

SUSTAINABILITY AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Huda Ahmed Idris Mohamed¹ & Faridah Ibrahim¹
¹*Infrastructure University Kuala Lumpur, MALAYSIA*

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic is regarded to be among the most major global health crisis of the century and the biggest threat facing the world since the Second World War. Infectious diseases, especially those that have been declared by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as a global pandemic such as COVID-19 can lead to frightful multifarious impact. It has spread rapidly all over the world, presenting the entire human population with immense health, social economic, educational and environmental challenges. These are some of the critical areas that made up sustainable development. The notion of 'sustainability' brings forward the idea that wealthier, more technologically sophisticated societies would have to contribute materially and through a wide range of assistance program to increase the well-being of poorer nations. So the questions of obligation and responsibilities come into play which are within the realms of ethical principles. Under these circumstances one can see that the application of sustainability framework requires a better understanding of ethical concepts. In this conceptual paper we discuss the challenges and implications of sustainability in a pandemic situation and provide some ethical practices and solutions to manage these challenges.

Keywords:

Sustainability, Ethical Considerations, COVID-19, Pandemic, Global Health

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic is regarded to be among the most major global health crisis of the century and the biggest threat facing the world since the Second World War. Many researchers have argued that "the world is becoming increasingly complex and hazardous" (Seeger and Reynolds, 2008). Infectious diseases, especially those that involve unexpected outbreaks such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS in 2003), Swine flu H1N1 (2009) Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS in 2012), Ebola (2014-2016) and present Covid-19, can lead to frightful psychological, physical, economic, and social impact. Considering that each outbreak is at least to some extent different than its predecessors (Coombs, 1999), the emergence of new infectious diseases is marked by uncertainty, amongst scientists and the public alike.

A new infectious respiratory disease emerged in Wuhan, Hubei province, China in December 2019 and was called coronavirus disease 2019 or COVID-19 by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020). It has spread rapidly all over the world, presenting the entire human population with immense health, social, economic, educational, and environmental challenges. These are some of the critical areas that made up sustainable development.

The global economy is being significantly affected by the coronavirus outbreak. Countries are trying to slow down disease transmission by testing and treating patients, quarantining potentially infected individuals by touch tracking, banning large meetings, enforcing full or partial lock-down, etc. (Chakraborty & Maity, 2020).

During the pandemic, the focus of public interest was the protective health care products such as masks and hand sanitizers. In many affected countries, masks were recognizably the 'must-have' item following news about COVID-19, and the Google search soared following the announcement of the first case of COVID-19 in Malaysia (Lim, Ong, Xie, & Low, 2020).

According to Lim, Ong, Xie and Low (2020), with the realization of the need for hand hygiene and handwashing, the interest in hand sanitizer subsequently grew. There was also concern from the public about the suitability of the supply and the affordability of the health care products since the prices of the products had risen at some point.

The COVID-19 outbreak presents major regulatory and ethical problems for those in the supply chain of these goods to procure suitable pharmaceutical and health care products and diagnostic medical devices. People with concerns about their health often turn to the internet for knowledge, and because of the accessibility that the internet provides people in this time and age it would be easy to retrieve that information (Lim, Ong, Xie, & Low, 2020).

There has been an influx of sellers online and the options available to online shoppers have been rapidly increasing. However, not all sellers are trusted and some of them take advantage of the ongoing pandemic to sell low quality health care products that can do more harm than good (Fairgrieve, Feldschreiber, Howells, & Pilgerstorfer, 2020). People seek transparency in their online transactions (Aronczyk, 2020).

Transparency and trust are important principles in ethics. And ethics or morality has to do with the principles, standards, rules, norms of conduct that make cooperation, justice, and freedom possible.

Currently the pandemic has exposed several sustainability and ethical challenges to the society at large. Clearly, we are at a significant crossroads, with consequences of climate change, the persistent problem of the COVID-19 pandemic and depletion of resources on the horizon which are in the domain of sustainability. The question of our responsibility to the future looms large and it is an ethical responsibility that should be addressed and better understood. This paper attempts to highlight the meaning of sustainability and to what extent it is applied in the period of a pandemic and how does ethical consideration go in line with sustainable development.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

In effect, sustainability forces us to face the consequences of our behaviour. And as a result, developing an understanding of the ethical underpinnings of sustainability is fundamental to applying it as a solution for the many problems that societies are facing and will be facing in the future. On a general basis, sustainable development is defined as “development” that meets the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. The Brundtland definition of sustainable development was a broad ethical principle with two key components namely The Social Equality and Equity as pillars of sustainable development that focus on the social well-being of people.

