompanied via digital channels by their teachers – with texts and assignments. Communication is established through push messages, via entire websites or apps, by video call, sometimes via documents sent by post, sometimes by a good old telephone call or even through face to face conversations in the school building.

Learning requires positive relationships

Distance learning across the board is an unexplored area. Almost no previous experience exists in this area of teaching. Accordingly, its success differs greatly. For many distance teaching is working optimally, however, it works better for some and less well for others. For some distance teaching doesn't work at all. The headline in the *SonntagsZeitung* read: "Not all educators are convincing in distance teaching"¹. Not without undertone.

The accusations that this should have been taken seriously long ago, were levelled at the schools. It was stated that digital development in education has simply

"Definitely no 'let's go back ...'"

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¹ https://www.who.int/csr/sars/country/table2004_04_21/en/

² "Pandemie-Übung 2014: Die Schweiz war gewarnt" ("Pandemic exercise 2014: Switzerland was warned"). In: *Aargauer Zeitung* from 28 March 2020.

³ "Das könnte eine Pandemie für Deutschland bedeuten" ("This could mean a pandemic for Germany"). In: *Welt online* from 26 February 2020, <https://www.welt.de/wirtschaft/article206119443/Coronavirus-Das-bedeutet-eine-Pandemie-fuer-Deutschland.html>

⁴ "Aargauer Gesundheitspolitikerin Ruth Humbel: 'Musste Vater überzeugen, dass ich einkaufe'" ("Aargau health politician Ruth Humbel: 'I had to convince my father that I am doing the shopping'"). In: *Aargauer Zeitung* from 30 March 2020.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* from 16 April 2020.

⁷ *Aargauer Zeitung* from 16 April 2020.



A teacher talking to his students in class. Teachers and students are very happy with the subject. The students learn as a class community. Teacher and students are in relationship with each other. The focus is on learning on the job. (picture ew)

been forgotten and the consequences must be faced. Therefore intensified, even radical digitisation of teaching throughout the country is being called for. However, for the reaction to call for increased digitisation of the schools has to be countered by pedagogical reflection. There is good reason why children have not been left alone with educational software: In short, since we are human², and because learning requires positive relationships. School and teaching are in many ways an interactive process, a relationship between people.³ Education unfolds "in processes that are densely interactive (with people and things)"⁴, according to sociologist *Hartmut Rosa*.

Man is no Robinson Crusoe

Therefore, it is one of the basic anthropological constants that man needs a counterpart in order to recognise himself. *Martin Buber*, pedagogue and philosopher of religion, has condensed this insight into a core statement: "Man becomes himself in you".⁵ Therefore, the human counterpart must not be missing. Even the best digital programme cannot replace the human vis-à-vis. This can also be seen with distance learning in these days of corona. Countless children miss the company of their classmates and their teacher. The other way round, many educators seek direct and personal contact with their students.

Man is not just a *Kaspar Hauser* figure, and only very few are suitable for a modern *Robinson Crusoe*. Left to their own devices, they lose themselves in a world

without support and orientation. People need a counterpart in order to be able to develop.

Interpersonal relations are essential

Many research results show, and many expert reports confirm: From earliest childhood two basic needs exist which complement each other: For one thing we want to feel safe and secure, on the other hand we want to discover and experience something new. For this feeling of security as well as for discovering something new, we need fellow human beings whom we trust and who strengthen us while also providing correction. This makes learning easier and strengthens it.

Especially with younger children, these are elementary and resonant gifts. Teachers must believe in the adolescents, pay attention to them, encourage them, acknowledge them and trust them. Supportive and corrective feedback also plays a crucial role. The learners must know what or how to improve. These relationships are elemental to teaching and are all relationship elements. They lie in the interpersonal, in the "in-between" and the divergent. Physical presence and vital interest in the child intensify these interpersonal processes.

Learning is not linear

Digitisation, however, assumes that teaching is a controllable and therefore plannable process, so to speak a linear and con-

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"The classroom – interactive ..."

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vergent start-finish run, precisely calculable and controlled by algorithms. The divergent hardly ever occurs. That is why children have little perseverance to follow a digitalised lesson over a longer period. They soon get bored, because no person is perceptible, and there is no interpersonal energy which animates the student. The physician and neuroscientist *Joachim Bauer* points out⁶ that it is this "in-between" that provides young people with the indispensable analogue resonance experiences.

Therefore, a teacher must be perceptible and vital in the classroom. He is more than a "guide at the side".⁷ He must be there for a feedback, a humorous joke, for recognition and stimulation, for resistance and argument. Pupils need the understanding attention of their teacher and they must feel perceived and taken seriously by the teacher.

Personal contact is indispensable

What does this mean in the current emergency situation with distance learning, when children have to learn at home alone?

It shows how important direct human contact is, when learning together in the classroom with the teachers present and what is suddenly missing now. Many parents try to compensate for this but not all are equally successful. Not all homes are equally learner friendly for the children.

Soon return to the interaction and resonances of the classroom

The emergency situation shows more: pedagogy before technology should be self-evident. Many uncritical digitisers and promoters of a virtual learning world forget this. The use of digital media is usually unproblematic for students. However, what is needed for good learning is a committed personal counterpart. Learning needs positive relationships. Therefore, psychologist and psychotherapist *Allan Guggenbühl* emphasises that digital media – especially in primary school – are an addition to teaching from person to person. For, human evolution is not the same as technical revolution. Even in the digital age, the human being becomes human being in man. Soon, primary school children and their teachers will return to the resonance space of the

classroom. For many reasons this is gratifying.

