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The stark choices in a COVID-dominated world: Why interdisciplinarity is indispensable now

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Igniting Minds.

Outline

- The crisis
- The impact
- Solution and Decisions
- Interdisciplinarity and its relevance
- The way forward?

The Crisis



- Crisis of knowledge
- Crisis of life
- Crisis of livelihoods
- Crisis of the state
- Crisis of voice
- Crisis of leadership
- Crisis of human relations
- Crisis of faith/spirituality
- Crisis of mental health
- Crisis of empathy

“A crisis of civilization”
(Tagore’s famous essay)

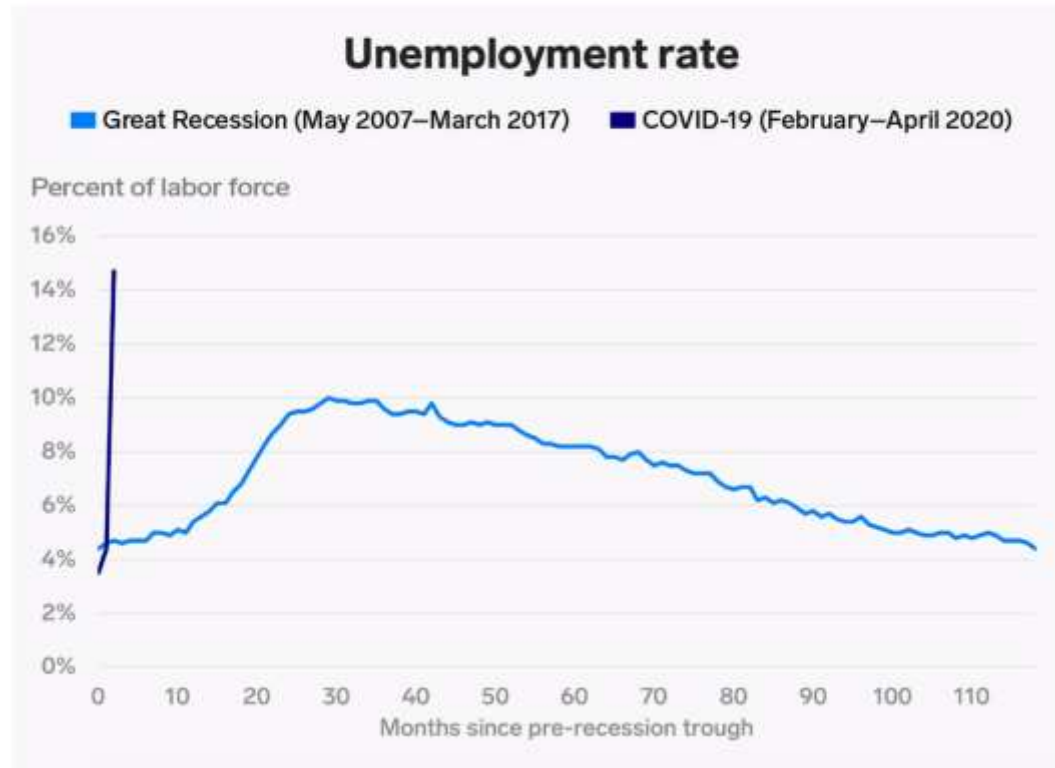
Should we have seen it coming?

The impact: unemployment, poverty, hunger

- Global per capita income expected to fall 4%
- COVID could push between 40 and 60 million into extreme poverty this year, with sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia hardest hit (World Bank)
- Half of working people could lose their jobs within the next few months, and the virus could cost the global economy US\$10 trillion (International Labour Organization estimate)
- 265 million people will face crisis levels of hunger unless direct action is taken (World Food Programme)