Sustainability is now a well-known and commonly accepted framework for guiding a wide variety of choices. Sustainability suggests that in the decision-making process, societies that have a good Quality of Life (QOL) have an obligation to ensure that both future societies and contemporary, and less well-off societies are also able to achieve a standard of living in which their basic needs are met (United Nations General Assembly, 1987, p. 43).

The main features of sustainable development are:

- it respects and cares for all kinds of life forms.
- it improves the quality of the human life.
- it minimises the depletion of natural resources.
- it enables the communities to care for their own environment.

Communities are applying sustainability to solving urban areas and reinvigorating the local economy. Corporate companies are using the concept of sustainability to expand the measure of success for their endeavours from the financial bottom line to triple bottom line. Whilst universities are applying sustainability to guide changes to their campuses, curriculum, governance, investments, procurement policies and relationships with their local communities. Hence, sustainability is a framework upon which specific strategies could be used to guide decision making.

Inherent in the definition, the notion of ‘sustainability’ is the proposed responsibility of contemporary society for the QOL of today’s population plus the preservation of resources, the environment, and the ingredients needed for future populations to also experience a good QOL. This is a disheartening task that requires enormous changes in thinking, policy and basic assumptions about the economy for its full implementation. In the field of agriculture, the word ‘sustainable’ implies the relationship to an ecological balance such as conserving an ecological balance by avoiding the depletion of natural resources (Zakaria et al. 2017). Maintaining an ecological balance will help the country to stay within the boundary of sustainable development.

One may question why there is a need to apply the sustainability framework? To answer this, then several terms need to be considered such as rights, obligation, and interdependence.

Currently, this notion of sustainability brings forward the idea that wealthier, more technologically sophisticated societies would have to contribute materially and through a wide range of assistance program to increase the wealth of poorer nations, to help them to develop their capabilities to provide basic needs to their population. So, the question of obligation comes into play. Does the present generation have an obligation to the future generation? Who is controlling the fate of poorer countries and everyone else?

Hence one can see that the application of sustainability framework requires a better understanding of ethical concepts. At its core, sustainability is about ethics because it calls on present people to consider the condition of future populations who are at the mercy of our current production and consumption patterns (Kilbert et al. 2012). Citizen of the world will have their rights to question whether their countries and other countries of the world are taking care of the well being of the current generation and the interest of future generations. They would want to know whether the countries of the world are practicing sustainability to the fullest in normal time and during a crisis period, such as in a pandemic.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethics is basically one of the most important branches of philosophy – the theory of right conduct which deals with all sorts of day-to-day decisions.

In the field of journalism for instance, the concept of ethics lies on whether or not the media carry out their obligation with responsibility; how accurate the events are presented to the readers; and how far journalists separate factual and opinionated type of stories. This view undoubtedly is shared by the public as well.

Under the current pandemic situation, fake news is rampant, and the public is thrown into a dilemma of whether to believe or not to believe information from the various media. The presence of social media made matters more difficult. The search for authentic and believable information and news became much harder. The credo of journalism expected professional journalists to produce the “truth”, but it turns out the other way round in which the credibility of the mass media is gradually disappearing brought by the onset of globalisation and new media technology with the social media championing the plight of societies.

While people must rely on authentic data, the news spread through social media platforms often masks the original news and statistics. The tsunami of incorrect information and rumours has appeared as a major concern. The focus should be on awareness regarding SARS-CoV-2 and not on overburdening people with psychological distress which may lead our way to a psychological pandemic.

From Plato and to the present-day scholars and philosophers, the question of ethics has been hotly debated and has absorbed the attention of thoughtful persons in all cultures and religions. This has been the case because the question of right and wrong is so fundamental towards a lawful and sustainable society.

