

# World 404 Error - Normality not found



Since the Covid-19 virus has been at the front of everyone's minds for some weeks now, Sebastian Emig looks from a macro perspective at how the crisis could develop and the possible long-term effects on society and the economy. Next time we will dive more deeply into how the pandemic will potentially affect the food sector and change consumer expectations

**DEPENDING** on where you live and what state of lock-down you are in, for most of us life has changed fundamentally over the past few weeks and will remain far from normal for the near future.

In a few short weeks, we have entered a crisis unlike anything we have ever seen. It's a crisis where any pre-existing course of action has been put on hold. Such a crisis can naturally lead anyone to feel frustrated, annoyed, overwhelmed, afraid, concerned and unsure of what to do. Official advice may be absent, contradictory, out of date, or not granular enough for practical purposes. Confusion is compounded by a plethora of media reports with differing perspectives and advice.

The disease caused by this virus has brought economies to a halt and severely strained healthcare systems, filled hospitals and emptied public spaces. It has separated people from their families, friends and workplaces. It has disrupted modern society on a scale that most living people have never witnessed.

Just as this disease has shattered households, disrupted markets and exposed the competence (or lack thereof) of governments, it will lead to permanent shifts in political and economic power in ways that will become apparent only later. The real social and human costs will be studied and calculated in the years to come.

Everybody is reacting differently to the reduction of their usual day-to-day. Some try to balance this unprecedented situation with

something called 'panic-working': filling up days with video-meetings, tight schedules, obligatory workout sessions and so on. It is an attempt to throw oneself into productivity as a hedge against the feeling of loss of freedom, control and autonomy. The hope is that work will bring with it a brief feeling of safety, a return to known, manageable stresses and a sense of control and purpose. It is an attempt to cope with the new normal while the unpredictability of disease dynamics, a lack of relevant prior experience and the absence of plug-and-play instructions from government or international authorities all force us to slow our pace of thinking and acting as choices and opportunities are reduced. This new normal requires a constant reframing of mental models and plans. Initial ignorance, denial and paralysis can however give way to discovery and sense-making, then crisis planning and response, recovery and post-recovery strategy, and, finally, to reflection and long-term adaptation.

## THE GREAT RESET - COOL DOWN, RETHINK, RESTART

Each disruption or crisis has two sides: the things we need to let go of and the things that are about to emerge. The world as we know it is breaking apart and re-arranging itself, and we can see a new formation emerging from the dust. Let's have a look together at what the potential future might look like.

Interestingly, a new closeness seems to be emerging because of

the physical distance the virus is imposing on society. Many of us feel more connected in battling against a common enemy, and we have the technological means to create a new proximity across the chasms of social strata, age and gender. Just remember the overwhelming applause showing gratitude and solidarity towards medical staff that happens daily around the world. Post-crisis we might appreciate and value distance, and this will make connections more precious.

Running around in a hamster wheel is being replaced, where possible, by long walks in nature, even by younger people. In fact, the virus has accomplished more to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions within weeks than all recent climate conversations combined.

We are shocked by the economic crisis that is unfolding in front of our eyes, with many businesses shrinking or even going bankrupt. Maybe we will be surprised at how far the economy can shrink without actually breaking down.

Negative impacts such as closed borders, enforced separations, foreclosures and quarantines all show how fragile the interdependence and interconnectivity of a global economy is. I believe this is something we shouldn't sacrifice but it needs reconfiguration. A global just-in-time production regime, with widely branched value chains that shift millions of items around the planet might not survive. Instead, local production could boom, networks could become decentralised and

localised, storage facilities and depots could proliferate. In the best-case scenario, it might develop into a sustainable and greener glo-cal economy that will be more complex, but also more stable and resilient.

The European Union is - entirely falsely - criticised for its lack of action, forgetting that the authority for health-related measures lies with the Member States (of which some could have shown a more humane and united face). The question is how politics and democracy will emerge from this crisis, when many voices are calling for a strong (authoritative) leader.

### SHORT-TERM PAIN, LONG-TERM GAIN

If the crisis has shown us one thing, it is that populist arsonists have nothing valuable to contribute when it comes to finding solutions for the future. I hope that this will infuse the concept of democracy with new credibility and legitimacy. Similarly, science is experiencing a renaissance, while fake news is being unmasked.

The pandemic is terrible, but

this too will pass. How we deal with it is ultimately about the choices made by society. It's about the value we attribute to individual freedom versus the health of our neighbours. The current restrictions also present opportunities: more sophisticated and flexible use of technology, less polarisation, a revived appreciation for the outdoors and life's simple pleasures.

This crisis creates the sense that we are 'all alone together' in this, allowing ourselves a broader range of emotions, both positive and negative. All of us, separately and together, can make it work.

It is not an apocalypse, but a fresh start. Looking at the 1918 flu pandemic, history tells us that we are taking the right precautions. For us as a species this is survivable, and we will survive (despite the terrible human loss). This is a time to overprotect and reflect but not overreact. This current moment is a pivotal one and, to put it in Churchillian terms, despite all the odds it has the potential to be our 'finest hour' and deliver a positive outcome for the entire planet.

### STILL WORKING FOR YOU

Following the Belgian authorities' recommendation, we have closed the ESA offices and the ESA team will continue to work from home. At the time of writing, the situation is expected to continue until at least 18 May 2020, although an extension is certainly possible. All ESA staff remain available on all virtual channels (e-mail/mobile/WebEx) and we are still working hard on ongoing projects to support our industry. I am also happy to report that morale remains high.

We are sending regular sector and food industry relevant Covid-19 information to our members, and please do contact us if you want to receive it as well. We are here to make sure that your business can thrive as we work together through this unprecedented situation.



Director General Sebastian Emig\*  
\*in his capacity as permanent representative of PrimeConsulting BXLBCN SL

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