

Learning global solidarity in the Covid-19 pandemic?

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Abstract

In a letter published on March 30, 2021, 24 world leaders have called for global solidarity in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic. This commitment to act in solidarity with low-income countries however was won under duress, and it was in part at least self-serving. Can this still be called solidarity? On the basis of a functional view on solidarity the paper argues that states can indeed act in solidarity, if they accept costs to assist others with whom they recognize similarity in a relevant respect. States can act in solidarity, or they can fail to act in solidarity, also in situations of duress and if solidary acts also serve their own interests. The paper concludes that if this is true for the Covid-19 pandemic it is also true for the climate crisis, where damage of even much bigger dimensions are to be prevented. Also in regard to anthropogenic global heating, nobody is safe until everyone is safe.

Keywords:

[Complexity](#), [Trust](#), [Inequalities](#), [Covid-19](#), [Judgement](#).



“Nobody is safe until everyone is safe.” – the punchline of a widely publicized letter signed by 24 world leaders on March 30, 2021. In that letter they plea for a joint, broadly international approach to fight the pandemic. The list includes Boris Johnson, Angela Merkel, Emmanuel Macron and Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director-general of the World Health Organization. A number of heads of state in the Global South are signatories: Macky Sall, president of Senegal, Paul Kagame, president of Rwanda, Uhuru Kenyatta, president of Kenya and more (Johnson et al., 2021). It is obvious, as the authors pronounce, that a pandemic can only be overcome together. For reaching safety in an individual country, solidarity with other countries who might have less power and resources is the most essential requirement. In order to win back normal life all countries need one another.

This rare insight of sitting in the same boat together is however won under duress. And the solidarity is in no way altruistic. From a moral point of view, two key questions must be raised: Is forced and partly self-serving solidarity truly to be called solidarity? A concern is that a forced declaration of global solidarity, which is in the obvious interest of all might be indifferent to the pain and suffering of others and mainly see the advantage for oneself. Another concern is that forced and self-serving solidarity might be short-lived and disappear as soon as the pressure fades.

But is this ideal-world-thinking? We are living in a non-ideal world. Here in this place, forced and partly self-serving solidarity may be the best we can get from politicians. It can be the only form of solidarity a nation-state can realistically develop. States are built by humans with minds, hearts, and souls. And from individuals we may ask a deeper kind of responsibility than only forced self-serving solidarity. In person/person relationships, responsibility is essentially to be explained as

responsivity to the vulnerability of others. As collective political agents however, nations are not engaging in person/person relationships (Kellenberger, 1995) with other states or with other individuals.

In order to tackle problems on a global and structural level we also need to improve institutional relationships. Solidarity between nations on both sides of the so-called 10/90 gap would be a crucial requirement to cope with other, possibly even bigger global challenges (Capron, 2007). The climate crisis, global heating is one of them. It is a threat to the health and to the lives of people already in the present and it will dramatically escalate in the future. Climate change disturbs the dynamic equilibrium of ecosystems worldwide, and it destroys the habitats of animals, plants and humans who depend on them. In regard to the climate crisis nobody is safe until everyone is safe.

I doubt that the first sentence of the letter of the heads of state is true: “The Covid-19 pandemic is the biggest challenge to the global community since the 1940s.” Climate change is and will be a much bigger threat. Can we therefore learn something from the Covid-19 crisis for tackling an even harsher crisis by foresight?

Can states act in solidarity?

Three times in the letter, ‘solidarity’ is mentioned. The first appearance of the term is in an appeal to the “spirit of solidarity and cooperation” which is necessary to address key challenges of our time, namely peace, prosperity, health and security. Then the authors refer to “our solidarity” in ensuring that the world is better prepared for future pandemics. In the final sentence of the letter, the signatories refer to solidarity as one of a series of values that characterizes good governance: they “must be guided by solidarity, fairness, transparency, inclusiveness and equity.” And the motto

of the letter, saying that nobody is safe until everyone is safe is the expression of an insight into the inevitability of solidarity to establish safety for all people, including the citizens of their own countries.