Ethics is synonymous with human behaviour – what is good and what is evil, what is right and what is wrong, what is valid and what is invalid, what is moral and what is immoral – these are ethical issues within the realm of sustainability. Moral obligation has been discussed at great length by Western thinkers like Immanuel Kant. Everyone is expected to do what is right. For instance, a journalist's duty is to produce the truth not because the democratic system needs him or her to do as such, but by his or her own human nature; his moral obligation must function as a "rational man" properly. However, Kant's ideas are ephemeral or evanescent and short lived or momentary because today, such an ethical maxim "duty for duty's sake" is impractical or unworkable due to the existing of various political and economic thoughts which are suppressing media activities and therefore journalists fail to carry out their moral duty (Ibrahim, 2015).

Another philosophical perspective related to moral obligation is promulgated by Eric Fromm. Fromm views ethics as man's own responsibility towards man's existence. Fromm sees that ethical obligation should be universal and valid to and for mankind (Ibrahim, 2015).

In sum, virtue, rightness, consequence, and context are all ethically important in navigating sustainability. A sustainable society lives within its natural and social system which emphasize rules and incentives that promote replenishing and limit depletion, and pollution. A sustainable society builds upon the commitment of its members to conform to these rules voluntarily, and it enforces them when necessary.

The above observation coincides with the famous sayings by communication and industrial psychology scholars, Katz and Kahn who aptly said: *What you are today is what you will be tomorrow*. The question of our responsibility and moral obligation to the future generation poses a great challenge that needs to be addressed immediately, i.e. today. This is a daunting task that requires enormous changes in various aspects of life including changes in the mindset, behaviour, attitudes and policy implementations. With the current situation that is being challenged by a pandemic, sustainability would mean that everyone has the right to having their basic needs met. For the present, it would also imply that wealthier societies need to assist poorer nations with the provision of basic needs for the populations to survive (Kilbert et al. 2012). Hence, the current generation has an obligation for future generations through ethical conduct and practices.

PANDEMIC

A pandemic is the worldwide spread of a new disease (WHO, 2010). Pandemics happen when new (novel) viruses emerge which are able to infect people easily and spread from person to person in an efficient and sustained way (CDC, 2017). An epidemic becomes a pandemic when there is widespread geographical distribution of the disease (Green, 2020).

The coronavirus or COVID-19 has impacted the lives of millions of people all over the world. All the countries in the world, without exceptions, are affected by the COVID-19 pandemic since December 2019. Most countries have employed various methods to control the spread of COVID-19 including travel ban and restrictions, immunity passport, contact tracing, quarantine and

at the extreme, lockdowns of cities, regions, and whole countries (Isfeedvajani et al. 2020). By exposing global interconnectedness and human frailties, it has changed the world in unimaginable ways. It has become clear that not only is the pandemic a planetary public health issue, but also a business issue. Not only has it affected the world by becoming a major health concern, but it also negatively impacted many economies. Online shopping used to be more of a luxury, but due to the pandemic it has turned to a new norm that places it as a necessity (Aronczyk, 2020).

People all over the world are staying in their homes to quarantine and to curb the spread of COVID-19. Therefore, people are turning to the internet to acquire things that they might not find in their immediate vicinity.

Furthermore, the extreme uses of social media have progressed worldwide. Since words can mean differently in different settings, social media has been noted in allowing users to disperse their ideas, opinions, interests, programs, and others (Mohamed, M.T.S. et al. 2021). Anyone can utilize social media platforms such as Facebook and become a provider or seller online which is why it has become harder to identify the ones that are trustworthy. The quality of products, especially health care products, must be good because they could easily be a double-edged sword – they could help and could also cause harm to the consumers. They could provide suggestions for immediate remedies, but too much of them would cause health problems. Despite the increasing range of data examining social media in health contexts, including communication, promotion, and surveillance of public health, little insight has been allocated into how the usefulness of social media will differ based on the specific goals of public health regulating an intervention (Fairgrieve, Feldschreiber, Howells, & Pilgerstorfer, 2020).

