Is humanity doomed because we can't plan for the long term? Three experts discuss

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While the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are still unclear, it is certain that they are a profound shock to the systems underpinning contemporary life.

The World Bank estimates that global growth will contract by between 5% and 8% globally in 2020, and that COVID-19 will push between 71-100 million into extreme poverty. Sub-Saharan Africa is expected to

be hit hardest. In developed countries health, leisure, commercial, educational and work practices are being reorganised—some say for good—in order to facilitate the forms of social distancing being advocated by experts and (sometimes reluctantly) promoted by governments.

Each of us has been affected by the changes wrought by COVID-19 in different ways. For some, the period of isolation has afforded time for contemplation. How do the ways in which our societies are currently structured enable crises such as this? How might we organise them otherwise? How might we use this opportunity to address other pressing global challenges, such climate change or racism?

For others, including those deemed vulnerable or "essential workers", such reflections may have instead been directly precipitated from a more visceral sense of their exposure to danger. Had adequate preparations been made for events such as COVID-19? Were lessons being learnt not only to manage crises such as these when they happen again, but to prevent them from happening in the first place? Is the goal of getting back to normality adequate, or should we instead be seeking to refashion normality itself?

Such profound questions are commonly prompted by major events. When our sense of normality is shattered, when our habits get disrupted, we are made more aware that the world could be otherwise. But are humans capable of enacting such lofty plans? Are we capable of planning for the long-term in a meaningful way? What barriers might exist and, perhaps more pressingly, how might we overcome them in order to create a better world?

As experts from three different academic disciplines whose work considers the capacity to engage in long-term planning for unanticipated events, such as COVID-19, in different ways, our work interrogates such

questions. So is humanity in fact able to successfully plan for the longterm future?

Robin Dunbar, an evolutionary psychologist at the University of Oxford, argues that our obsession with short-term planning may be a part of human nature—but possibly a surmountable one. Chris Zebrowski, an emergency governance specialist from Loughborough University, contends that our lack of preparedness, far from being natural, is a consequence of contemporary political and economic systems. Per Olsson, sustainability scientist and expert in sustainability transformations from the Stockholm Resilience Centre at Stockholm University, reflects on how crisis points can be used to change the future—drawing on examples from the past in order to learn how to be more resilient going into the future.

We are built this way

Robin Dunbar

COVID-19 has highlighted three key aspects of human behaviour that seem unrelated but which, in fact, arise from the same underlying psychology. One was the bizarre surge in panic buying and stockpiling of everything from food to toilet rolls. A second was the abject failure of most states to be prepared when experts had been warning governments for years that a pandemic would happen sooner or later. The third has been the exposure of the fragility of globalised supply chains. All three of these are underpinned by the same phenomenon: a strong tendency to prioritise the short term at the expense of the future.

Most animals, including humans, are notoriously bad at taking the long term consequences of their actions into account. Economists know this as the "public good dilemma". In conservation biology, it is known as the "poacher's dilemma" and also also, more colloquially, as "the tragedy of

the commons".

If you are a logger, should you cut down the last tree in the forest, or leave it standing? Everyone knows that if it is left standing, the forest will eventually regrow and the whole village will survive. But the dilemma for the logger is not next year, but whether he and his family will survive until tomorrow. For the logger, the economically rational thing to do is, in fact, to cut the tree down.

This is because the future is unpredictable, but whether or not you make it to tomorrow is absolutely certain. If you die of starvation today, you have no options when it comes to the future; but if you can make through to tomorrow, there is a chance that things might have improved. Economically, it's a no-brainer. This is, in part, why we have overfishing, deforestation and climate change.

The process underpinning this is known to psychologists as discounting the future. Both animals and humans typically prefer a small reward now to a larger reward later, unless the future reward is very large. The ability to resist this temptation is dependent on the frontal pole (the bit of the brain right just above your eyes), one of whose functions is to allow us to inhibit the temptation to act without thinking of the consequences. It is this small brain region that allows (most of) us to politely leave the last slice of cake on the plate rather than wolf it down. In primates, the bigger this brain region is, the better they are at these kinds of decisions.

Our social life, and the fact that we (and other primates) can manage to live in large, stable, bonded communities depends entirely on this capacity. Primate social groups are implicit social contracts. For these groups to survive in the face of the ecological costs that group living necessarily incur, people must be able to forego some of their selfish desires in the interests of everyone else getting their fair share. If that doesn't happen, the group will very quickly break up and disperse.

In humans, failure to inhibit greedy behaviour quickly leads to excessive inequality of resources or power. This is probably the single most common cause of civil unrest and revolution, from the French Revolution to Hong Kong today.

