

Reflections on a Healthy Society

Six thinkers explore lessons learned from the pandemic to cultivate a more resilient world



Michelle Bachelet

Leave no one behind is not just a mantra, it is a necessity. The pandemic has exposed and exacerbated inequalities within and between states and demonstrated the huge costs to people and prosperity of leaving those gaps unaddressed. Yet, due in significant part to short-sighted vaccine policies, we are faced with deepening economic hardship in the developing world, while richer countries welcome signs of an economic recovery.

To recover better, we need an economy that puts human beings and rights at the center of economic policy. One that invests in health, social protection, and other human rights to curb inequalities and discrimination; embraces progressive taxation, labor rights, and decent work; and promotes meaningful public participation and civic spaces.

This human-rights-based approach to the economy is an essential lever to relaunch and accelerate our path toward realizing the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

MICHELLE BACHELET is the United Nations high commissioner for human rights.



Jeffrey Sachs

The basic lessons of happiness are these: society (and therefore government policies) should attend to people's economic needs, physical health, mental health, social connections, sense of purpose, and confidence in government. The pandemic has threatened almost every dimension of well-being and indeed has fostered rising anxieties, clinical depression, social isolation, and in many places, a loss of confidence in government.

We need more government outlays in response to the pandemic and its aftermath, but this poses two challenges: first, poor countries cannot afford to increase the provision of public services, so they urgently need access to incremental financing and debt relief on adequate terms. Second, governments need much more professionalism and competence than many (perhaps most) have displayed in response to the pandemic during the past two years.

Aristotle wrote two books as a pair: *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*. *Nicomachean Ethics* is mainly about personal virtues and the household and friends, while *Politics* is about civic life, public education, and sociality at the scale of the polis (the city-state). Virtuous citizens lead to a virtuous state, while a virtuous state (and government) promotes virtues in the population. And the virtues—wisdom, justice, moderation, honesty—are all supportive of a good life.

JEFFREY SACHS is the director of the Center for Sustainable Development at Columbia University.



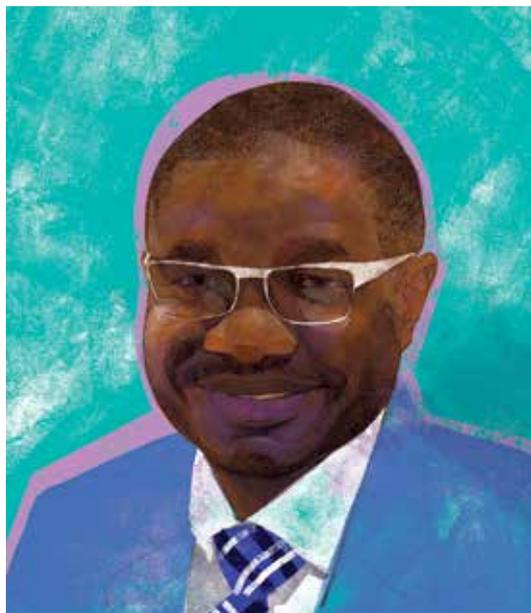
K. K. Shailaja

The worst crisis of the century has underscored the need to reassess existing health systems and formulate an effective and socially equitable strategy to combat health crises in the future. It is imperative that governments continue to strengthen their public health systems and augment the capacity to treat more infections. Protecting the physical and mental health of frontline workers should be given priority. At times of crisis, it is equally vital to galvanize the trust of the community through engagement and transparency in dissemination of information. The right to health and protection of human rights in providing care should be upheld for one and all. An inclusive response to the pandemic must be aligned with the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in order to ensure that no one is left behind.

The emergence and reemergence of new and old diseases and the public health aftereffects of natural disasters are unavoidable. Health policymakers should monitor and maintain a well-functioning disease surveillance system informed by the application of principles of epidemiology to help reduce the impact of future diseases and outbreaks. This proactive approach should be further complemented by preventive health care services, along with health workforce education and training in disease surveillance and public health actions.

An integrated and collaborative One Health method needs to be promoted to share scientific and research data to tackle emerging challenges in global health and to attain optimal health for people, animals, and our environment.