- ¹ Nadja Pastega: "Beim Fernunterricht überzeugten nicht alle Lehrer" (Not all teachers were convincing in distance learning). In: *SonntagsZeitung*, 12.04.2020, p. 8.
- ² Fridtjof Küchemann: "Warum es so schwierig ist, ohne Lehrer zu lernen" (Why it is so difficult to learn without teachers). In: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 20.03.2020.
- ³ Jens Beljan: *Schule als Resonanzraum und Entfremdungszone. Eine neue Perspektive auf Bildung* (School as resonance space and zone of alienation. A new perspective on education): Weinheim: Juventa Verlag, 2019, p. 375.
- ⁴ Hartmut Rosa: *Resonanz. Eine Soziologie der Weltbeziehung* (Resonance. A Sociology of World Relations). Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2016, p. 403.
- ⁵ cf. Martin Buber: *Ich und Du*. Gerlingen: Lambert Schneider, 1997, 13th edition.
- ⁶ Joachim Bauer: *Wie wir werden, wer wir sind. Die Entstehung des menschlichen Selbst durch Resonanz* (How we become, who we are. The emergence of the human self through resonance). Munich: Karl Blessing Verlag, 2019, p. 205.
- ⁷ Ewald Terhart: *Eine neo-existenzialistische Konzeption von Unterricht und Lehrerhandeln? Zu Gert Biestas Wiederentdeckung und Rehabilitation des Lehrens und des Lehrers* (A neo-existentialist conception of teaching and teacher action? On Gert Biestas rediscovery and rehabilitation of teaching and the teacher), in: *Vierteljahrsschrift für wissenschaftliche Pädagogik*, 94, 2018/3, p. 479.

Source: *Journal21* of 18. April 2020

(Translation *Current Concerns*)

Care for nature and its creatures

On Meredith May's novel "The Honey Bus"

dk. The novel* tells the story of *Meredith* and her brother *Matthew*. After their parents' divorce, the two are left completely to themselves by their mother. She often spends several days in bed with depression. The two siblings find their only support in their grandfather, a passionate beekeeper, who introduces them to the fascinating world of honey bees. He keeps several beehives in Big Sur on the Californian coast.

The honey is processed by him in an old discarded bus.

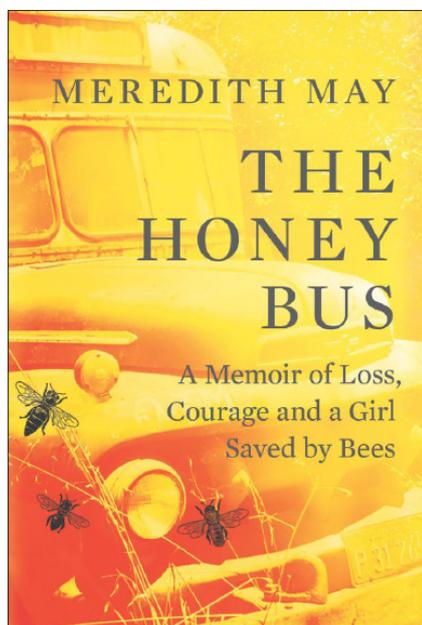
Soon after their arrival at their grandparents' house, Meredith and Matthew learn that bees only sting to defend their home. A beehive is comparable to a castle with a queen, but without a king. "All working bees are female; about sixty thousand daughters who feed their mother, bring her water drops and keep her warm at night. The colony would shrink and die without the queen laying eggs. But without her daughters to take care of her, the queen would either starve or freeze to death. It's the need for each other that makes them strong." Meredith also learns that bees not only produce honey, but also pollinate flowers to make fruit, nuts and vegetables grow. "If the bees didn't produce pollen, grandpa explained, many things in the fruit and vegetable department in the grocery store would disappear. I would lose my beloved cucumbers and blackberries. No more pumpkins on Halloween. Summer without watermelons. The cherries in granny's Manhattans – gone. The world would be dull and boring and flowerless without bees, he warned."

One day, when Meredith is even bashed by her mother, she finds comfort in her grandfather. "Did I ever tell you about scout bees?" asked my grandfather. "When their home isn't good anymore, they look

for a better one. Don't lose courage because of your mother. You're smart as a scout bee. One day you'll find your own way."

Meredith actually finds her way, attends college and eventually becomes a journalist for the "San Francisco Chronicle". Like her grandfather, she keeps bees, introduces other people to beekeeping, and in this way cultivates her grandfather's legacy: "When Grandpa asked me to look after his bees, he didn't just mean his last colony; he made me promise to look after all the bees, nature, all the creatures. In short, he asked me to look at everything through the eyes of a beekeeper, to be gentle with everything, including things that can sting." Is there anything more beautiful than introducing your grandchildren to a fulfilled life in this way?

*May, Meredith. *The Honey Bus: A memoir of Loss, Courage and a Girl Saved by Bees*, Park Row, New York, ISBN: 978-0-7783-0778-5



ISBN 978-0778307785

Meredith May is a journalist and author. She lives in the San Francisco Bay Area and writes for the "San Francisco Chronicle". She won the "PEN USA Literary Award for Journalism" and was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. Her book "The Honey Bus" has been translated into eleven languages.