



Leadership challenges in a COVID-19 environment

By Susana Malcorra

Sometime during the V century BC Sophocles wrote his play *Antigone*. Among the most quoted lines of this magnificent work of art are those of the chorus' response to Creon's final desperation, popularly translated as "Tomorrow is tomorrow. Future cares have future cures, and we must mind today." But, as we know, every aphorism hides a tension, a mystery, a riddle that puts the burden back on those who imagined that they had found a final answer to their inquiry. Thus, while most would agree that we must mind today, it is not always agreed by all on which of the many constituents that comprise our complex today we must focus. Even those who agree

on the priority of issues often disagree on the actions to be taken. And, to make things even more challenging, we know that "future cares" are quite often the result of today's disregards.

Thus, while the devastating consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic should be paramount in the list of what we must mind today, we do not see a coherent response from world leaders (I will use the word "leader" in this article following the common usage in the media these days, meaning a person in a high decision-making position regardless of his or her actual leadership skills). As I write in January 2021, the

statistics of the pandemic show more than 2 million people dead and more than 95 million people infected, and the world is far from having the spread under control.

At the same time, it is undeniable that the first responsibility of leadership in any country is to preserve the lives of their populations. While we know that some countries have not ratified the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the contentious issues that caused this situation never included the right to life.

Therefore, from the perspective of the basic human right to life, we must admit that the world leaders are not responding as could be expected. The World Health Organization is at the lead on what should be done from the viewpoint of preserving lives in the pandemic. It has published a wealth of documents outlining operational planning guidelines for many different areas. Country leadership has the double task of adapting and implementing these guidelines to their local realities and, at the same time, to strengthen their essential health services. As WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus affirmed at the early months of the pandemic: “The best defence against any outbreak is a strong health system.”

There are two types of reasons often cited to explain why some governments are falling short of their responsibilities to protect lives. One of them is the “willingness” of the population to accept protection protocols including confinement. The other, is the need to preserve the economy. I would suggest that these two types of reasons are so intertwined that they should be analysed together. To confirm this approach, it is only necessary to confront the economic level of those who publicly protest against protection protocols as an infringement on their freedom, to the economic level of the vast majority of people infected.

The effects of the pandemic follow a familiar pattern: it disproportionately affects poor people. People who are forced to inhabit accommodations in which protection measures are very difficult to implement

and to sustain, to survive doing jobs in which required isolation and distancing are impossible, and to commute using public transportation usually crowded beyond COVID-19 safety recommendation. According to the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA):

The COVID-19 outbreak affects all segments of the population and is particularly detrimental to members of those social groups that are in the most vulnerable situations. It continues to affect populations, including people living in poverty, older persons, persons with disabilities, youth, and indigenous peoples. Early evidence indicates that the health and economic impacts of the virus are being borne disproportionately by poor people. For example, homeless people, because they may be unable to safely shelter in place, are highly exposed to the danger of the virus. People without access to running water, refugees, migrants, or displaced persons also stand to suffer disproportionately both from the pandemic and its aftermath – whether due to limited movement, fewer employment opportunities, increased xenophobia etc.

On the other hand, the repetitive pattern of the many protests in many countries against safety measures, from the attempted assaults on parliaments to the burning of virus protection masks, suggests, at least partially, a hidden attempt to impose on the general public an opposition to the measures that

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governments should take. In the words of the United Nations Secretary-General, “we must come to the aid of the ultra-vulnerable – millions upon millions of people who are least able to protect themselves.” Reducing income inequality is at the heart of the possibility to aid the ultra-vulnerable, and those who protest against protective protocols, knowingly or not, are really protesting against changes in the distribution of wealth and in favour of maintaining acquired privileges.

In the Fall 2020 Issue of the Finance and Development magazine of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Nobel Prize winner economist Joseph Stiglitz clearly identifies the problem from the economic standpoint: “Weakening constraints on corporate power; minimizing the bargaining power of workers; and eroding rules governing the exploitation of consumers, borrowers, students, and workers have all worked together to create a poorer-performing economy marked by greater rent seeking and greater inequality.”

