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## Introduction: Capabilities and Covid-19

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## POLICY FORUM

# Introduction: Capabilities and Covid-19

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The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting containment measures are affecting our societies and eco-systems, causing significant changes for material and non-material aspects of well-being and well-becoming across dimensions, across countries and territories and population groups.

Governments at different levels, policymakers, communities, private and public enterprises, households and individuals alike are challenged by the unprecedented consequences of this pandemic in several ways: the rapid and pervasive spread of the virus, the collapse of health systems and failure of health capabilities, and the economic slowdown. All in all, the COVID-19 is dramatically affecting individual and collective capabilities questioning the future from a sustainable human development vision.

The current emergency necessitates deep reflection about what we might learn during this difficult time. The connection of individual and collective capabilities has become accentuated: we have been willing to renounce (individual) freedom of movement and association to preserve the health and longevity of the most vulnerable. We realise that public health systems and governance need to pay far greater attention to collective and individual well-being.

We have also learned that pandemics and lockdowns lead to heterogeneous effects on different societies and population groups; for example, in many places individuals living in the informal sector and vulnerable population groups are likely to bear disproportionate burdens during crises that typically exacerbate pre-existing inequalities and opportunistic behaviours. While certain big companies (especially in the ICT sector) are increasing their “amazing” fortune thanks to lockdowns, millions of people, particularly in developing countries, especially informal workers with daily wages, have seen their jobs disappear opening up to the threat of starvation, illness and violence. Children of poor households were left out from online education. Indeed, according to UNICEF, about 1.2 billion schoolchildren—70 per cent of the world’s students—are currently affected by school closures. While some households became jails for women victims of domestic violence.

Nonetheless, we have also applauded as many doctors and nurses gave their lives to save the lives of others, thus demonstrating that a high level of individual and collective agency is possible. During the lockdowns some conflicts suddenly have stopped, pollution has

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decreased and the world has witnessed international health cooperation from middle-income countries to the most hard-hit amongst high-income countries in the name of solidarity, fraternity and humanity. Difficulties have also awakened a new spirit of solidarity and fraternity among people living in the same community and, even, among territories. In a nutshell, as stated by Amartya Sen, “A better society can emerge from the lockdowns” (The Financial Times, 15/4/2020).

Overall, we learned that individuals, households, communities and territories with specific conversion factors and resources address health crises by adopting different strategies. However, uncertainty about the best way to proceed continues to prevail and the current moment raises many new questions for policymakers to explore to recover and for the future.

The papers selected for this forum disentangle some of the issues mentioned above and their policy implications according to different point of views.

The three papers show how the COVID-19 pandemic has altered the development course of nations, and threatens to erase significant achievements in terms of capabilities and sustainable human development with consequences for job and public health. According to Sridhar Venkatapuram three aspects of the capability approach, including its critique of dominant paradigms and policies affecting human well-being, the conception of well-being as capabilities, and normative argument for every human beings having equal moral claims to capabilities, are discussed in relation to the spread of COVID-19 and the spectrum of social responses. Rhys Manley underlines how the COVID-19's impacts have been devastating to the material well-being and capabilities of countless individuals across the globe. In particular, according to Manley, it is the absence of certain capabilities such as resilience and connection that may, at least in part, be making the crisis worse. This might lead to greater willingness within the community to accept human development-centred policies based on the capability approach. Finally, Paul Anand, from a capability approach angle, argues that meeting economic challenges from a people-first perspective helps to identify policy priorities across the range of human experience and need. Moreover, he adds, prevention and fight against pandemics is a truly global public good that calls for a more coordinated global response and actions.

From a capability approach and sustainable human development perspective, many other questions remain open: to what extent is the pandemic going to question our concerns about global economic and social governance? To what extent would the heterogeneity of the virus's impact on people's capabilities across territories and countries lead to different recovery strategies? To what extent is the crisis affecting children in developed and developing countries? How can this health emergency and its subsequent economic and social crisis be turned into an opportunity to articulate a better future for all? How can we rethink and rebuild ecosystems to be more resilient and favourable to the individual and collective capabilities that promote an integrated form of Sustainable Human Development? And what will be the role of global public goods and their coordination in a post-Covid19 scenario? Just to mention a few.

Continuing this policy discussion from a capability approach and sustainable human development perspective is surely needed.

### About the Author

**Mario Biggeri**, guest editor of the paper on Capabilities and Covid-19, is Associate Professor of Development Economics at the University of Florence, Scientific Director of

ARCO (Action Research for CO-development). His research concentrates on political economy for sustainable human development, international cooperation, industrial policies, social entrepreneurship, local development, impact evaluations, participatory methods, poverty measures, well-being of children, youth and persons with disabilities.

**Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.