



# Innovation Possibilities in Times of Crisis: Covid 19 Pandemic

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*The crisis posed by this global pandemic has provided a unique opportunity to challenge orthodoxies and paradoxically, to become energized and inspired, even while physically isolated. This is an ideal time to examine and reframe our shared understanding and meanings of innovation, resilience, and systems change. To make this argument, I draw on firsthand lived experience of Hurricane Maria as it devastated St Croix in 2017, ongoing efforts with colleagues, to shape disaster management responses in the Caribbean, and more than two decades of intellectual engagement and practice in finance, innovation studies and international development.*

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As the world grapples with sadness, shock, anxiety and disbelief, there is also a sense of possibility, as we remake and question. My daily life has been fuller than ever because of the surge of experimentation, collaboration across geographic boundaries and opportunities for intellectual engagement. I also consume way too much cable news and information from a plethora of feeds and sources. An avid collector, communicator, and curator.

From that vantage point, I am acutely aware of the light and shadows cast by the virus. For every story of disorganized coordination of supply chains, mistrust between governments and the citizens with whom they are meant to hold a bond of trust, there are corresponding tales of volunteerism, neighborly kindness and community organizing. There are individual heroes among the frontline workers and politicians have rediscovered gravitas and statesmanship. Possibilities abound and our information networks are working

overtime. From my perspective, perhaps the single most important entry point presented by the global pandemic, is that there has been a literal turning on the axis of many closely held beliefs, biases, and perceptions in the areas where I have honed by craft. Economics, finance, public policy, international development, and the intellectual field of innovation studies.

Here are some stylized facts as we say in the trade:

- Anglo American OECD countries have obviously not been world leaders in effective response, and this opens up the space to ask questions about why health care systems, planning and readiness failed so spectacularly. Within this case of failure, the role of government and the social contract between those who govern and those that are governed have come under scrutiny.
- Authoritarian leadership styles emerged as being more effective in mobilization, planning and even in behavior change communication; this has led to considerable consternation about what is being given up in order to battle the virus and “flatten the curve” and whether intrusions once made under the guise of crisis management will ever be normalized. Do we in fact know what is normal and what we want it to be?
- Many writers who would not necessarily familiarize themselves with countries outside of North America and Europe, have had to take a crash course in Asia to help explain why China, Singapore, South Korea and Hong Kong have emerged as the leaders in containment and health systems response. Some commentators have suggested that India is not getting as much praise or attention of its draconian strategy.
- That many Asian countries employed digital surveillance and encroached on privacy has not gone unnoticed, although Singapore’s Prime Minister claimed that his country’s effectiveness had more to do with old fashioned contact tracing and sound public health practices rather than employing new-fangled technologies.
- The world is waking up each morning to reports of increasing numbers of cases and in this context, arcane United Nations agencies have emerged as being beacons of calm competence. Importantly in this climate, the leadership has relied on facts and has appeared to truly understand that health relying on a broader set of scientific and technological knowledge than medicine and health related disciplines. That they couched the term infodemic is particularly insightful and in treating with a global issue, the agency has proceeded with care to deploy fairness and sensitivity. The world is clamoring for these displays of apolitical competence.

These facts and observations permit me to suggest that we can use this crisis to change the search algorithm that we use to identify solutions. We can **widen the solution space** for tackling pernicious problems facing the world. It is my contention that pre Covid 19, and especially in the United States, because of the success of Silicon Valley, Route 128, Silicon Alley and the rise of the tech platform giants FANG, we operate under certain well-established beliefs and prevailing myths around innovation. These are encoded in global indicators of innovation performance and so on and guide the programming of development finance instructions and may even heavily influence how innovation is taught in business schools, accelerators and entrepreneurship programs.

- *Scientific and technical knowledge considered to be the most important source of knowledge for innovation* - we have seen that knowledge about behavior change and socio-cultural contexts is particularly important as a complement to natural science and medicine.
- *Novelty being more important than usefulness* - investment expenditure has been directed at lifestyle tech with a focus on convenience rather than solutions that improve the lives of the world's majority. We are paying a heavy price for this now.
- *The market and its related processes of diffusion and promise of risk adjusted returns being most important motivation for generating new knowledge, practices or ways of being* - this has meant a systematic underinvestment in goods, services and processes that transform systems. These societally valuable outputs of the innovation process may not pass risk adjusted return thresholds and so do not attract capital or make it through the screening funnel. How will it scale and what traction have you already achieved do not seem as relevant in today's reality?
- Little focus on *innovation as process and mindset*. Instead, even in my own discipline, there are categorizations of innovation based on degrees of technological intensity. This approach to nomenclature and ranking reinforces other processes of exclusion. Moreover, day to day *practices and processes of problem solving*, especially those used by marginalized poor and rural communities, are undervalued and in this crisis, this may prove a matter of life and death. By excluding simple solutions produced by knowledge bearers away from the technological frontier, we may be preventing ourselves from being more resilient and future proof.
- Correspondingly, there is an entire set of theoretical frames and practices that promote *intellectual property systems that discourage knowledge sharing*. The orthodoxy suggests that protection of IP is necessary for commercial progress. By applying particular market structures, we have seen underinvestment in public goods and social services (health, education, water & sanitation and communications).

In many parts of the Global South, the prevailing innovation practices are myth busters. Under conditions of financial constraints, far away from the modern-day technology horizon, there is a problem solving and experimental frame. The Covid 19 global pandemic, despite its bleak prognosis, loss of life and upheaval of daily routines, allows for reflection, recalibration and action. I invite you to take those steps as we make sense of the new times. In a culture of possibility, innovation is a renewable resource.

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## Selected resources

This piece draws on my academic work in innovation and some key sources are provided here. Crisis management especially in disaster management is also an area of interest and be readers can consider the co-authored piece. My work builds on systems change and philosophy from writers that offer pathways to make seismic shifts in ideologies, systems, and ethical frames. While the finance and investment community were mostly shell shocked, the ImpactAlpha media house reported on Covid 19 responses and did a great job of curation. There were also deep reflections from surprising quarters including the Financial Times. My work in Covid times included very rewarding collaborations with medical professionals and other scientists. Our joint efforts are included in this selection.

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2. Marcelle, G. (2023) [Innovation Possibilities in Time of Crisis](#)
3. Marcelle, G. (2020) [Building Crisis management Capabilities can save from future pandemic](#), interview in African Eye Report.
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5. Marcelle, Gillian M. 2017. "[Science, technology and innovation policy that is responsive to innovation performers](#)," Chapters, in: Stefan Kuhlmann & Gonzalo Ordóñez-Matamoros (ed.), Research Handbook on Innovation Governance for Emerging Economies, chapter 2, pages 59-86, Edward Elgar Publishing
6. Marcelle, Gillian M. 2004. [Technological Learning: A Strategic Imperative for Firms in the Developing World](#). Edward Elgar Publishing.
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8. Richards, Howard. 2020. [A Rationale for Unbounded Organization: A Path to Positive Peace](#). Transcend Media Service.
9. Lindner, Evelin G. 2020. [From humiliation to dignity: For a future of global solidarity – The Corona pandemic as an opportunity in the midst of Suffering](#). Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies. .
10. ImpactAlpha. 2020, March 24. [The Impact Alpha: Let's make this s\\*\\*\\*storm matter.](#)
11. ImpactAlpha. 2020, April 2. Amit Bouri: [Impact investors are stepping up to the challenges of COVID – and capitalism.](#)
12. Financial Times. 2020, April 3. [Virus lays bare the fragility of the social contract: Radical reforms are required to forge a society that will work for all.](#)