K. K. SHAILAJA is the former health minister of Kerala, India.



Christian Happi

The world was not prepared to respond to the emergence of a new and deadly pathogen. With pathogens, we need to start playing offense and stop playing defense. Preventive measures must be put in place to ensure the health and wellness of citizens. This will require crucial investments in novel genomic tools and technologies for surveillance and real-time data capture and sharing.

Fortunately, we have seen the establishment of new health and wellness initiatives by private philanthropies, governments, and global health organizations, especially in the field of public health and outbreak preparedness. Examples of these initiatives include the World Health Organization's Hub for Pandemic and Epidemic Intelligence and an early warning system program called SENTINEL that is being co-led by the African Center of Excellence for Genomics of Infectious Disease at Nigeria's Redeemer's University and the Broad Institute of Harvard and MIT.

The pandemic has also highlighted the importance of investing in basic and translational scientific

research on infectious diseases, especially in Africa. Most pandemic-potential pathogens are found in Africa, which means that the continent could lead the world in the development of countermeasures and tools for preventing, detecting, and responding to outbreaks. But this has not been an investment priority for African leaders. As an example, if African countries had previously invested in vaccine research and development, they would not be waiting for vaccine donations.

Many countries on the continent also lack the local production capacity for biotechnology and the manufacture of medical supplies, drugs, and vaccines. This makes the continent vulnerable. Thankfully, we are seeing a renewed urgency toward investments in these sectors.

CHRISTIAN HAPPI is a professor of molecular biology and genomics and the director of the African Center of Excellence for Genomics of Infectious Diseases.



Kate Soper

The pandemic has added to global inequalities—in 2020, it pushed 124 million more people into poverty—and revealed the topsy-turvy nature of an economy that undervalues its most essential workers while massively rewarding its financial elite. It has also shown how environmental misuse is implicated in lifestyle illness and the spread of pandemic disease. At the same time, the lockdown experience shed light on the

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María del Rocío Sáenz Madrigal

I am a doctor by training but served for four years in government as the minister of health for Costa Rica—the first woman to do so. Those years in government gave me a 360-degree view of how the health sector and public policy intersect. After I finished my term as minister and took some leave, I was called back to serve as the executive president of the Costa Rican Social Security Fund. That allowed me to see the health system from a different perspective. Serving in those positions fundamentally shaped my view that while regulation and the provision of services are extremely important, we cannot forget the role of people, populations, and the communities we serve. They must be at the center of decision-making.

I think there are three lessons the pandemic has taught us. The first is that it has deepened preexisting gaps—access gaps, income gaps, inequality gaps. These are all very evident. The second, which is related, is that you cannot have a sufficient response without greater equity. Equity not only in terms of health outcomes, but equity in how policies are designed and implemented. The third, which I think is extremely important, is the role of community and of primary health care—strengthening the services that are close to the population. Countries with stronger primary care health systems and greater penetration at the community level have without a doubt shown greater resilience during the pandemic. [FD](#)

benefits to health and well-being of adopting slower-paced and less acquisitive ways of living, and it allowed more citizenly feeling to come into play.

If there is a lesson to be learned here, it is that our collective health and well-being can be secured only through correcting the huge disparities of wealth and eco-privilege of the current world order. The more affluent nations must now promote a green renaissance founded upon an alternative politics of prosperity. There is an opportunity here to advance beyond a way of living that is not just bad for the planet and ourselves, but also in many respects self-denying and overly fixated on work and moneymaking at the expense of the enjoyment that comes with having more time, doing more things for oneself, traveling more slowly, and consuming less stuff.

Nations whose environmental footprint grossly exceeds the planet's carrying capacity can no longer be aspirational models for the rest of the world. A cultural revolution along these lines will be comparable to the forms of social transformation and personal epiphany brought about through the feminist, anti-racist, and anti-colonial movements of recent history. It will not be easy to mount and will be fiercely opposed by those currently in power. But the gains it promises will be immense, and without them, the future is bleak for us all.

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