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Covid-19 and the Developmental State

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In a rapidly evolving situation, we asked a group of scholars what light they thought the covid-19 pandemic is throwing on variation in the capability of the state to act in the public interest in different countries. Here's what Stephan Haggard, Yixian Sun, Elsje Fourie, Ben Radley and Blessings Chinsinga said.

Stephan Haggard, University of California San Diego

I will consider the response of two countries—China and Korea—to start a discussion. Among the East Asian cases, it is often thought that China responded to covid-19 with the greatest alacrity, in part because of the forcefulness of the lockdown in Wuhan once it was ultimately implemented. Centralization of power, an encompassing party, and the ability of the party to mobilize and surveil were seen as pluses. In fact, this presumption is being challenged by outstanding reporting showing weaknesses in the early-warning system. The central government had established a reporting mechanism through which doctors and hospitals could directly transmit information on disease outbreak to health authorities in Beijing. However, local political authorities—apparently motivated by their own performance evaluations as well as fear of panic—inserted themselves into this process and screened judgments made by medical professionals; doctors were even summoned and forced to recant social media posts. The result was a fatal delay in awareness of the disease before the central government stepped in. Skepticism about the quality of data coming out of China is now increasing again because of the central government's reputational concerns. In my view, China's record will ultimately be judged as mixed.

In South Korea—a democracy—the government responded strongly in part because it had an adverse experience with MERS in 2012; it was the most seriously-affected country outside the Middle East. As a result, however, South Korea changed a number of laws governing access to phone and credit card data for public health purposes. Directly relevant to the developmental state concept, the country quickly centralized crisis response and rolled out a comprehensive strategy for containment. Within a week of the first case, the government also reached out to the local pharmaceutical sectors to incentivize development of testing capability. Korea did benefit—as China did—from the concentration of cases in a limited number of locations (particularly Taegu). But that concentration was itself the result of a strategy that focused on containment through extensive testing, quarantine where appropriate, and invasive monitoring of the movement of cases, down to the individual patient. This invasive monitoring would probably be impossible in the US.

A brief word on the United States. The fact that the political system is federal has had advantages and disadvantages. The response of the central government was slow, with mixed messaging about the seriousness of the virus; that alone is proving deadly, because once containment became impossible the only choice was costly mitigation. Like many countries, the administration created a centralized task force, but there is increasing evidence that the

advice of scientists had to break through resistance from Trump himself before messaging became more coherent. In the meantime, states varied widely in their responses, with states like California and Washington responding with alacrity to shut down spread, while the deep South—Trump states—and more unequal areas still slow in changing behavior. Federalism means that a consideration of the response needs to go state-by-state; we are about to see explosive growth in cases in those parts of the country that failed to act quickly. The need for stronger, more centralized crisis response mechanisms will clearly be part of the post-COVID19 political landscape in the US.

Yixian Sun, University of Bath

The covid-19 pandemic reminds us of the critical role of the state in mobilizing resources to tackle a crisis. While many observers attribute China's experience to its authoritarian rule, this was not a sufficient condition, rather the key success factor is state capacity to coordinate different actors across all levels of society for policy implementation. For example, once the Chinese government decided to lockdown Wuhan, on Jan 23rd, it mobilized resources across the whole country to support the region. Meanwhile, all other provinces soon introduced strict movement restrictions, with scrutiny and campaigns down to the community level. Such state capacity could also explain other successful cases, such as Korea and Taiwan, despite their slightly different approaches.

Elsje Fourie, University of Maastricht

 Covid-19 is indeed reinforcing how different the effects of seemingly uniform global threats can be from country to country. This has rightly put the spotlight back on the state. We should be careful not to see all variation in Coronavirus deaths as a result of state strategy or even capacity, because relatively little is still known about the virus, its epidemiology and its effects on different populations. Nevertheless, only states (almost by definition) have the tools and mandates to enact measures that can stem the virus, although of course cooperation between and across them will also be crucial. This has laid bare the weakness of ideologies—perhaps both on the left and on the right—that have overlooked their role as indispensable providers of public goods.

Blessings Chinsinga, University of Malawi

The actions taken by different states to deal with the covid-19 pandemic brings into question the very notion of public interest. Given disparate or differentiated needs of various segments of the population arising from their social standing in society, especially in middle and low income level countries, the measures taken should not and cannot homogenize public interest. The blanket measures being implemented, such as lockdowns, are marginalizing the less privileged sections of society. This invariably creates some fundamental tensions between what states are projecting as 'public interest' and individual rights and freedoms. Some of the measures, especially fiscal and monetary ones, are essentially populist which characteristically fragile economies cannot effectively support, but these regimes have appropriated the pandemic as an opportunity to shore up their faltering legitimacy.

How will the covid-19 experience affect public perception of state capability and their tolerance of how 'robustly' governments make use of digital technology in the exercise of power, including at the expense of private data protection rights?

Elsje Fourie

The crisis will also affect public perception of state capability to serve the public interest, including in the global South. Many seem to be responding to the crisis by accepting—and in some cases demanding—stronger state intervention. In my home country of South Africa, for example, the decision to institute one of the world's strictest lockdowns has been described as "a rare moment of national unity".

In the face of these trends, I worry that we might be confusing strong state power with smart state power. China seems to be the model that many have in mind, particularly in Africa where the country's recent provision of medical equipment has built on its already-considerable soft power. This is ironic, given the Chinese leadership's highly-damaging initial response to the virus. The longer that lockdowns go on and the more forcefully they are imposed, the more likely they are to backfire on states that cannot draw on vast reservoirs of public trust and legitimacy (as South Africa's use of rubber bullets against shoppers demonstrated recently).