State representatives are saying that they are committed to act in solidarity. But the question can be raised whether in a non-ideal world they can be truly solidary? Is it possible for institutions as collectivities to act in solidarity? Is solidarity not a name for the ties *within* a society, an institution, or a group that bind people together as ‘one’? In other words, is solidarity bound to a certain group of motives that can only be human motives and not be attributed to an artificial institution of which human actors are only representatives?

In a recent review on the history of the idea of solidarity and on the discussions on solidarity in current sociological and philosophical literature, Barbara Prainsack and Alena Buyx define solidarity “as an enacted commitment to carry the ‘costs’ (financial, social, emotional, and other contributions) of assisting others with whom a person or persons recognise similarity in a relevant respect” (2016, p. 493)¹. This definition is illuminating because it highlights the function of solidarity, not so much the motives that make somebody solidary. States can carry costs and make contributions (financial, logistical, manpower and other). Solidarity is the action of accepting costs for assisting others. That is what counts. All this is possible for institutions. States in their institutional actions can behave in a way that it fulfills the definition of the term ‘solidarity’.

If this is accepted, the next question can be answered more easily. In Prainsack and Buyx’ (2016) explanation there no reference is made to the absence of pressure and inducement, which could arise from the situation of those acting in solidarity. Solidarity is the ‘enacted

commitment’, i.e., a resulting attitude and practice, which of course answers pressures, tensions, even emergencies in the situation. A situation of famine or an emergency breakdown of an airplane for instance can induce mutual helping in the people affected, which also maximizes everyone’s own chances to survive.

If we adopt this approach to understanding the phenomenon of solidarity, the solidarity declared in the letter by Johnson et al. on March 30 with countries who are less wealthy than the European countries is not to be disavowed for the reason that it (i) emerged under the duress of the pandemic and (ii) is in obvious ways self-serving for all parties. Yes, it may be depending on a stressful situation, be short-lived and it may have a strong self-serving element. Helping Brazil or India in fighting the pandemic is good for fending off the more dangerous new covid variants that thrive in these countries. Helping poor countries who could not have access in time to sufficient doses of Covid-19 vaccines or lack essential medical infrastructure is good for them *and* good for everybody. The functionalist understanding of solidarity, which is underlying Prainsack and Buyx’ (2016) analysis, does not suggest solidarity being a constant element of the character of a person – what we call a ‘virtue’. It is enacted in the assistance given to others who need it and with whom one recognizes similarity and connection. This kind of solidarity is possible to be realized by persons as well as by groups, collectives, and institutions such as states.

If states can act in solidarity, then we need to concede that they can also fail to act in solidarity. “America first”, the hallmark slogan of Trumpism, was policy program that obviously did not show solidarity; European countries pay billions to southern countries to fend off refugees from poor countries in the middle east and from Africa. Whether a politics of ‘fortress Europe’ that forcefully fends off as many

¹ See also Prainsack and Buyx, 2015.

refugees as possible represents solidarity with African refugees is more than questionable. Solidarity would require respecting the diversity of motives, to listen to the stories and to protect human rights of those who need it (Perkowski, 2018). Many of the refugees just die on their journey over the Mediterranean in desperate attempts to escape dire conditions in their home countries and to survive manifold traps on their way. And in the European countries they are often reduced to one single story (Squire et al., 2017). And the actually performed international climate politics, in large parts still represents a similar mode of one's own (short-term) interests first.

The pressure that has led them to this precious expression of solidarity is the pressure from the pandemic, which affects all parties – not everybody in the same way, however everybody in an unpleasant way, costing millions of lives and hampering the health of even more. The pandemic was and is in many ways an amplifier of global inequality. It is a common danger, and 'nobody is safe' from it. This common situation, as the heads of state declare in that letter, creates a perception of commonality. This, I would say, represents the element of 'similarity in a relevant respect' that is required in the explanation of solidarity given above.

The Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response, established by the World Health Organization (WHO) has issued a high-profile report in May 2021, which essentially substantiates the call for global solidarity in pandemic response, both to the Covid-19 pandemic and to prevent any future pandemics. Avoiding the vocabulary of solidarity it describes concrete measures. They include technology transfer for vaccines from affluent to poor countries, voluntary licensing, and if this does not work, waiving intellectual property rights under international agreements. The first recommendation how to end the

Covid-19 pandemic contains the statement (in the wording of the summary document, p. 4): "High income countries with a vaccine pipeline for adequate coverage should, alongside their own scale up, commit to provide to the 92 low – and middle-income countries of the COVAX Gavi Advance Market Commitment at least one billion vaccine doses no later than 1 September 2021 and more than two billion doses by mid-2022." This, if implemented, unequivocally represents enacted solidarity. It will need substantial funding and other resources from those who have more.

