

Social trust in times of crisis

How we act in challenging times depends partly on how we expect others will act

Nomi Claire Lazar

For The Straits Times

As countries around the world confront Covid-19, it is easy to compare tangible preparations like numbers of beds, ventilators and doctors per capita. But a public health emergency also tests social trust.

In a crisis, social trust is critical to compliance. Will citizens abide by stay-home notices and social distancing? Will they help one another and assist the vulnerable? Do people believe their compatriots deserve to be trusted, even when they belong to different social, religious or cultural groups?

When we expect others will help us and our loved ones, we are motivated to abide by their equal expectations in turn. If we can each trust others to buy only what we need, the shelves stay full. We're one community. We're in it together. But how we act depends partly on how we expect others will.

Without social trust, we anticipate bad behaviour in others and respond defensively. Consider stockpiling: If each person fears others will take more than their share, leaving none for that person, it becomes rational to do the same. Shelves are then empty: a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Stockpiling incidents have occurred across the globe, but in

some places, this is the least of their social trust worries. Gun sales have skyrocketed alongside Covid-19 case counts in the United States.

Americans remember Hurricane Katrina's violent aftermath. People expected looting, and set about aggressively defending their property. While there was little actual looting, violence sparked by mutual distrust contributed to hundreds of deaths.

What would happen without social trust as, for example, Malaysia and Italy deploy their military forces to enforce lockdowns and social distancing?

The army and the police are where state force touches citizens most directly. We may not think of this in Singapore, where not a single police officer has been killed by a civilian in the past 20 years, and police shootings of civilians are exceedingly rare. Because citizens and police trust each other not to shoot, they don't shoot first. Social trust builds on itself.

When a government has reliably met citizens' needs for economic, food and physical security, it creates the conditions for social trust. People are more relaxed and inclined to care for one another.

When states also provide healthcare, education and opportunities for service to others and self-actualisation, regardless of income, this tempers resentment across economic and social divides, and builds common purpose.



Residents of The Pinnacle@Duxton were among many Singaporeans on Monday who applauded in appreciation of workers on the front lines of the fight against the coronavirus. The writer says that where social trust flourishes, there is hope, and adds that social trust is dynamic: Facing a challenge together can seed new vectors of cohesion and mutual care.
ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH

Investment in social infrastructure can pay huge dividends in a crisis like this.

Singaporeans are used to seeing these tangible effects of government work in their daily lives. But it is challenging for governments in large federal states to build this relationship with citizens. Local, provincial or state governments provide daily services while a faraway central government's workings may seem mysterious.

Who is successful at meeting citizens' needs, whom should they trust, and how are they connected with distant others whose distinct local services make for distinct lives? Worse, levels of government

often cast blame on one another for failures, further eroding already low levels of public trust. In Canada, the federal government helps fund universal healthcare, but provinces pay the lion's share and do the administration. When there aren't enough hospital beds, whose fault is it?

As federal or local leaders make political gains attacking one another, people wonder if the government can be trusted to do anything well. Of course, large states cannot do without multi-level government, but it comes at this cost.

Citizens may feel the cost most keenly in a crisis, when governments themselves may have

forgotten what they are capable of.

This is one reason why some Anglosphere states have had trouble moving quickly enough to contain the Covid-19 crisis: They have, at best, forgotten that they can act, and at worst, decided they ought, on principle, not to. They may even have let critical organisational and material capacity lapse: The US disbanded its central office for coordinating pandemic response, ostensibly as a means of trimming "waste".

These political matters can also drive social distrust.

Trenchant disagreement over what governments ought to do, and what services ought to be left to

individuals or communities, drives deep division in some Anglosphere countries. Should a state provide a basic income? Or should only charities pitch in when individuals are unable to provide for themselves?

Principled disagreements over identity and distributional justice can create dangerous divides. American acquaintances have joked: "It's just as well Republicans ignore the urgency of Covid-19. Fewer Republican voters on election day!" So much for social trust.

Worse, because government always seems hijacked by one faction, whoever does not have "their guy" in power may see government as the enemy. In a factionalised society, when a crisis strikes and leaders say "You need to take this seriously", people think "Why should I trust you? You're with them".

But in fear, people may instead choose to band together for mutual assistance and protection, creating new vectors of social trust.

We see this in a heartening range of global initiatives: In New York City, citizens calling themselves "Invisible Hands" offer to deliver groceries to the elderly.

In Wuhan, neighbourhood councils ensured everyone had food.

In Italy, citizens fling open windows to applaud and serenade exhausted medical workers.

Singaporeans stepped up to house stranded Malaysian workers when the border closed, and volunteers help distribute masks and hand sanitiser.

Right now, what each state does impacts every other, and every person is relying on every other for their families' health and well-being. Where social trust flourishes, there is hope. And that trust will build on itself. But even where it does not, social trust is dynamic: Facing a challenge together can seed new vectors of cohesion and mutual care.

At this momentous juncture, all governments face an opportunity to engage and build trust with and among citizens. As we come together to confront this common enemy of humanity, who knows what new bonds will be forged?

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• Nomi Claire Lazar is an associate dean of faculty and associate professor of politics at Yale-NUS College.