

Caution: Dangerous Social Curve Ahead!

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Israel began easing its lockdown and moving into the next phase of living in the presence of the coronavirus, which will continue in different ways and intensities until a vaccine is found or until the virus disappears. While major emphasis is currently placed on the medical and economic tracks, the social dimension is also a key element that must be addressed. Although it is difficult to gauge, the social curve is no less and perhaps even more critical in managing the crisis over the long term. This article presents the importance of tracking the social curve, methods for doing so, and recommendations for the use of data collection. The core recommendation is to designate key parameters and assess them frequently, in order to chart the social trajectory so as to identify both early warning signals of social weaknesses and strengths that might assist in policy management.

Many are looking for ways to emerge from the COVID-19 crisis, primarily based on projecting trends along healthcare and macroeconomic curves. The healthcare curve is benchmarked on quantitative indexes such as the scale of individuals confirmed to be infected, seriously ill, dead, or recovered. The macroeconomic curve is commonly drawn through indexes of unemployed and estimates of losses to GDP. However, the social trajectory, which is closely connected to the previous two, is usually missing from the discussion. Indeed the social curve is more difficult to measure quantitatively, but its implications are clearly evident world-wide, as it represents a critical domain both for the management of the present crisis and further beyond.

It seems that thorough public and official discussion of this issue is lacking. For example, analysis of the economic hardship is typically based on a growing unemployment scale, without specifying how many of them are members of the same family, or single breadwinners, or young couples living in rented apartments while paying a mortgage on an apartment that is still under construction. What is common to all of these individuals is the fact that an abrupt and severe disruption to their household cash flow threatens their present wellbeing and their future social security. Unemployment payments serve merely as a partial and temporary solution. Furthermore, the public debate over re-starting the school system relates mainly to health and economic considerations (for the sake of

watching children in school to enable their parents to return to work), but seldom addresses students' social and educational needs when they are out of school for a long duration.

On the macroeconomic level, Israel began the coronavirus crisis on stronger footing than many other developed countries, with a low rate of unemployment, a low debt-to-GDP ratio, and high growth – although per capita growth was less impressive. On the other hand, many of Israel's social parameters are far from satisfactory. The economic prosperity of the past few years has not solved Israel's chronic social inequality, as reflected in significant gaps in per capita income and Israel's international ranking on the Gini scale. There are also significant inequalities in education, as demonstrated by Israeli students' lower standing on PISA tests relative to the developed world, not to mention the educational gaps between different sectors in the Israeli population.

The COVID-19 outbreak exacerbates this challenge. The crisis emphasizes social and economic disparities in a wide variety of fields. For example, moving teaching online reveals the gaps between households that are able to provide a computer for each child and those that lack the means to do so. The crisis also increases social stress not only among disadvantaged groups, but for everyone, and particularly for the middle class. For example, the income of many young couples has declined, leaving them with high debts and facing significant uncertainty regarding their employment and future wellbeing. This difficulty is not just economic – it also exerts significant emotional and social stress among families that are not monitored and assisted by the welfare services. The same is true for the owners of small profitable businesses that are currently with no income but with high expenses. Over the next months the real scale of unemployment will become clear, given that economic activity is not expected to return to its pre-crisis levels. Social stress is also caused by limitations on social contacts and cultural and physical activity, which in turn impacts on inner family relations. All these might continue potential social explosion.

The social curve should be used to monitor the societal capacity to stand up to the coronavirus challenge, particularly in conditions of ongoing restrictions, social distancing, and the public ability to handle these restrictions over time. Eased lockdown restrictions notwithstanding, economic and social stress can accumulate over time. Monitoring the social trajectory might also draw the social distinction between different groups and geographic regions which need a differential social policy.

It can be estimated that the social curve is more sensitive to a worsened situation, and responds more slowly to relief measures than the macroeconomic curve. Thus, for example, the decline in GDP may cease, which does not necessarily imply that all cohorts

of the population will benefit and rebound. Some groups may approach their breaking point even as the lockdown is eased state-wide. Under such circumstances widespread social deterioration may take place, without knowing in advance when such developments would occur. A random unexpected spark could ignite it, such as a post on social media calling for a mass public gathering in violation of the regulations, or a violent clash between demonstrators and police forces.

Despite the challenge of drawing the social curve, it can be constructed by a series of benchmarks representing trends in public conduct, such as the consumer confidence index, based on a monthly survey (that could also be conducted more frequently). Also, crime levels, public disturbances, clashes with police, increases in complaints about domestic violence, and higher occupancy in women's shelters can be relevant indicators. Additional sources of social information can be found in requests for assistance from the National Insurance Institute, welfare services, mental health services, the Eran mental health hotline, and many others. Other accounts concerning fluctuation in public consumption, overdrafts, bounced checks, canceled credit cards, forfeiture of debt, should be monitored, as well as suicide rates and increases in the homeless population. Another important indicator is the degree of public adherence to government guidelines: increases in noncompliance may suggest heightened social stress and decreased public trust in the authorities' management of the crisis. The social curve can also be monitored on social networks. Negative deviations on all or some of these indexes should be seen as early alerts for approaching social disruption.

In March 2020 there was actually a decline in the number of criminal offenses, in comparison to the equivalent period in 2019, apparently as a result of the lockdown. There was a particularly sharp decline in moral offenses (e.g., drug sales, prostitution). At the same time there was a 16 percent increase in domestic violence. In the Arab sector there was a sharp increase in urgent calls to the Ministry of Welfare's hotline concerning violence against children.

At the same time, it is also important to monitor sources of strength and fortitude in Israeli society, as a basis for the formulation of social policy. Israel is a highly resilient society, as reflected in its long history of overcoming serious disruptions. It is thus important to create tools for monitoring social resilience in the face of the COVID-19 outbreak, not only for the purposes of warning of social deterioration and potential crisis, but in order to effectively support rapid recovery, which will likely require a combination of continued responsible public conduct and intelligent and clearly-explained policy management.

It is therefore recommended to select a series of key parameters that will be monitored frequently, in order to construct the social curve during the expected lengthy coronavirus crisis, and identify signs of weakness or strength in real time. Critical information of this – alongside medical and economic indicators – is likely to assist decision makers and agencies managing the coronavirus crisis in the following ways:

- a. Designating targets with high social impact during the process of easing the lockdown.
- b. Considering medical and economic policy steps from a perspective of social costs and benefits, and focusing policy on particular sectors of the population. For example, in certain situations it may be preferable to lower unemployment at the cost of reducing GDP.
- c. Focusing the economic and social policies on specific groups, by providing them professional assistance when needed.
- d. Formulating economic, social, technological, and legal solutions for citizens in economic stress, and presenting immediate solutions for challenging situations or near-breakdowns.
- e. Supporting focused solutions through incentives, assistance mechanisms, and confidence-building measures.
- f. Providing specific guidelines to different sectors through professional messaging and advice. Part of the current social stress seemingly comes from significant uncertainty.
- g. Increasing the distribution of telecommunication technology among people in need, in order to allow online social activity; expanding the Computer for Every Child project and setting up a Computer for Every Senior Citizen project.
- h. Involving relevant government ministries, welfare services, municipalities, and nonprofit organizations in data gathering for the sake of scientific based research, to allow coherent decision making and implementation. This will be useful also beyond the coronavirus crisis.