Stiglitz also defines the key guidelines of how this economic transformation needs to happen: “we need monetary policies that focus more on ensuring full employment of all groups and not just on inflation; bankruptcy laws that are better balanced, replacing those that became too creditor-friendly and provided too little accountability for bankers who engaged in predatory lending; and corporate governance laws that recognize the importance of all stakeholders, not just shareholders. The rules governing globalization must do more than just serve corporate interests; workers and the environment have to be protected.

Labour legislation needs to do a better job of protecting workers and providing greater scope for collective action.”

Mr. Stiglitz then alerts that these set of measures, transformative as they are, will not be enough if major shifts are not also implemented in wealth distribution, namely in the tax systems.

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This is excellent. However, we have learned that to “mind today” we need to understand where we come from, we need to remember what happened in the past and what were the facts that contributed to our current reality. Therefore, when we consider the impact of the COVID-19 crisis and think the actions for the future, we must put all recommendations into perspective. Let’s then review some of the declarations and decisions made by international actors in recent previous crisis and the results obtained.

Using the year 2000 as an initial point, I would like to start by recalling Secretary-General Kofi Annan’s report dated March 2000, *We the Peoples. The Role of the United Nations in the 21st Century*. At that time the greatest perceived threat on humanity was globalization. “The central challenge we face today is to ensure that globalization becomes a positive force for all the world’s people, instead of leaving billions of them behind in squalor” is the way the report put it.

In the year 2000, globalization was seen as an opportunity and as a risk at the same time. Poverty was at the heart of the risks, and the language was quite similar to the one used today to think of the post-COVID scenario:

First, the benefits and opportunities of globalization remain highly concentrated among a relatively small number of countries and are spread unevenly within them. Second, in recent decades an imbalance has emerged

between successful efforts to craft strong and well-enforced rules facilitating the expansion of global markets, while support for equally valid social objectives, be they labour standards, the environment, human rights or poverty reduction, has lagged behind.

Then, in an unusually strong language for a UN Secretary-General, the report includes a sentence that still resonates strongly twenty years later: “Even in the most powerful countries, people wonder who is in charge, worry for their jobs and fear that their voices are drowned out in globalization’s sweep.”

This and similar documents prepared the way for the Millennium Summit in September 2000 that adopted the United Nations Millennium Declaration. The heads of State and Government jointly declared:

We believe that the central challenge we face today is to ensure that globalization becomes a positive force for all the world’s people. For while globalization offers great opportunities, at present its benefits are very unevenly shared, while its costs are unevenly distributed. We recognize that developing countries and countries with economies in transition face special difficulties in responding to this central challenge. Thus, only through broad and sustained efforts to create a shared future, based upon our common humanity in all its diversity, can globalization be made fully inclusive and equitable. These efforts must include policies and measures, at the global level, which correspond to the needs of developing countries and economies in transition and are formulated and implemented with their effective participation.

In the same document the heads of State and Government boldly committed to a series of concrete actions to ensure peace, security and disarmament; development and poverty eradication; protect our common environment; promote respect for human rights, democracy and good

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governance; protect the vulnerable; meet the special needs of Africa; and, strengthen the United Nations. As we know, the Millennium Development Goals were derived from this declaration and adopted unanimously by all Member States who committed to achieve these objectives by the year 2015.

This commitment was reaffirmed several times. In particular in the General Assembly Resolution of July 2012: “We reaffirm our commitment to make every effort to accelerate the achievement of the internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015.”

Were the MDGs achieved? In 2015 the United Nations published The Millennium Development Goals Report. The report presents “profound achievements” in the eight areas defined for the goals. But the next section of the document is entitled: “Despite many successes, the poorest and most vulnerable people are being left behind”. It then develops this concept under five subtitles: Gender inequality persists; Big gaps exist between the poorest and richest households, and between rural and urban areas; Climate change and environmental degradation undermine progress achieved, and poor people suffer the most; Conflicts remain the biggest threat to human development; and, Millions of poor people still live in poverty and hunger, without access to basic services. In spite of progress made, the MDGs were not achieved.