It would make more sense in this crisis to look to countries like Taiwan, South Korea and Singapore for examples of effective statecraft, even if their specific strategies come too late for countries like South Africa and are beyond the capacity of countries like India. These former 'developmental states' have used transparent public information campaigns, targeted interventions, and specialised national agencies to combat the spread of Covid-19. The developmental state of the late 20th century was not built in times of prosperity and stability but rather developed through experimentation and state learning in periods of great uncertainty and resource constraints. Some interesting examples of developmentalism might therefore also emerge in the global South in the face of this common threat.

In considering the question of 'smart' statecraft, the question of surveillance technologies and other digital infringements on privacy inevitably arises. This is a delicate and difficult question that forces members of every society to wrestle with their relationship to government, as well as the trade-offs they are willing to make between personal freedoms and immediate physical security. The willingness of many publics to acquiesce to measures to contain Covid-19 that would have been highly contested even three months ago—such as the 'immunity passports' being considered in the UK and Germany—should not be simply written off as naïve. At the same time, the publics of many former developmental states such as Taiwan and South Korea have come to expect far greater levels of accountability and transparency from their governments than during their developmentalist heydays. It would be concerning to see these hard-won gains sacrificed in the service of permanent, amorphous crisis. Thus the developmental states offer us both a journey into national unity and a journey beyond it. States' forays into the increased collection, processing and use of our personal data should have clear expiration dates, be accompanied by public debate, and not be normalised.

Yixian Sun

In countries where the tide was quickly turned (e.g. China) I think people might become more willing to accept strong government control over society. My fear is that this change will leave less space for the important contribution of civil society to sustainable development. Meanwhile, in liberal democracies, public opinion on state capability might become further polarized as supporters of the incumbent become more willing to accept state interventions, while supporters of the opposition keep criticizing the abuse of state power.

The role of digitalized forms of government in this depends both on political culture and pre-existing regulatory frameworks. The failure of Europe and the US to use digital data to identify infected cases and introduce targeted quarantine at an early stage of the outbreak can partially be attributed to their strict regulations on personal data protection. Given that this issue has not become a more prominent subject of public debate in this crisis, I doubt that public opinion on data protection will shift dramatically in countries that already have strict regulations on data protection. However, in countries where regulations remain weak, the current crisis is likely to delay or prevent potential reforms to strengthen regulations.

Blessings Chinsinga

In countries like Malawi, the capability of the state to act in the public interest was already in serious doubt due to systemic corruption, executive arrogance and impunity. While the people still look up to the discredited state to protect them against covid-19, there is a great deal of fatalism and resignation especially in view of the devastating impact it is having in Western countries which are widely taken as benchmarks for progress and modernity in almost all facets of life. There is, however, a very strong feeling that the apparent devastating impact of covid-19 shall ignite a forceful discourse about the countries' abilities to fend for themselves in times of adversity including having a functioning public sector that can provide some semblance of protection and safety. Covid-19 could thus provide an opportunity to reinvest in the faltering public sectors in these countries.

What is the Covid-19 revealing about global convergence and prospects for enhanced international cooperation?

Ben Radley, London School of Economics

An increasingly popular view in development studies is that 21st century convergence and the 'rise of the South' challenge the intellectual and moral relevance of the historic North-South binary underlying the discipline. Yet by throwing new light on the continued existence of many of the old development challenges and constraints faced by the global South that are distinct from or more acute than those faced in the North, Covid-19 highlights its relevance more than ever.

Two of these constraints relate to financing and industrial capacity, both key prerequisites of an effective state response to the pandemic. Since the outbreak of Covid-19, low- and middle-income country (LMIC) governments have been hit by a triple whammy: record capital outflows, a steep fall in demand for primary commodity exports, and increased demand for imports of the medical equipment and supplies required to confront the virus. This has, in turn, exacerbated already strained LMIC balance of payments positions, depleting scarce foreign exchange reserves and threatening to drive inflation. Under immense strain already, 85 LMIC governments have approached the IMF for emergency assistance in recent weeks, and Zambia and Ecuador are on the brink of default.

By contrast, high-income country (HIC) governments are better financed to begin with, have been the beneficiaries of most of the LMIC capital outflows, have more diversified and domestically-oriented economies, and are better medically equipped to respond. Where HIC governments do face medical provisioning shortages, they have been quick to direct their manufacturing sectors to fill these gaps and ban exports of critical medical supplies. LMIC states, then, might not be able to access these critical supplies at all.

Variation in state and industrial capabilities have long sustained and reproduced North-South inequalities and inequities. In a post-covid-19 world, it seems increasingly difficult to maintain a position that this historically rooted bifurcation is an outdated remnant of the past. On the contrary, the divergence has never felt stronger.

Yixian Sun

The COVID-19 also casts doubts on the existing global governance system and reveals many obstacles to international cooperation in a time of crisis. The World Health Organization (WHO) has been at the centre of the storm since January such that many people blame the organization for not preventing the global outbreak of the virus. But the criticisms that the WHO has received simply prove the very challenges facing any multilateral institution attempting to ensure coordination and cooperation among different nation states. Moreover, the tensions and even a "blame war" between China and the US during this crisis reminds us that politics never disappear, even in such an unprecedented crisis in human history, and such political struggles may prevent states from achieving the level of cooperation necessary to save more lives. While we still hope that countries will better collaborate with each other in this crisis, the experience in the past two months already suggests that our governance system needs a fundamental reform to cope with any crises on a global scale.

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