

## **TRADE-OFFS AND DECISION MAKING IN COVID-19**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The outbreak of COVID-19 has considerably caused a massive destruction of human health and social and economic activity resulting in highly uncertain situations of fear and distress among the masses as they are being forced to accept exceptional voluntary or the involuntary quarantine measures. It is one of the largest public health crises that occurred in the century after the Spanish flu of 1918-20, profoundly impacting the people's daily activities throughout the globe (Lades *et al.*, 2020). The emergence of COVID transformed the nature of daily routines of people, restricting their movements and social interactions across the world, with governments continuously requesting them to self-isolate and practice social distancing measures. The onset of pandemic created a confusion system among governments which persuaded them to take impossibly difficult decisions that preserve the public health and the national economy simultaneously. It left the governments exposed to a dichotomy, leaving them with two options (1) To put drastic medical restrictions to contain the virus spread at the cost of national economy. (2) To allow the international trade and economy to remain open at the cost of people's health. Both these choices are considerably challenging as opting any of them does not provide a complete resolution to the problem. It was the need of the hour to adopt a holistic approach to formulate policies to end the crisis and work together in an interactive environment which comprised both the epidemiological and socio-economic features to understand the trade-offs involved.

### **DECISION MAKING AND TRADE OFF IN COVID**

When it comes to public health measures political science is in no position to pass judgements, all they can do is emphasise on effective and quick decision making to manage the crisis and enable the difficult changes in policies over the period (Lacey, 2020). It is crucial that governments recognize multifaceted aspects of the pandemic and consult professionals from all health sectors including child care, mental health and also the non-health experts to forecast the pandemic's trajectory (Weible *et al.*, 2020). The effects of social isolation can go far beyond health as people are not able to continue their life as usual. Sudden closure of schools, universities and offices and start of remote working could cost people, students with reduced productivity, increased mental health issues, increased screen

time hours centring to an inescapable trade –off (Wharton, 2020). As the pandemic set in there were biases involved with governments firstly overconfidence, people's perception of COVID was it won't cause much disruption and if it occurs the governments were in a position to handle it (Chaxel, 2020). Second comes a confirmatory bias or processing information in a way that governments would like to be true (Chaxel, 2020). The initial selection of information that proved virus won't spread to Europe and stay in Asia, trapped by past learning's, however on the contrary Europe became one of the worst affected places in 2020. The governments presently are however in a better position to weather the storm of COVID than they were in early 2020 (Chaxel, 2020).

Three major steps have been identified which result in an impactful decision making namely situation framing, information gathering and coming to conclusions. The situation framing varies from country to country and governments how they lay down their prioritization list based on human, economic, financial or individual freedom dimensions (Chaxel, 2020). For instance there is a huge difference in the COVID framing policy of US which prioritized individual freedom over closing the on-going economy and where people perceived strict lockdown and quarantine measures as violence to their basic human rights. Initial negligence on such delicate issue resulted into massive disruption of both the economy and public health of the US with more than 500K deaths and 30 million cases and leaving millions of Americans unemployed it remains the worst affected country by the pandemic. On the other hand country like Taiwan began testing and tracing the citizens returning from Wuhan, China the very day 31st December, 2019 when government were warned about the then unknown virus in China. These proactive approaches taken by governments first led to suppression and then complete eradication of the virus from their geography. The same policies of first suppression and eradication of the virus was adopted by countries like New Zealand and Australia which completely shut down their borders for the foreign travellers and imposed strict quarantine measures for the returnees (Manipis et al., 2021). Considering the dynamic behaviour of COVID and with new information coming up every day there are possibilities that the interpretation of same information is different to different experts and which can persuade governments to make assumptions to support decision making in uncertainty (Chaxel, 2020). Therefore it is crucial to work out a process on the basis of information gathered and learning from the past pandemics to avoid unreasonable conclusions (Chaxel, 2020).

With inconsistent information available it is utmost important to make public feel assure, make them understand what is happening and insist on maintaining transparency in communication of decisions. For more than month's media has covered news about COVID alerting people to follow safety guidelines and providing information about stats of the worlds affected areas. However with so much of negative news trying to alert people it can make public feel more scared and push them into severe mental health conditions like depression, anxiety. The leadership of governments has to ensure the decisions communicated are authentic and at the same time don't provide over reassurance as governments are themselves are not aware where the pandemic will lead to in the future instead focus on encouraging people to follow safety measures like washing hands, wearing masks and act with patience (PAHO, 2019). For a developing country like India ,where more than 60% of population resides in villages the immediate lockdown put thousands of people unemployed and people came in huge crowds on roads to walk thousands of kilometres on foot to reach their hometowns becoming the potential carriers of virus to villages which were relatively free from COVID(Padmanabhan, 2021). This high opposition of lockdown would have been avoided if governments had communicated the consequences of the decision before hand and made the people understand why such drastic steps being taken, people would have been more prepared to accept the situation.