The same logic underpins economic globalisation. By switching production elsewhere where production costs are lower, homegrown industries can reduce their costs. The problem is that this occurs at a cost to the community, due to increased social security expenditure to pay for the now redundant employees of home industries until such time as they can find alternative employment. This is a hidden cost: the producer doesn't notice (they can sell more cheaply than they could otherwise have done) and the shopper doesn't notice (they can buy cheaper).

There is a simple issue of scale that feeds into this. Our natural social world is very small scale, barely village size. Once community size gets large, our interests switch from the wider community to a focus on self-interest. Society staggers on, but it becomes an unstable, increasingly fractious body liable at continual risk of fragmenting, as all historical empires have found.

Businesses provide a smaller-scale example of these effects. The average lifetime of companies in the FTSE100 index has declined dramatically in the last half-century: three-quarters have disappeared in just 30 years. The companies that have survived turn out to be those that have a long term vision, are not interested in get-rich-quick strategies to maximise returns to investors and have a vision of social benefit. Those that have gone extinct have largely been those that pursued short term strategies or those that, because of their size, lacked the structural flexibility to adapt (think holiday operator Thomas Cook).

Much of the problem, in the end, comes down to scale. Once a community exceeds a certain size, most of its members become

strangers: we lose our sense of commitment both to others as individuals and to the communal project that society represents.

COVID-19 may be the reminder many societies need to rethink their political and economic structures into a more localised form which is closer to their constituents. Of course, these will surely need bringing together in federal superstructures, but the key here is a level of autonomous community-level government where the citizen feels they have a personal stake in the way things work.

The power of politics

Chris Zebrowski

Where size and scale is concerned, it doesn't get much bigger than the Rideau canal. Stretching over [202 kilometres in length](link), the Rideau canal in Canada is regarded as one of the great engineering feats of the 19th century. Opened in 1832, the canal system was designed to act as an alternative supply route to the vital stretch of the St Lawrence river connecting Montreal and the naval base in Kingston.

The impetus for this project was the threat of resumed hostilities with the Americans following a war fought between the United States, the United Kingdom and their allies [from 1812-1815](link). While the canal would never need to be used for its intended purpose (despite its considerable cost), it is just one example of human ingenuity being paired with significant public investment in the face of an uncertain future threat.

"Discounting the future" may well be a common habit. But I don't think that this is an inevitable consequence of how our [brains are wired](link) or an enduring legacy of our primate ancestry. Our proclivity to short-termism has been socialised. It is a result of the ways we are socially and politically organised today.

Businesses prioritise short-term profits over longer term outcomes because it appeals to shareholders and lenders. Politicians dismiss long-term projects in favour of quick-fix solutions promising instant results which can feature in campaign literature that is distributed every four years.

At the same time, we are surrounded by examples of highly sophisticated, and often well-financed, tools for risk management. The major public works projects, vital social security systems, sizeable military assemblages, complex financial instruments, and elaborate insurance policies which support our contemporary way of life attest to the human capacity to plan and prepare for the future when we feel compelled to do so.

In recent months, the vital importance of emergency preparedness and response systems in managing the COVID-19 crisis has come into full public view. These are highly complex systems which employ horizon scanning, risk registers, preparedness exercises and a variety of other specialist methods to identify and plan for future emergencies before they happen. Such measures ensure that we are prepared for future events, even when we are not entirely sure when (or if) they will materialise.

While we could not predict the scale of the outbreak of COVID-19, previous coronavirus outbreaks in Asia meant we knew it was [a possibility](). The World Health Organization (WHO) has been warning about the risks of an [international influenza pandemic]() for many years now. In the UK, the 2016 national preparedness project Exercise Cygnus made abundantly clear that [the country lacked the capacity]() to adequately respond to a large-scale public health emergency. The danger was clearly identified. What was required to prepare for such a calamity was known. What was lacking was the political will to provide adequate investment in these vital systems.

In many western nations the ascendance of neoliberalism (and accompanying logic of austerity) has contributed to the defunding of many critical services, including emergency preparedness, upon which our safety and security depend. This is in sharp contrast to countries including China, New Zealand, South Korea, and Vietnam where a commitment to both preparedness and response has ensured a [rapid suppression](link) of the disease and the minimisation of its disruptive potential to lives and the economy.

While such a diagnosis may first appear to be bleak, there is good reason to find within it some hope. If the causes of short-termism are a product of the ways we are organised, then there is an opportunity for us reorganise ourselves to address them.

