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*Towards ICCS 2022*

## **COVID-19's Testing of Religious Roles**

*By Katherine Marshall*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*Societies across the world are tested by the COVID-19 pandemic in countless ways. Deep cracks in social cohesion have become visible in many countries, and many fall along religious lines. Post-COVID-19 policy needs to address robustly what inclusion means both for government policy and for each society.*

### **COMMENTARY**

REFLECTIONS ABOUT the course of the COVID-19 pandemic often evoke metaphors of storms and boats. These images highlight two realities that tug in quite different directions: The first conjures up the common, shared threats nations face, buffeted by powerful often unpredictable forces of nature. COVID-19 strikes everywhere, everyone, crossing boundaries of place and class.

But the storm image also conveys stark differences in the pandemic's impact and the deep inequalities within and among nations. These shape very different capacities to withstand shocks and different responses to them. A yacht generally fares better than a tiny skiff and while the wealthy seem to do well, the less affluent suffer more. Overall, acute poverty and hunger have increased sharply. The dual, seemingly contradictory commentaries highlight stark and pragmatic choices for governments in the COVID-19 recovery.

### **Social Cohesion as a Central Challenge**

The COVID-19 crisis tests contemporary societies and governance in countless ways. Some challenges are new, others seen more clearly in the light of a crisis that

highlights differences of leadership and social responses. Inequalities take on new importance as do unresolved conflicts and tensions.

Interreligious relationships can reinforce cooperation and protection of needy groups, smoothing turbulent waters, or they can stir up squalls of anger and discrimination. The challenges are eminently practical and pragmatic but also deeply values-linked and ethical — global leaders speak often of inadequate and unequal global and national responses as a moral catastrophe.

A much-discussed policy objective — inclusion to build social cohesion — takes on new significance in pandemic times, as public health policies and measures that demand social acceptance become matters of life and death. Different societies and nations have fared very differently in these extraordinary crises. Societies marked by strong cohesion and those with leaders trusted by their constituents have responded better than those riven by divisions.

Within societies, different segments of communities have faced different challenges, rendered more acute by the economic fallout of emergency measures. The impact of the COVID-19 crises on, for example, domestic violence and child abuse speaks to often hidden tensions within societies.

Questions as to how and why societies have responded well or less well are fundamental as we look, hopefully with clear-eyed vision, not only to rebuilding better but to rethinking and reimagining future reforms.

Social cohesion emerges as a central analytic issue but also challenges strategic policy. Some COVID-19 “success” stories have built policy actions (mandates for vaccination, shutdown regulations) on the strengths of homogenous societies. Countries like Denmark have been blessed with general compliance and support.

There are other, perhaps fewer cases, where diverse societies have displayed capacities to come together because they buy, in meaningful ways, into a narrative of shared common interests. On the surface, authoritarian systems have forced compliance with positive short-term results but uncertain longer-term prospects.

### **Public Health Restrictions and Religious Diversity**

Religious diversity is an important testing ground for societies facing COVID-19 challenges and one that points to significant policy challenges looking ahead. There is first the question of public authority to regulate religious practice of various sorts.

Some religious gatherings early in the pandemic were tied directly to the spread of the virus, sparking tensions around resulting restrictive measures. With wide-ranging lockdowns and travel restrictions the focus shifted to how religious freedom clashed with public health responsibilities.

Arrangements for faith-government relationships, often legal but not uncommonly tacit and shifting, came under renewed focus. Where close relationships characterised governance, consultations about measures and cooperation on, for example,

addressing misinformation, have shown positive results. Elsewhere politicisation of relationships between religious groups has been a significant stumbling block.

Inter- and intra-religious relationships have shown new strains in several societies. The history of pandemics and the fears they have always evoked help explain increases in discrimination and scapegoating of different communities. Divisions and inequalities among groups, sometimes divided along religious lines, have shown signs of being accentuated.

Simmering if barely apparent conflicts, discordant objectives, unhealed past wounds, gaps in civic education, and weak leadership have contributed to anti-public health demonstrations and balky populations. The hardships of economic fallout from the public health crisis (Nigeria, South Africa, for example) and COVID-19 specific measures (cremation orders in Sri Lanka, for example) have heightened social tensions.

Going forward, rethinking, and reimagining social cohesion is needed. The passage of time may have also eroded mutual acceptance and co-existence built on personal friendship and understanding among the respective community leaderships.

### **Looking Ahead: Need for Strategic Reset**

Bolder approaches to social cohesion could have positive results in the post-COVID-19 era. It is necessary to move into a more active co-engagement phase between communities rather than keep to the passive co-existence model.

The relationships between government and religious communities deserve a strategic reset in many countries. The pandemic should not lead to tighter restrictions on freedom of religion or belief. Faith groups can be mobilised for their humanitarian instincts to strengthen disaster preparedness (for pandemics and other natural disasters). Issues of family law and human rights should be backed by practical implementation of policy and legislation.

Questions as to which groups are represented at which tables need new approaches. Are women and youth sufficiently represented in religious establishments and their outreach programmes?

Educational policy should more deliberately promote and include civic responsibilities, religious literacy, and religiously-run educational systems that promote integration. Student relationships that foster knowledge of other communities and inclusion across social, economic, and religious divides can play major roles in advancing the goals of inclusion.

Tensions among religious communities that the pandemic has highlighted merit attention by the wider society – beyond the traditional inter-faith groups and advocates or activists for social cohesion. Timely intervention by policy makers would be helpful.

The immediate and urgent challenge of achieving widespread vaccination against COVID-19 can and should engage civil society groups including religious institutions and leaders. Programmes that promote inter-group cooperation must be strongly

encouraged as they could advance efforts to address the COVID-19 pandemic and point the way to greater engagement in the future.

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