POST-LOCKDOWN VALUES?

By Sabine Leitner

**"There are decades where nothing happens –
and there are weeks where decades happen."**

This Lenin quote might sum up how many of us feel regarding the events of 2020. Not that nothing happened before – in my view the last few decades contained quite a lot of events on a mega scale – but the changes triggered by COVID-19 have been unprecedented. As some countries are gradually coming out of complete lockdown, the paramount question is: where do we go from here?

There are many signs that we want to hold on to the positives of the last 3 months and that we see this crisis as a transition and an opportunity to bring in systemic changes. But how can we best use this kairos moment to create a world after lockdown that is actually better than the one before?

One tried and tested way of doing this is certainly by identifying clear goals that need to be achieved in order to bring about an improvement. When Britain needed a plan to recover after World War II, the economist Sir William Beveridge identified five problems to be tackled simultaneously: want, ignorance, idleness, squalor, and disease. His report served as the basis for the post-war welfare state and guided social reform for the next 30 years. For the current crisis, the historian Peter Hennessy has proposed another five priorities: social care, social housing, technical education, climate change, and preparing for artificial intelligence.

Whilst it is absolutely clear that any of these points need to be addressed, I wonder whether concrete goals alone will be sufficient to bring about a lasting and sustainable change and improvement. I believe that we will also need to focus on values. Values are, after all, amongst the main driving forces of our actions. Of course, each concrete goal does embody a value, but values are not only broader, they are also deeper and more all-encompassing. For example, the value of 'health' can give rise to a much deeper change of how I lead my life than the concrete goal of attaining a specific weight or running several miles in a specific time or giving up alcohol. As a value, it also

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enables me to understand the concept of 'health' on more than just one level: not only as a specific aspect of physical health but also as mental health, emotional health and – why not? – spiritual health. It might even make me reflect on the underlying principles of health and their application on all these levels: balance, harmony, nothing in excess, etc.

I don't think that concrete goals alone will be able to create this better world. It is necessary to address our underlying belief systems and the values they are based on – let us not forget that profit is also a 'value'. If the world is, as Einstein said, a product of our thinking, then we need to change the way we think in order to produce a better one. We need a philosophical examination of the principles that help us to decide what is right and wrong, and how to act in various situations. We will also need stories and narratives that transmit them and open our hearts to them.

Values will always give rise to concrete actions. Concrete actions alone, however, will probably not in the long-term awaken and transmit values that will have the strength to create and sustain a world where everyone can flourish. So, do we need values or specific goals? It's not 'either/or', but 'and'. Which values will we need to build this better future? This is a question to inspire our reflections and our dialogues. I do not know the answer. But I am sure that amongst them will be a strong emphasis on the 'we'. Wangari Maathai, the first black African woman to win a Nobel Prize, said: "Mankind's universal values of love, compassion, solidarity, caring and tolerance should form the basis for this global ethic which should permeate culture, politics, trade, religion and philosophy." And Barack Obama put it beautifully in his speech at Nelson Mandela's memorial:

"There is a word in South Africa – Ubuntu – that describes his greatest gift: his recognition that we are all bound together in ways that can be invisible to the eye; that there is a oneness to humanity; that we achieve ourselves by sharing ourselves with others, and caring for those around us." ◌◌◌

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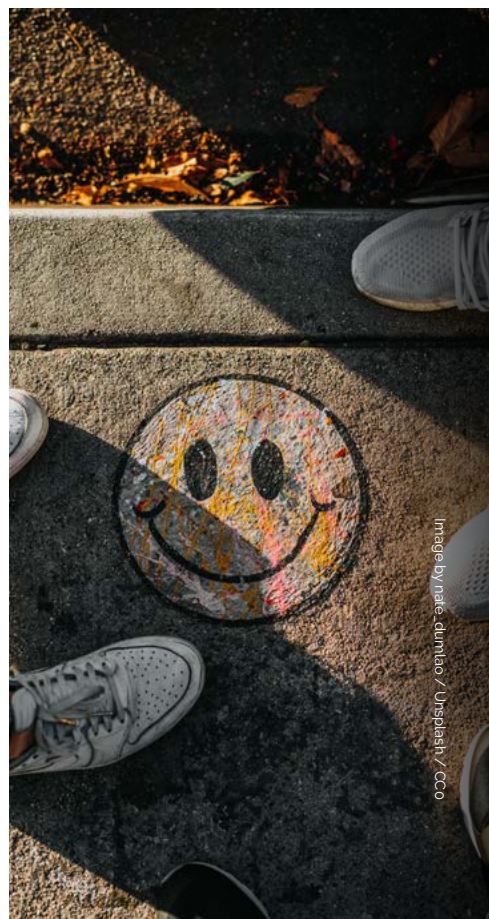

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