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Covid, Climate, and Geo-Politics

Michael Briguglio

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In a recent interview in The Malta Independent on Sunday, Deputy Prime Minister and Health Minister Chris Fearne said that “Herd immunity is a mathematical formula. It’s not a magical number that you can just make up. It changes according to several factors, including the variants of the virus and the reproduction rate, also referred to as the r-factor.”

He explained that when the original strain of the Coronavirus hit, the reproduction rate was 2.5, and herd immunity was established to be at around 60%. Hence, in his words, it was decided that at least 70% of the population were required to be vaccinated to reach a high herd immunity level. However, “with the emergence of more transmissible variants, the reproductive rate increased, so the herd immunity requirement increased as well. With the Delta variant, it has climbed to 90%.”

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Malta is almost there given that our vaccination rate is one of the highest in the world. At the same time, however, our small island-state in the middle of the Mediterranean is part of a global society of opportunities and risks. The relatively low vaccination rates in many countries impacts herd immunity at a global level. Consequently, Minister Fearne added, Covid-19 might be something which is here to stay – an endemic rather than a pandemic – and we might have to learn to live with it, much like we do other diseases, with its spread controlled by booster shots.

This is not to mention that despite the vital role of vaccines, they are not 100% effective. Unfortunately, in their interpretation of this, some Covid-sceptics are throwing out the baby with the bathwater by ignoring the fact that vaccinated persons are in a much safer position than those who are not vaccinated.

This is not to say that we should take everything that authorities tell us as the gospel truth. Sure, it is imperative that every authority and influential voice – including those of adversaries - is subject to scrutiny. In a democratic society, criticism is an essential part of this. But there should be parameters for such deliberation, where we abide by the rules of the game, for example by distinguishing between evidence-based knowledge and fake-news. In a media-sphere where a Facebook rant can get more views than a well-researched journalistic report, and where a fake profile can make more rounds than someone who is responsible for what one says, things become more complicated. This phenomenon can obviously be transposed to other issues and processes within society.

Going back to the parameters approach - which I subscribe to - which, can be explored in more detail by engaging with Chantal Mouffe's theory of agonism, there are various aspects of the Covid-19 issue which deserve critique.

For example, it is frustrating to see that whilst 90% of the eligible Maltese population has so far taken up Covid vaccination, Maltese society is still at risk due to our dependence on the global situation. In this regard, one often encounters arguments lamenting that whilst we made sacrifices for the common good, we are still subjected to external Covid perils.

At the same time, we know that Malta simply cannot isolate itself from the world, for a variety of reasons. We are part of global society with both its risks and opportunities, albeit having lived experiences in our respective social contexts.

Here I believe that Malta can take a more proactive approach in the global political economy of Covid. To put things into perspective, there are some countries where vaccine take-up rates are relatively low despite the availability of vaccines, but there are many others, for example in Africa, where vaccines are just not available, and the few available are more likely to be taken up by elites. One understands that pharmaceutical companies need to make profits to finance operations and research, but at the same time, it is common interest that vaccine rates increase around the world.

This takes us to Malta and geo-politics. Malta has a rather unique position in global politics: it is a open -state which happens to be both an island in the Mediterranean as well as an EU-member

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that factors in the various variables that influence availability of vaccines. At an EU level, we reportedly had quite an important role in the bloc's vaccine purchase strategy. Along similar lines, we can speak up for a more sustainable approach in global Covid geo-politics.

As a small state which is rather dependent on tourism, it is in our best interest to fulfil this role, but our own interest also depends on the experiences of others. In short, we are in this together, despite our differences and divisions.

This type of approach could also be adopted in other areas, climate change being another urgent example. Malta's own contribution to global climate change is insignificant, but we may suffer terrible consequences due to impacts such as changing weather conditions. Hence, it is in our interest to negotiate in global fora, through give and take, and by making the best of our geo-political status as a small Mediterranean and EU island state. Once again despite our divisions and differences, we are facing the climate change emergency together.

Dr Michael Briguglio is a sociologist and senior lecturer at the University of Malta

www.michaelbriguglio.com

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