In reality, by the time of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), in June 2012, it was evident that the heads of State and Government would not be able to fulfil their commitments. Member States agreed to launch a process to create a new set of goals, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and decided “to establish an inclusive and transparent intergovernmental process on sustainable development goals that is open to all stakeholders, with a view to developing global sustainable development goals to be agreed by the General Assembly.” As a result, in the following year the General Assembly established a 30-members Open Working Group (OWG) to lead this process.

At the same time, in July 2012, the Secretary-General had announced the establishment of a 27-members High-Level Panel of eminent persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda. The work of this group culminated in a report presented on May 2013 that called for “five big, transformative shifts”: 1. Leave no one behind; 2. Put sustainable development at the core; 3. Transform economies for jobs and inclusive Growth; 4. Build peace and effective, open and accountable institutions for all; and, 5. Forge a new global partnership.

As is well known, all these efforts led to the adoption, in September 2015, of the General Assembly resolution called Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The new Agenda included the 17 SDGs and once again it expressed a serious commitment: “On behalf of the peoples we serve, we have adopted a historic decision on a comprehensive, far-reaching and people-centred set of universal and transformative Goals and targets. We commit ourselves to working tirelessly for the full implementation of this Agenda by 2030.”

The foreword to The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020, signed

by the UN Secretary-General, expresses: “The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020 brings together the latest data to show us that, before the COVID-19 pandemic, progress remained uneven and we were not on track to meet the Goals by 2030.”

After this rapid review, it seems fair to conclude that we come from a past filled with good intentions supported by uplifting rhetoric and expressions of commitment that are invariably not honoured. We have seen many crises. We have recognized in each one that the most vulnerable suffer the most and have designed plans to change. But, in spite of partial improvements evident in some indicators, the deep causes that are key constituents of all our crises are not touched. Sometimes, after the crisis that they have caused is somehow controlled, the causes come out even reinforced, as the continuously widening gap between rich and poor after the 2008 financial crisis exemplify.

It is evident that we do not live in the “best of all possible worlds” as Leibniz claimed. Analysing the text of the General Assembly’s resolutions during its 75 years of work, it is clear the effort to express the need to change unjust social and economic realities that still remain mostly the result of the suffering of slaves, the genocide of indigenous populations, and the colonial exploitation. But these are the rules of the game that are so difficult to change.

Far from being a source of doubt or discouragement, this realization is a confirmation of the fundamental role of the United Nations and of the need to continue working to bring about the transformations that the peoples desire. As written in the We the Peoples report mentioned above, the UN exists for, and must serve, the needs and hopes of people everywhere. The UN is a uniquely useful forum—for sharing information, conducting negotiations, elaborating norms and voicing expectations, coordinating the behaviour of states and other actors, and pursuing common plans of action.

One lesson that can be learned from the review of the past is that those who benefit from the current social and economic structures have been capable –by several means– of halting profound transformations. While studies, discussions and resolutions on the need of structural changes are always useful and necessary, it is urgent to concentrate on smaller improvements that will not generate unsurmountable resistance.

Of course, in the current environment, the COVID-19 crisis must be dealt with urgently, if this can be said after almost a year of suffering its unremitting harm. This means first and foremost caring for the infected and to stop the spread of the virus. Financial resources are necessary to upgrade health care systems and to accelerate the availability of vaccines for all. These activities must be coordinated by the governments under their responsibility for the health of the population, and financed by exceptional tax on the wealthiest. This is already under way in some countries, but needs to be reinforced and replicated elsewhere. The discussion of a deeper change of tax systems towards a more just distribution must be postponed. The need now is urgent and evident.

In terms of the continued spread of the virus and its mutations, urgent temporary measures need to be considered. Among them is the establishment of measures aimed at reducing the chances of infection of workers who commute using public transportation. Together with the transformation of all possible activities into on-line modalities and the need for institutions and companies to properly justify the need of presential type of activities, possible measures to be considered include the establishment of reduced shifts for workers so that peak-hours would be eliminated.

