

The pandemic through the eyes of social scientists

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Margaretha Wewerinke-Singh. Credit: Leiden University

The corona crisis relates to not only the medical field but also the field of the social sciences and humanities. SSH Beraad, a consultation body that aims to improve the position of the social sciences and humanities in the Netherlands, has launched a website bringing together experts in the social sciences and humanities (SSH). Three social scientists from Leiden talk about how the crisis affects their field.

Ethics and politics in healthcare

Annemarie Samuels is a medical anthropologist. Her research focuses on HIV/AIDS and palliative care in Indonesia. She also teaches the Medical Anthropology course. "In this course we talk about how individuals and groups deal with difficult ethical and political questions relating to healthcare," she says. And in these times these types of question are very relevant. "What constitutes good care? Who decides? For instance, is it good care not to visit a parent or grandparent with dementia whose health is rapidly deteriorating in the coming months?" Samuels emphasizes that there is no right answer to questions such as this. "Cultural aspects are very relevant here but so too is religion, gender and socio-economic background."

The pandemic is also helping to highlight moral dilemmas and inequality. Triage, for example, or prioritizing in healthcare. Who should be given priority if the supply of medicine and other resources is limited? This question also belongs to Samuels' field. "Medical anthropologists help analyze the inequality and political and [ethical questions](#) that the pandemic exposes," she explains. "How can we create a different, fairer world? What does the pandemic teach us about what we consider to be good care for one another and how can we generate more space for this in the future?" Important questions therefore about a good way to leave the crisis behind.

Human rights during a global crisis

Margaretha Wewerinke-Singh researches the role of law in solving sustainable development challenges. Her particular focus is the relationship between human rights and climate change. "The causes of the COVID-19 outbreak and the response of states to this raises important questions about protecting biodiversity, the climate and human rights," she says. "Questions about protecting or even promoting various aspects of sustainable development in times of crisis." This, she believes, is extremely important because climate change also plays a role in the current crisis. "Countries in the Pacific Ocean such as the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji have now been hit by a destructive cyclone and the economic effects of the corona crisis," she says by way of example. Another example is Africa, where climate-related drought is exacerbating poverty and food insecurity, making communities there particularly vulnerable to a crisis such as corona.

The importance of [human rights](#) is clear. "Human rights organizations emphasize that the right to health is a universal right and that international coordination and aid are needed to prevent violations of this right," Wewerinke-Singh explains. "Despite this, most countries appear to be inward-looking in their response." The same can be seen in the battle against [climate change](#): "A lack of effective international collaboration and solidarity has been preventing a solution to the climate problem for years." Whereas the crisis has shown that strong government intervention in societal problems is possible. "This gives us food for thought when it comes to new ways to achieve the goals enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the climate convention and other international treaties relevant to sustainable development."

The role of China

Frank Pieke researches migration from and to China, in particular threats to, abuse of and negative stereotyping about the Chinese. These problems have regularly been in the news since the outbreak of corona, thus demonstrating the importance of this research. Pieke also researches the political system in China, which is also relevant to the current crisis. "At the beginning, the local authorities in Wuhan made a significant number of mistakes and even ignored reports from doctors and other experts," he says. "This definitely led to an unnecessary deterioration in the situation, although you could say that at the time no one knew how things would develop. After that the Chinese government was very resolute and the crisis in China appears to be over—for now at least."

Pieke is not interested in the question of guilt: "We'll never agree. What's more important is the role of the corona crisis in the rift between China and the US. The US is now using the crisis to paint a negative picture of China and to absolve itself from any responsibility, whereas China for its part is trying to make a good impression with its success in combating the virus and is now showcasing how it is helping other affected countries."

The big question is who will come out of the crisis best in the end. Pieke: "It seems to be taking its toll on weaker countries and groups. Not so much because they have disproportionately more victims but more because they are hardest hit in their livelihoods by the anti-corona measures." Pieke predicts which changes this will bring about: "I think that global politics will be much clearer after the crisis, but also more ruthless, which means the winners of the [crisis](#) will generally be the strongest countries and regions."

Provided by Leiden University

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