Expertise from the humanities and social sciences is essential for governmental responses to COVID-19

Citation for published version:
Pickersgill, M & Smith, M 2021, ‘Expertise from the humanities and social sciences is essential for governmental responses to COVID-19’, Journal of Global Health, vol. 11, 03081. https://doi.org/10.7189/jogh.11.03081

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):
10.7189/jogh.11.03081

Link:
Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published in:
Journal of Global Health

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There can be few people untouched by the social and economic turbulence of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, even if they or their close ones have been medically unaffected by the virus. We have seen both the huge cost to human life of COVID-19 around the world, and the very considerable costs to lives as lived [1]. The disruption and abruption of swathes of educational, religious, and cultural activities and much, much more speak to the dramatic personal and political ramifications of managing a disease which at the start of last year did not even have a name [2].

The disastrous implications of the global spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus have exacerbated and generated humanitarian crises in both classic and less familiar forms [3]. Increasing numbers of people, including in relatively affluent countries, continue to struggle to access the resources and support they need [4]. Despite this, expert advice and insight from the disciplines precisely concerned with the nature of societies and the workings of social, cultural, and economic processes – namely, the humanities and social sciences – have too often been under-utilised by policymakers tackling the pandemic.

SARS-CoV-2 is a virus and COVID-19 a serious disease, so of course expertise from biomedicine and public health is needed on national and international advisory groups aimed at addressing and managing the pandemic. However, the broader effects of COVID-19 also need more sustained attention [5]. SARS-CoV-2 permeates society and culture, undermining diverse aspects of well-being beyond a purely biomedical understanding of health. Innovative solutions to its management can consequently be derived by exploring historical and international experiences and re-examining and building from insights from philosophy and the arts [6].

Many of the questions that policymakers at local, national, and global levels are dealing with in relation to COVID-19 have significant social, economic, and ethical dimensions [7]. What, for instance, are both the immediate and longer-lasting implications of different exit strategies to stay-at-home mandates? How can individuals, communities, and infrastructures best recover from the pandemic and understand, anticipate, and adapt to the widespread changes to personal and professional lives that will result? And how can societies learn the
Humanities and social science research can provide the political, historical, cultural, social, and economic insights to deepen our understanding of the pandemic, how it has been experienced, how to overcome it, and how best to learn from it.

Societies are formed through the interactions between histories, laws, traditions, and social relationships at different levels. Deep understandings of these and the complexity of their effects on economies, communities, and individuals are absolutely vital to informing the design, development, and roll-out of policy, regulatory, and technical interventions into societies afflicted by – and eventually recovering from – the SARS-CoV-2 virus. It is these understandings that must be brought to bear on the current crisis through an enhanced role for the humanities and social sciences as part of policy advising and making, as societies around the world seek to mitigate the worst aspects of COVID-19 and move towards recovery.

Acknowledgements: The authors are very grateful to Vikki Entwistle and Richard Huxtable for comments on an earlier draft.

Funding: None declared.

Authorship contributions: First drafted by MP, with input from MS who then also reviewed and edited the text. The final version of the editorial was produced by MP and confirmed by MS.

Conflicts of interest: MP acknowledges the following funding: British Academy [EN160164], ESRC [ES/T014164/1, ES/S013873/1], MRC [MR/S035818/1], Wellcome Trust [209519/Z/17/Z, WT106612MA]. MS acknowledges the following funding: AHRC [AH/L009641/1]. The authors have completed the ICMJE Conflicts of Interest form (available upon request from the corresponding author), and declare no further conflicts of interest.
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