Recent studies suggest that the public not only recognises the risk of climate change, but are [demanding urgent action](link) be taken to stave off this existential crisis. We cannot allow the death and destruction of COVID-19 to have been in vain. In the wake of this tragedy, we must be prepared to radically rethink how we organise ourselves our societies and be prepared to take ambitious actions to ensure the security and sustainability of our species.

Our capacity to deal not only with future pandemics, but larger-scale (and perhaps not unrelated) threats including [climate change](link) will require us to exercise the human capacity for foresight and prudence in the face of future threats. It is not beyond us to do so.

How to change the world

Per Olsson

As much as short-termism and structural issues have come to play out in analyses of the pandemic, those focused on the longer term keep arguing

that this is the time for change.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a slew of people arguing that this is a once-in-a-generation moment for transformation. Government responses, these writers say, must drive far-reaching economic and social change relating to energy and food systems, otherwise we will be vulnerable to more crises in the future. Some go further and claim a different world is possible, a more equitable and sustainable society less obsessed with growth and consumption. But transforming multiple systems simultaneously is not an easy task, and it is worth understanding better what we already know about transformations and crisis.

History shows us that crisis does indeed create a unique chance for change.

A classic example is how the oil crisis in 1973 enabled the transition from a car-based society to a cycling nation in the Netherlands. Prior to the energy crisis there was growing opposition to cars, and a social movement emerged in response to the increasingly congested cities and the number of traffic related deaths, especially children.

Another example is the Black Death, the plague that swept Asia, Africa, and Europe in the 14th century. This led to the abolition of feudalism and the strengthening of peasants rights in Western Europe.

But while positive (large-scale) societal change can come out of crises, the consequences are not always better, more sustainable, or more just, and sometimes the changes that emerge are different from one context to another.

For example, the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami affected two of Asia's longest-running insurgencies in Sri Lanka and the Aceh province in Indonesia very differently. In the former, the armed conflict

between the Sri Lankan government and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam deepened and intensified by the natural disaster. In Aceh meanwhile, it resulted in a historic peace agreement between the Indonesian government and the separatists.

Some of these differences can be explained by the long histories of the conflicts. But the readiness of different groups to further their agenda, the anatomy of the crisis itself, and the actions and strategies following the initial tsunami event also have important parts to play.

It comes as no surprise, then, that the opportunities for change can be seized by self-interested movements and therefore can accelerate non-democratic tendencies. Power can be further consolidated among groups not interested in improving equity and sustainability. We see this right now in places like the Philippines and Hungary.

With many clamouring for change, what gets left out of the discussion is that the scale, speed, and quality of transformations matter. And more importantly, the specific capabilities that are needed to navigate such significant change successfully.

There is often a confusion about what kinds of actions actually make a difference and what should be done now, and by whom. The risk is that opportunities created by the crisis are missed and that efforts—with the best of intentions and all the promises of being innovative—just lead back to the pre-crisis status quo, or to a slightly improved one, or even to a radically worse one.

For example, the financial crisis of 2008 was seized on by some as a moment to transform the finance sector, but the strongest forces pushed the system back to something resembling the pre-crash status quo.

Systems that create inequality, insecurity, and unsustainable practices are

not easily transformed. Transformation, as the word suggests, requires fundamental changes in multiple dimensions such as power, resource flows, roles, and routines. And these shifts must take place at different levels in society, from practices and behaviours, to rules and regulations, to values and worldviews. This involves changing the relationships among humans but also profoundly change the relationships between humans and nature.

We see efforts now during COVID-19 to—at least in principle—commit to these kinds of changes, with ideas once viewed as radical now being deployed by a range of different groups. In Europe, the idea of a green recovery is growing. The city of Amsterdam is considering implementing doughnut economics – an economic system that is intended to deliver ecological and human wellbeing; and universal basic income is being rolled out in Spain. All existed before the COVID-19 crisis and have been piloted in some cases, but the pandemic has put rocket boosters under the ideas.

So for those that seek to use this opportunity to create change that will ensure the long-term health, equity, and sustainability of our societies, there are some important considerations. It is critical to dissect the anatomy of the crisis and adjust actions accordingly. Such assessment should include questions about what type of multiple, interacting crises are occurring, what parts of the "status quo" are truly collapsing and what parts remain firmly in place, and who is affected by all of these changes. Another key thing to do is to identify piloted experiments that have reached a certain level of "readiness".

It is also important to deal with inequalities and include marginalised voices to avoid transformation processes becoming dominated and co-opted by a specific set of values and interests. This also means respecting and working with the competing values that will inevitably come into conflict.

How we organise our efforts will define our systems for decades to come. Crises can be opportunities—but only if they are navigated wisely.

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