When it comes to health information, the power of the Internet to promote quick, inexpensive, and worldwide publication is also a weakness. It is difficult to make distinctions between qualified medical practitioners and quacks, validated medicines and untested substances, and ads and content (Cho, 2000). In addition, based on unverified health statements, the global existence of the Internet defies most existing nation-specific laws governing the practice of medicine or sales of health-related products.

Factors such as attitude, benefit awareness, corporate reputation, and celebrity endorsement influence the consumer's decision to buy when exposed to social media advertising (Mekawie & Hany, 2019). For example, consumers with a positive attitude to a product are likely to take steps that reflect their positive attitude and are thus expected to act positively in social media advertising; buy social media-promoted products; or search for additional information.

In general, pandemics are not simply severe global health problems, but could also cause devastating socio-economic and political issues in affected countries. The World Health Organization reported that Coronavirus disease 2019 or COVID-19, is a novel pneumonia disease emerging in Wuhan, on January 12, 2020, before becoming a pandemic throughout all parts of the world. The global economy is being seriously affected by the coronavirus outbreak. In addition to being the biggest threat to global public health of the century, COVID-19 is seen as a symbol of inequity and stagnation in social development (Chakraborty & Maity, 2020).

Confirmed COVID-19 cases have been reported by more than 200 nations/regions (WHO, 2020). On the one hand, the very high infectivity of the virus is accountable for its global spread, and on the other hand, the advancement and convenience of international travel and tourism may be a cause for its further spread worldwide. Several religious, socio-cultural, scientific, sport, and political major gathering festivals are organized every year in different parts of the world and these activities are equated to mass spread of the disease (Chakraborty & Maity, 2020).

Chakraborty and Maity (2020) argue that these kinds of public gatherings are likely to sensationalize many of COVID-19's risk factors and have traditionally been correlated to disease outbreaks at both local and international levels. A global pandemic threat is the emergence and spread of COVID-19 from Asia to the Americas, Africa, and Europe.

Almost all the countries are attempting to decelerate the spread of the disease by monitoring and treating patients, quarantining associated individuals by exposure tracing, prohibiting large gatherings, implementing full or partial lock downs etc.

PRACTICES AND IMPLICATIONS

As part of efforts to tackle COVID-19, a multitude of medical products are being produced and manufactured. In the face of the current pandemic, there has been a massive global demand for a range of products, including test kits and pesticides, personal protective equipment, hand sanitizers and other biocidal products, ventilators, and the like, as well as medications, therapies, and vaccines (Fairgrieve, Feldschreiber, Howells & Pilgerstorfer, 2020). Due to the urgency of the situation and the sudden rise in demand generated by the pandemic, the design, testing and manufacture of many of these products varies from production in normal times.

According to Fairgrieve, Feldschreiber, Howells & Pilgerstorfer (2020) the COVID-19 pandemic raises major regulatory challenges for those in the supply chain of these products to procure suitable medical products and diagnostic medical devices. Special regulations found in the Public Readiness and Emergency Preparedness (PREP) Act 27 in the United States allow the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to take action to speed up marketing authorization approval and assist with the implementation of clinical trials endorsing products related to Covid-19.

The coronavirus has already created serious problems in global markets with a lack of supply of hand sanitizers, face mask counterfeiting, and many other supply chain disturbances (Fairgrieve, Feldschreiber, Howells & Pilgerstorfer, 2020). The manufacturing, distribution, and management of required medical equipment inventories have been greatly affected by disruptions in the health care supply chain.

Resource scarcity has become a challenging issue. Resource allocation should be ethical, transparent, and based on scientific evidence. In this regard, the primary obligation is to protect the front liners as the entire health care depend on these individuals. Equal health opportunities for all should also be the focus of all health policies by the state actors.

However, health care facilities have begun stocking up available goods as a response to supply chain shortages. Furthermore, such unregulated buying puts financial pressure on the health care system, which is already suffering from challenges such as inadequacies in procurement and excessive expenditure. This has contributed to the development of compromised quality of care as well (*Straits Research*, 2020).

