

COVID-19 tests communitarian values

**The world's most communitarian countries are handling the pandemic well.
The most individualistic countries are doing the worst.**

Amitai Etzioni

The Diplomat, 14 July 2020

In the 1990s, I was dubbed a communitarian guru, although quite a few others deserved the title at least as much. Recently, I have followed with special interest the responses to the pandemic in various nations that have embraced communitarian values (sometimes referred to as Asian or East Asian values). Communitarianism is often defined as a social philosophy in which the common good trumps individual rights. Individuals are viewed as cells of an organic body, the society, and hence gain their meaning through the contributions they make to society. This philosophy draws on Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist values. (The version I advocated treats the common good and individual right as co-equals and is referred to as liberal communitarianism.) Communitarian governance relies on norms and peer pressure, rather than on government coercion, laws, and policing.

The sudden outbreak of COVID-19 raised the question: Can nations rely on their communitarian values and norms to curb the spread of the virus, or must they fall back on government impositions? I should note that communitarians do not necessarily assume that the government will play no role, but they do assume that society will largely regulate itself.

Japan provides a prime test case. As Paul de Vries, contributing writer for the Japan Times, pointed out, while compared to most other countries in its region, Japan has one of the highest degrees of individualism, the values of “courtesy, obligation, and shame” have a significant impact on Japanese social, political, and business culture. These values also motivate an adherence to policies that emphasize the collective good. Shame and stigma, that follow violating norms and *giri*, play a significant role in ordering daily life.

Japan's government played a relatively small and not particularly vigorous role in controlling the pandemic. It was slow to introduce protective measures and originally introduced them only in some parts of the country. Above all, the Japanese government was unable to forcibly close businesses and make its citizens stay inside due to the way its constitution was written at the end of World War II. Instead, the government has had to rely on asking restaurants and businesses to close early and on sending government workers to the streets to inform the public on what must be done.

Communitarian values seem to have carried the day. The authorities sought a 70-80 percent reduction in social interaction. The data suggest they got close to that figure. The Japanese high-speed train network operated at around 5 percent capacity over the May “Golden Week” holiday period, compared with the typical 105 percent. In Tokyo crowds have fallen by around 60 percent. Masks are in use by almost everyone, a request that has invoked few complaints because, in Japan, people often don masks anyhow out of concern about pollution, allergies, or colds. Some individuals and businesses who ignored these restrictions were shamed by being named in public lists. The assistant director of Tokyo Medical and Dental University hospital, Ryuji Koike, stated, “I don't think the falling number of infections is due to

government policies. I think it looks like Japan is doing well thanks to things that can't be measured, like daily habits and 'Japanese behavior.'"

Japan has reported just under 18,000 confirmed cases, has avoided overloading its medical system, and has managed to contain deaths below 1,000 people, resulting in one of the lowest death rates per 100,000 people (0.78) in the world.

Other nations that embrace communitarian values have also done rather well in containing the virus, relying more on social norms than government coercion. Professor Chan Heng Chee found that in South Korea, China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, "in spite of having different political systems, they all share to some degree a communitarian culture, where social solidarity is valued." Data from Johns Hopkins shows China with a COVID-19 death rate of 0.33 per 100,000 people, Taiwan with 0.03, and South Korea with 0.54, compared to a U.S. death rate of 36.80.

The Chinese government initially tried to suppress the news about the virus rather than deal with it. However, once it changed course, it took draconian measures and locked down, for 76 days, 46 million people in the Wuhan region. These measures succeeded in curbing a rapidly spreading disease, bringing the total number of infections down to only a few cases. Although the government played a much larger role in China than in other nations with communitarian values, these values also played a role in China. In particular, neighborhood communities helped enforce regulations on sheltering at home and wearing masks, as well as ensured that sick people gained supplies and medical care.

Westerners may wonder if communitarian values could be combined with full attention to individual rights. The experience of Sweden, which refused to lock down and relied mainly on self-government and people's sense of social responsibility, suggests that the answer to this question is distressing. Sweden's policy is widely held as a grand failure, as it experienced high infection rates, much higher than countries with similar cultures, like Denmark, Norway, and Finland, all of which locked down. Sweden has recorded over 75,000 confirmed cases with 5,536 deaths. The elderly were hit especially hard, with 89 percent of the deaths in the over-70 demographic. Many of these people were denied basic therapeutic care and some received even only poor palliative care. "Nordic neighbors avoid Sweden like the plague," according a report in the New York Times.

However, one should not give up on the notion that communitarian values can provide a strong foundation for social governance in liberal democracies. Uruguay gives one hope. The government in Uruguay, rather than locking people down, trusted the people to behave responsibly — and they did.

On March 13, President Luis Lacalle Pou declared an emergency and shut the borders. Unlike the populist leaders of Brazil and the United States, he did not make light of the disease. "It was such a surprise to see a president listen to a doctor, or a mathematician, digest the advice, then communicate a message to the public free of any politics," says Eduardo Savio, an epidemiologist who advised the government.

The government calls its policy *libertad responsable* (responsible liberty). It urged people to work from home, wear masks, and keep their distance from each other, but did not confine

them to their houses. Lacalle Pou “was not going to imprison people,” says an adviser. By June 18, Uruguay reported 849 confirmed cases and 24 deaths from COVID-19, the lowest number as a share of population of any country in South America. The International Monetary Fund expects the Uruguayan economy to shrink by 3 percent this year, less than the regional average.

The least communitarian countries — the United States leading the parade, with the United Kingdom marching right along with it — have done very poorly in managing the pandemic. They turned mitigating measures such as wearing masks into a contest between the government and the masses, many of which have strong libertarian sentiments, instead of considering them a mark of being a good fellow, caring about others, and the common good. If I was not already a communitarian (albeit of the liberal kind), I would sign up now.

Amitai Etzioni is a University Professor and professor of international affairs at The George Washington University. He founded the Communitarian Network and is the author of *The Spirit of Community*, among other communitarian texts.

This article was also reported in The Japan Times.