

Learning from Failure

The experiences gathered during COVID-19 can help us prevent a next crisis caused by climate change

BY ELLEN JOHNSON SIRLEAF

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating and unprecedented impact on our globalized world. After nearly two years of seemingly unrelenting shocks, one conclusion is abundantly clear: no nation can respond to the pandemic on its own, regardless of size or power.

As former president of Liberia, I know all too well that sincere promises of ‘never again’ were made by national leaders and the international community after Ebola struck my country and our neighbours. But despite a temporary surge in attention on strengthening health systems and global preparedness, little was done to address the more fundamental shortcomings in the international system.

As co-chair of the Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response over the past year, I concluded with other panel members that COVID-19 went from being a localized outbreak to a pandemic because of myriad failures and gaps in pandemic preparedness and response. At the outset, there was a failure to learn from the past. Today, learning the right lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic can not only help us to better respond to future pandemics but also to tackle another existential challenge we face: the climate crisis.

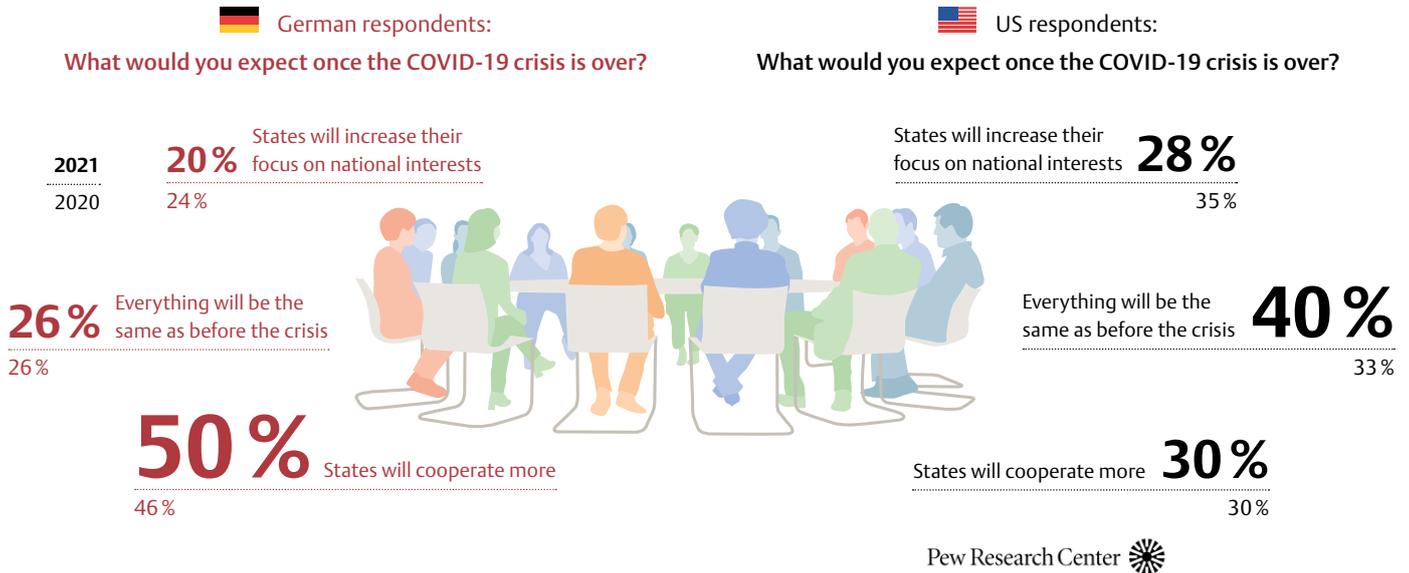
When addressing future challenges, we must first acknowledge that they are always multidimen-

sional. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, is not only a health crisis. It is also a crisis of human rights, equality, justice and sustainability.

With more than 242 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 and more than 4.9 million deaths reported to the World Health Organization, this pandemic is an ongoing disaster. It could have been averted if the countries of the world had heeded the many warnings and prepared their health and surveillance systems – and then, when the outbreak began, if they had moved together in mutual transparency and solidarity. This experience must alert us to better prepare for the consequences of climate change that are no longer preventable. Mitigation efforts will only be successful if states take a collective, proactive and long-term approach. This means rich countries finally delivering on their \$100 billion pledge on climate finance to the developing world, and support for all countries to develop along zero-carbon pathways through technology transfer.

Vaccine equity has failed

The failure of rich countries to support true vaccine equity has deepened the trust deficit with the nations of the Global South. Yet, we will need trusting international relationships to share responsibilities and secure a successful outcome of future climate summits. Germany’s new government has an



important responsibility to honour collective climate finance promises to poorer nations by scaling up budget allocations and growing the share for adaptation to 50 per cent. The lack of preparedness faced during the COVID-19 crisis, affects the most vulnerable in our societies the most. During the pandemic, tens of millions more people have been pushed into extreme poverty. Women and girls have suffered a disproportionate impact: sexual and reproductive health services have been disrupted; millions of girls whose education has been terminated were put at risk of early forced marriage; and there have been sharp increases in reported domestic violence around the world. We know that the climate change also has a disproportionate and deleterious impact on women and girls, particularly in the developing world. But women’s front-line experience and resilience affords them valuable perspectives on how to adapt to climate change, which should be heeded by policymakers at the national and global level.

Moreover, the pandemic has proved the relevance of science and research. The speed at which the virus genome was sequenced and vaccines were developed was unprecedented in human history, and a tribute to the dedication and collaborative spirit of the world’s scientists. Respecting scientific experts and evidence is similarly crucial for tackling the climate crisis, as is sustained efforts

to tackle ignorance and malign disinformation on social media and other platforms.

Across income levels and political systems, we have found examples of countries that responded well in the first 90 days of the pandemic. The defining factor was competence, not wealth. Those that heeded the lessons of the past, prepared well, were guided by evidence, and engaged communities in the response through transparent communication tended to be more successful.

Competence matters, not wealth

Today there is a choice – to carry on with business as usual, with the inevitability of a future pandemic and climate catastrophe, or to make real and lasting change. All of us owe it to future generations to show courage and resolve, and to build a better multilateral system that can meet current and future threats to deliver lasting peace, health and prosperity. German leadership in the race to net-zero carbon emissions and true vaccine equity will set a commendable example for the rest of Europe and the world to follow.

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