However, the advertising of health care products on social media can be done by anyone from well-known manufacturers to small business owners. A variety of legal concerns emerge from the manufacturing and distribution of health care products in the context of a pandemic. Firstly, the intentionally deceptive or counterfeit goods that unfortunately arise when the corrupt are attempting to benefit from an emergency situation can be detected. There is a rise in fraudulent products that claim to cure, treat, or prevent COVID-19 (FDA, 2020). With the rampant usage of internet and social media, fraud and fake information could easily find their way in the media and product promotional content. Spread of rumours and fake news on social media is becoming more common in Malaysia and all parts of the world. The increasing internet penetration and the high trust given to online information was seen as one of the contributing factors to the widespread of rumours and fake news (Muhammad Noor et al. 2014).

By April 2020, more than 2,000 online scams, including 471 fake online stores selling fraudulent coronavirus-related products, had been removed by the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) in the UK (NCSC, 2020).

Current manufacturers scale up production of existing products to meet demand. This may simply be a case of a manufacturer doing more of the same, but in times of pandemic, the pressure

will come at a cost to generate supply quickly (Fairgrieve, Feldschreiber, Howells & Pilgerstorfer, 2020). Some may be forced to use alternative raw materials to raise production rates if there is no ready supply of the average, additional production/quality control workers, various production, or quality control techniques, etc. Both may potentially lead to the manufacturing of products that differ from the specification, leading to production defects or products that are "non-standard." (Burton, 2001).

Resource scarcity may also be encountered at the global level. Lower- and middle-income countries may face more scarcity than developed countries in countering COVID-19 spread. Hoarding of important medical supplies such as personal protective equipment and inaccessibility of vaccines and treatments should be discouraged by developed countries or the producer countries.

Besides the financial and economic perspectives, ethical aspects must also be considered in COVID-19 pandemic research at the academic and scholarly levels. It is an ethical obligation to conduct research in infectious disease outbreaks needed to address pertinent research questions ranging from health sciences including risk assessment, risk management, vaccine development and modelling studies for improved data analysis to social sciences fighting discrimination, violence, information seeking and dissemination, uncertainty and anxiety reduction, issues on human rights et cetera.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has taken a toll on education systems around the world, affecting approximately 1.6 billion students in over 200 countries. More than 94% of the world's student population has been affected by school, institution, and other learning facility closures (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). This has resulted in significant changes in every part of our life. Traditional educational techniques have been considerably disrupted by social distancing and restricted movement regulations. The reopening of schools once the restrictions have been lifted is another challenge, as many new standard operating procedures will need to be implemented.

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 is a worldwide pandemic and has become a significant global public health problem. It can have long-lasting impacts on countries with already weak health care systems. Outbreaks in a pandemic situation evoke fear-related behaviours among health care professionals and an elevated risk of mental health problems is often present.

The health crisis of COVID-19 has brought new challenges to the effective delivery of health information around the world. In the context of COVID-19, this is amplified by misleading information and disinformation on social media. Past studies have shown that self-efficacy plays an important role in predicting public health behaviours. However, in the event of a pandemic, there is an increased dependence on the government and the health authorities to manage the problem. The key to disease mitigation and control is the need to provide clear, consistent, and credible information about the COVID-19 pandemic.

In order to ensure that public health remains the highest priority on the government agenda, the control of information during a pandemic is of vehement significance. Similarly, to keep up with the COVID-19 news and the required preventive measures, the public must also be provided with reliable and timely details. Social networking platforms are widely used worldwide by the WHO, health care providers, and regulatory agencies to discuss important public health concerns.

They can be used to educate the public and health care practitioners on a wide variety of subjects, from anti-microbial resistance issues to topics such as reporting of adverse reactions. Awareness-building strategies that take advantage of the broad scale, breadth of scope, and immediacy of social media platforms to connect efficiently, easily, and effectively represent the central focus of these initiatives. It is hoped that the aftermath of the pandemic may provide a

meaningful platform for the current generation to plan and strategize the futures to be not only sustainable, but also more ethical.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Huda Ahmed Idris Mohamad is a Postgraduate student in Communication, Faculty of Business, Information and Human Sciences, IUKL. She is from Sudan and currently staying in Qatar.
Email: hudaaidris1999@gmail.com

Faridah Ibrahim, PhD is Professor in Journalism and Communication with the Department of Communication, Faculty of Business, Information and Human Sciences, IUKL.
Email: faridah@iukl.edu.my

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