## **TRADE OFF WITH FACE MASK AND PEOPLE BEHAVIOUR**

Due to the lack of feasibility under numerous medical and social situations like hospitals, public transportation, maintaining social distancing can be a tedious task(Akhtar *et al.*, 2020). Face masks at such scenarios prove to be an incentive to the people who can now more confidently and safely attend public places. The initial recommendation was masks to be worn by healthcare workers to avoid supply shortage to the healthcare workers. However, WHO new guidelines stressed the need to wear masks by the general public as well which would also eventually support in lifting lockdowns and return to normalcy. The mandate use of mask showed positive effects in reducing the transmission in various parts of UK (Toxvaerd, 2020).

With lack of evidence present initially, it was difficult to draw a conclusion whether masks actually reduced the transmission of virus. The possibility of people's behavioural changes was one reason why government was reluctant to mandate the use of masks as wearing face coverings people might become less cautious, might not wash hands or follow basic hygiene

or adhere to social distancing measures (Toxvaerd, 2020). All these behavioural changes by public could backfire the government's efforts to contain the virus.

## **TRADE-OFF IN VACCINATION**

At present after more than a year suffering from COVID a number of potential vaccines namely COVAX, Pfizer, Moderna and other vaccines have come up which is a major breakthrough in the fight against the COVID(Williams *et al.*, 2021). The approval of vaccines comes with a lot of risk and puts governments in a dilemma in approving the safest vaccines and ensuring their delivery at a reasonable cost especially in the low income countries. The structural demand of vaccine is dynamic and might show changes for the better or worse. The vaccine has to ensure that it offers more potential benefits to the people against the disease than risk, evidence of which must be clearly visible through data gathered by clinical trials (Saldaña, 2020). No vaccine offers 100% protection against the disease even the vaccines released Pfizer was 90% effective, Moderna was 94 % effective, even after this much success ratio there have been cases of side effects like mild fever, allergy which are normal after a vaccine shot (Saldaña, 2020). Vaccine acceptance by people is another issue government faces , a prioritization list of people receiving vaccines starting from frontline workers can help governments gain people's confidence in taking vaccines(Williams *et al.*, 2021).Although, WHO is working hard to make the vaccines available to the masses however, there are significant challenges in shipping ,storing and freezing the vaccines. People seem to be still hesitant taking the shots primarily because of the limited time frame the vaccines are prepared in, the side effects after taking it especially to those who already have a prior illness like diabetes or any other (Saldaña, 2020).

Virus mutation with virus becoming more deadly and transmissible is other aspect of the pandemic seen from the cases found in UK, strain found in Africa, Germany, and France which can prove to be a threat on the effectiveness to the currently developed vaccines, thus research and clinical trials of the present vaccines will continue to prevail over the period. Even with mass vaccination programs' going on in the world it does not completely eliminate the threat from COVID, social distancing, mass testing, contact tracing will continue to prevail till the effect of vaccines get visible on larger public. It is crucial that governments ensure fair resource allocations and infrastructure support to carry out the mass vaccination programs across the world.

## **CONCLUSION**

Global knowledge revolving around COVID 19 epidemiology has continued to enlarge since the onset of the pandemic. Numerous theories and discussions have come up identifying the classes that are more vulnerable to contracting the disease mainly being the elders or people with prior health conditions whereas children below 18 possessing a relatively low infection and mortality rate. With an on-going tsunami of suffering, apart from of working out ways to conserve the economy and public health at the same time and getting back to reopening communities it was more important to understand and implement the transition process to adapt to a new COVID normal life or in other words open the economy in a smart way. This is a fight between saving lives and avoiding crushed livelihoods. Even with mass vaccinations in action it is not certain that vaccines would completely eradicate the virus people would still have to maintain social distancing and wear masks for the foreseeable future. The virus has shown different behaviours and strains in different parts of the world thus the risk of future waves will always remain a threat to the population.

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