Pandemics and climate change

The Covid-19 pandemic is not "the biggest challenge to the global community since the 1940s", as the letter states. There are several reasons for this. While the global death toll of the Covid-19 pandemic is huge (more than 3.3 million at the time of writing (May 28, 2021), according to Johns Hopkins University's Covid-19 Dashboard²), the fatalities that are to be expected from the effects of global heating are much bigger. A recent modelling study by Ian Hamilton et al. (2021) compares public health effects in nine representative countries (Brazil, China, Germany, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, South Africa, the UK, and the USA) until 2040 between two pathway scenarios: One scenario, they call it the 'current pathways scenario', is based on the nationally determined contributions of these nine countries according to the Paris Agreement. These commitments (if fulfilled, which is only a hope) are however inadequate to achieve the Paris goal of keeping global temperature rise 'well below 2°C'. The other scenario, they call it the 'sustainable pathways scenario', is consistent with that goal of the Paris Agreement. Compared with the current pathways scenario, the sustainable

² <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>

pathways scenario will result, as the detailed calculations say, in an *annual* reduction of 1.18 million air pollution-related deaths, 5.86 million diet-related deaths, and 1.15 million deaths due to physical inactivity, across the nine countries, by 2040. The corresponding global numbers should of course be assumed to be much bigger. And years add up.

If this prospect is only approximately true, we need to conclude that the impact of climate change on human lives is larger by magnitudes than the death toll of the pandemic. More lives depend on states' actions, and on the corresponding changes in technology use and lifestyle that is necessary to keep the earth system within the range considered by the Paris Agreement as acceptable.

A second reason why we should not believe that the Covid-19 pandemic is the biggest challenge to the global community since the 1940s is the level of change needed to cope with the crisis. While fighting the pandemic implemented pre-established pandemic planning and pandemic preparation laws that existed in most of the countries, no such anticipatory planning exists in regard to the response to the climate crisis. For fighting the pandemic, which is an accepted health issue, a relatively powerful World Health Organization existed and had the capacities to trigger the response internationally. For fighting the climate crisis no similar global organization is existing. For fighting the pandemic, pharmaceutical industry can produce tools such as medication and vaccines. The response in many ways can use the functionalities of the existing socio-economic system. The response to climate change however needs a change of this system because its very functioning is based on an ever-increasing consumption of energy. Powerful industry, including fossil fuel companies, are politically lobbying for obstruction of necessary steps for change – according

to a "denial and delay playbook" (Mann, 2021, p. 2)., as climatologist Michael E. Mann, one of the authors of the last IPCC report, states.

But there are similarities. Both crises can only be overcome in joint international efforts. Both crises are existential for millions of people all over the world. Both crises can cause a dramatic rise in global injustice. Both crises need fast, powerful, and resolute, joint action. This kind of solidarity that world leaders learn in the pandemic and have agreed on in such statements as the letter from which I have quoted, is one of the necessary ingredients for every justifiable plan for international climate action.

Much more is needed, however. The German Constitutional Court recently concluded that the protection of the climate by actions of the state is an obligatory requirement of basic human rights, as they are protected in the German constitution (Bundesverfassungsgericht 2021). The same argument can, in principle, be made in other legislations as well. And change needs to be realized on all levels of society and cultural habits, including companies, institutions and of course the individuals. It can however not be delegated to individual consumers who need to change their behavior. Yes, they need to change their behavior, we all need to. But this will only happen if it is supported and incentivized by political strategies, which necessarily need to be internationally coordinated. Also, here we can learn something from the pandemic.

Learning to act on forced solidarity is not to be ridiculed or dismissed because it is also serving everyone's own interests. If based on well-considered, i.e., not only short-term but also long-term self-interest, and, I would add, if it does not hinder but enable and support empathy and care for the others who need protection, this kind of solidarity is part of a solution. 🙏

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