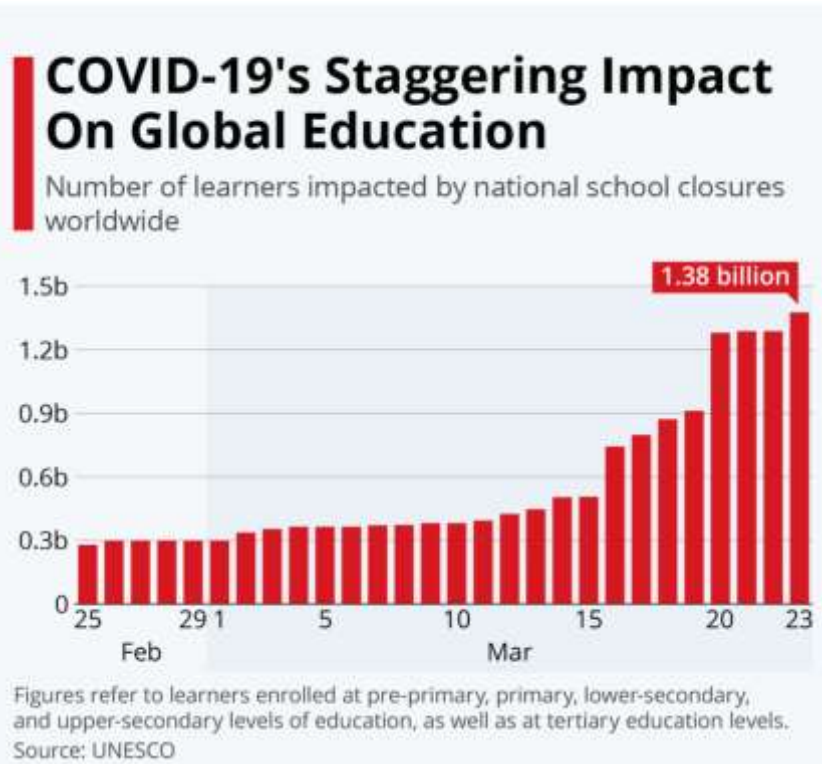
The impact: unemployment in the US

The unemployment rate has spiked to a post-war high of 14.7% in April, well above the Great Recession-era peak of 10.0% in October 2009.



<https://www.businessinsider.com/5-charts-how-coronavirus-economic-fallout-compares-to-great-recession-2020-5>

The impact: K-12 education



1.38 billion children are out of school worldwide

The impact: universities

- The American Council of Education (ACE) projects an overall drop in college enrolment of 15% for fall 2020 – including a 25% decline in international student numbers – and an expected revenue loss for institutions of US\$23 billion”.
- Universities UK estimates “the financial impact of the pandemic has already reached £790 million for the country’s institutions, including revenues lost in the form of “accommodation, catering and conference income as well as additional spend to support students learning online.”
- <https://monitor.icef.com/2020/04/measuring-covid-19s-impact-on-higher-education/>

Deaths: who is dying?

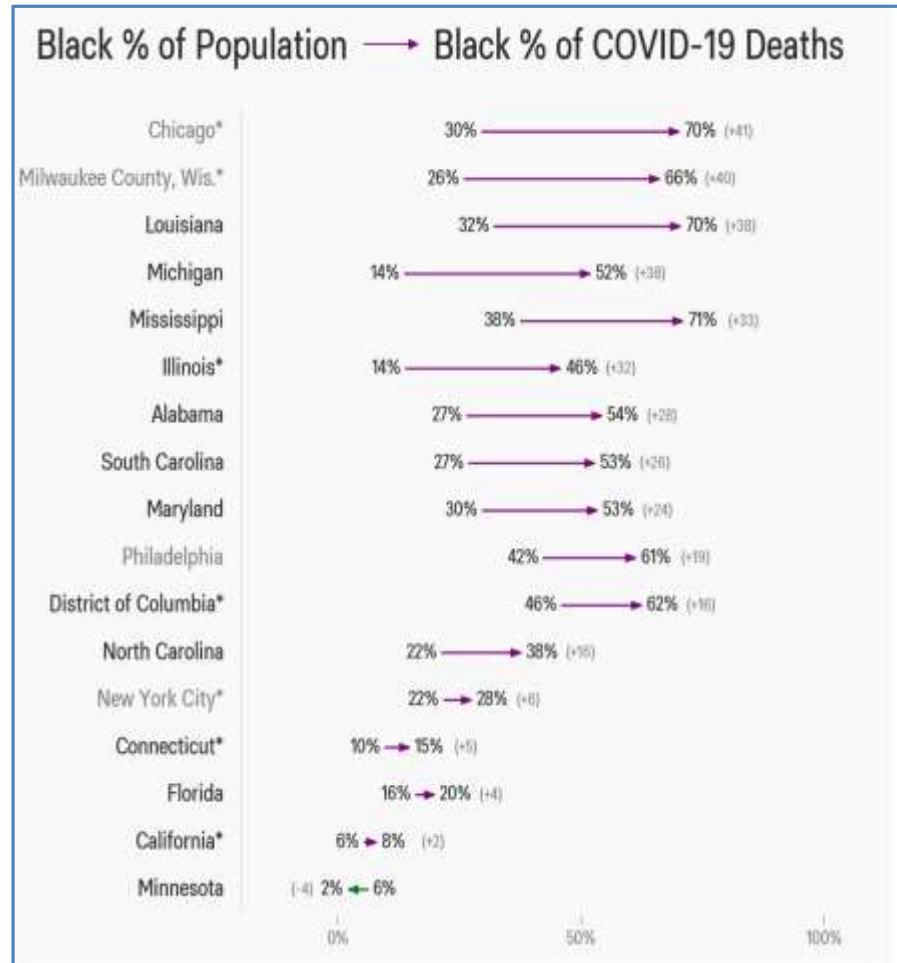


NY TIMES COVER

Dying disproportionately: Our parents and grandparents

- In Canada, 82% of the COVID deaths have been in long-term care homes:
<https://www.thestar.com/politics/federal/2020/05/07/82-of-canadas-covid-19-deaths-have-been-in-long-term-care.html>
- In the US, could be as high as 50%:
<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/may/11/nursing-homes-us-data-coronavirus>

Dying disproportionately: Black population in the US



<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/danvergano/coronavirus-black-americans-covid19>

Dying disproportionately: the poor



The migrant's photo while crying on the roadside in Delhi was shared widely on social media. (File)

Courtesy: NDTV

Solutions and Decisions

Decisions: the vaccine

- The scientific discovery alone will not help. Other crucial decisions need to be made
- Who will get the vaccine?
 - A child? An elderly person?
 - Those who can buy? Or those who cannot adequately distance physically?
 - The US? France? Or everyone?