The economic consequences for people whose livelihood are affected, in particular the cases of job-loss and small business

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owners, should be compensated with universal incomes financed through exceptional tax.

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These changes should be channelled and implemented through the democratic system at all levels of society. This is fundamental to give the temporary exceptions the proper required standing, and to strengthen democratic systems so much under attack all over the world these days through the manipulation of information using traditional and new channels of communication, and the intentional division of the social fabric propagating a culture of fear and hate.

In our “minding today” we are so far focusing on the challenges posed by the pandemic as this is affecting the lives of all of us in an immediate manner. But the other great challenges remain. Inequality, poverty and hunger; lack of access to basic services, decent work, health and education; abuses of human rights and lack of solid justice and institutions; and

gender inequality, are still pervasive and compounded by the global risks of nuclear war and the destruction of the environment. In addition, the centralization and lack of public discussion of the goals of scientific research and of technological applications are creating new risks to humanity. Many philosophers, notably Éric Sadin, Yuk Hui, Helen Hester or Nick Srnicek, are proposing new ways of looking at technology and offering views for action.

As already stated in the We the Peoples report, “the United Nations is more than a mere tool, however. As its Charter makes clear, the United Nations was intended to introduce new principles into international relations, making a qualitative difference to their day-to-day conduct.” Twenty

years later, the United Nations is the only organization capable of convening the world leaders and offer a new set of ideas. The challenge for world leaders in all their capacities is to support the role of the United Nations with total sincerity and humility, beyond great words. If world leaders are not up to this challenge, we might face extremely hard times for the world for, as the chorus reflects in the closing lines of Antigone: “great words of haughty men exact in retribution blows as great.”



Susana Malcorra

Susana Malcorra became Dean of the IE School of Public and Global Affairs in March 2020.

She was Minister of Foreign Affairs and Worship of the Argentine Republic from December 2015 to July 2017. After her resignation as Foreign Minister, she was appointed Minister Advisor by President Mauricio Macri and, in that capacity, she was the Chairperson of the WTO Ministerial Conference (MC11) hosted by Argentina in December 2017. She became Dean of the IE School of Public and Global Affairs in March 2020.

Minister Malcorra holds a degree in Electronics Engineering from the University of Rosario and has 25 years' professional experience in business in technology sector (IBM and Telecom Argentina). She began her corporate career as a Systems Engineer at IBM eventually moving up to CEO at Telecom Argentina, the third-largest company in Argentina at the time.

Undertaking these responsibilities gave her deep insight into the management of large organizations, and she successfully led complex change processes at the same time. Ms. Malcorra left Telecom in 2002 after deciding to seek opportunities in the field of non-profit organizations, which she achieved in early 2004 by joining the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP). She served as COO (Chief Operating Officer) of the WFP—an opportunity to put her experience and energy at the service of a new cause, superior in meaning and in magnitude.

In May 2008, United Nations Secretary-General appointed Ms. Malcorra Under-Secretary-General for the recently created Department of Field Support, where she was charged with providing logistical, communications, personnel, and financial support services to Peacekeeping Operations overseeing a budget of eight billion dollars.

In April 2012, Ms. Malcorra was appointed Chief of Staff to the Secretary-General. Thus, in addition to her long career as an executive, she has invaluable experience in the diplomatic field including a range of activities from handling negotiations with various countries (Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, Chad, Somalia or Afghanistan, among others) to the approval by the General Assembly of strategic, financial and budgetary matters involving over 9 billion dollars. Among other specific tasks, Ms. Malcorra coordinated the Mission on the Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons and the first Health Mission for Ebola Emergency Response in West Africa. After leaving the Government of the Argentine Republic, Ms. Malcorra has been affiliated with multiple Think-tanks, Foundations and NGO's related to matters of democracy, global governance, leadership and gender.

She's a member of several Boards of both business and non-profit organizations.