Decisions: the economy

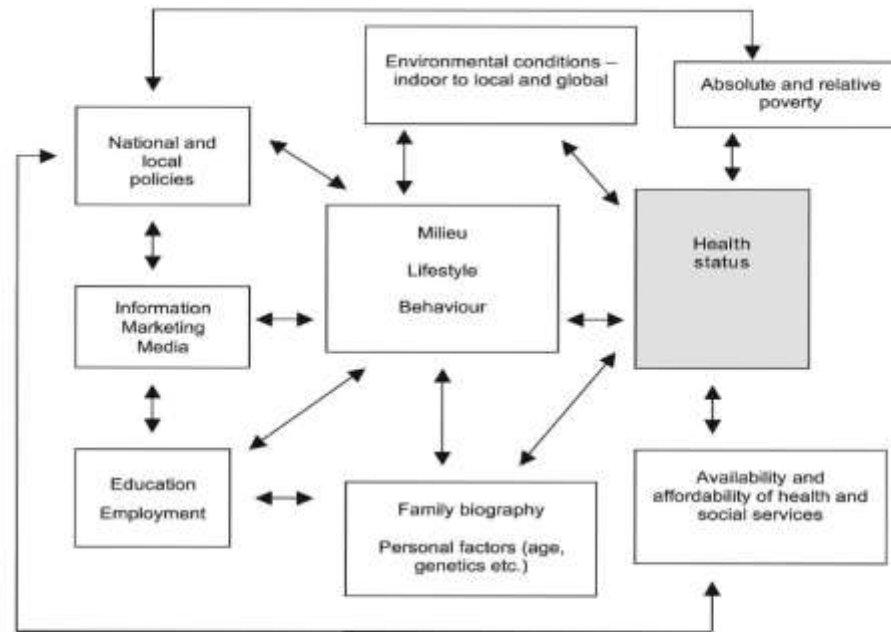
- Lockdown or return?
- What should we protect: the organized sector or the informal economy?
- Which loans should we write off: Students or SMEs?
- What kind of stimulus should we provide?

What kind of knowledge is required to make these decisions? The relevance of interdisciplinarity

Interdisciplinary approach to knowledge/decision-making

- **Begin from an ethical commitment to the collective/public good**
- **Prioritize a goal (e.g. patient well-being; reducing vulnerability)**
- Engage boldly with breadth and complexity
- Challenge habits of thought and privilege
- Proactively acknowledge limits of knowledge
- Defy, dissolve boundaries of knowledge and practice

Interdisciplinary approach to knowledge/decision-making



Source: Lawrence (2004)

Figure 2.1 Eight classes of factors influencing health

Tackling Wicked Problems Through the Transdisciplinary Imagination, Edited by Valerie A. Brown, John A. Harris and Jacqueline Y. Russell
 First published in 2010 by Earthscan Copyright © Professor Valerie A. Brown, Dr John Alfred Harris and Dr Jacqueline Yvette Russell, 2010

This is not new, certainly not in India

Dr. Radhakrishnan on the purpose of education

“The purpose of all education, it is admitted by thinkers of East and west, is to provide a coherent picture of the universe and an integrated way of life. We must obtain through it a sense of perspective, a synoptic vision, a *samanvaya* of the different items of knowledge.

Man can not live by a mass of disconnected information. He has a passion for an ordered intellectual vision of the connections of things. Life is one in all its varied manifestations. We, may study the factual relations of the different manifestations but we must have knowledge of life as a whole. It cannot be a collection of distracting scraps but should be a harmony of patterns. The subjects we study must be taught as parts of a connected curriculum.”

THE REPORT OF THE UNIVERSITY EDUCATION COMMISSION,
(DECEMBER 1948 – AUGUST 1949)

Dr. Radhakrishnan on leadership

“We are building a civilisation.... The quality of a civilisation depends not on the material equipment or the political machinery but on the character of men. The major task of education is the improvement of character.

Education must carry out at appropriate levels a combination of general, scientific, artistic and technical education for students of varying abilities and occupational objectives.”

THE REPORT OF THE UNIVERSITY EDUCATION COMMISSION, (DEC 1948 – AUG 1949)

The way forward

The way forward

“Almost \$8 billion (£6.5 billion) has been pledged internationally towards the scientific fight against coronavirus. But might investment outside medical science also pay dividends? Experts want “future pandemic research to encompass more disciplines” and “criticise the reliance on experts from a narrow group of subjects”, *Times Higher Education Supplement*, May 26, 2020

Under what conditions can these collaborations succeed?

Prioritize interdisciplinary thinking

- **Ethical commitment to the collective/public good**
- **Boldness**
- **Humility**
- **Collaboration**

Interdisciplinarity must be practiced, not only conceptualized.

*"You cannot cross the sea merely by standing and staring at the water."
Tagore*



Thank you.

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