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Ten Lessons from the Corona Crisis

Times of crisis are moments of learning. They are therefore also times of political dispute: What is the significance of the events? Which measures have proven effective? How should things continue after the crisis? What behaviour must we change? Whether or not the society as such is learning, whether politicians draw adequate conclusions, depends to a large extent on a vigilant civil society. The following text discusses these questions from the perspective of an Austrian peace educator. Some conclusions may be different in other countries and other parts of the world and from a different perspective. Let us talk about!

#1: Learning to learn from crises

Corona teaches us nothing. A crisis is not a teacher. There is no mechanism by which the pandemic forces us to seek new insights. However, *we* can, through our own efforts, learn lessons from the crisis. But are we capable of learning? "When man was pulled out from under the rubble of his bombed-out house, he shook himself and said: Never again. At least not right away." This is how skeptically the poet Günther Kunert assessed our willingness to change after the Second World War. Even today, despite all the assertions, there is still the danger that, apart from a few half-hearted approaches, everything will remain the same. But crisis means "turning point": Corona has shaken some false truths and at least for a moment facilitates a fundamental reflection. This opportunity must be seized.

The lessons to be learned are, in my opinion, mostly not even new insights, we certainly would not have needed Corona for this, but we have refused to see the "writing on the wall" so far. How long do we actually believe that we can afford not to learn anything from crises?

#2: Reflecting on our own perception and behaviour

While we are researching the virus from a medical point of view, from a socio-political point of view we must first study our perception and our behaviour in the crisis. The virus shows us what we have not seen because of our specialized and isolated way of thinking: the complexity of our world, our interdependence and the countless interactions of all areas – at the moment, for example, between pandemic and economy. As with perception, so it is with behaviour: Sociologists and psychologists have identified a number of unproductive behavioural patterns in our handling of catastrophes: first denial, then fear, then moralising and looking for scapegoats, and finally action at all costs. Which of these strategies do we observe today? How can we replace them with more sensible behaviour?

#3: Learning the globalization of solidarity

Corona shows us the state of the world: we have created global problems, but have not achieved global solidarity. In the crisis we are now experiencing all the disadvantages of a world in which the right of the strongest prevails. We are all vulnerable, we are all dependent on each other, and only our mutual solidarity can save us. Objectively, we share a common earthly fate. Yet all crisis measures have been taken at national level and in a spirit of national selfishness. Fantasies of national self-sufficiency are now haunting us. The few global

mechanisms – such as the UN Security Council – have not been used. The WHO is far too weak, and instead of strengthening it now, the USA is even suspending its payments. The background: the pandemic affects everyone, but by no means all equally. In the USA, for example, the poorer black population is disproportionately ill with corona. And the economic crisis, which is now following the lockdown, is hitting the states of the South much harder than rich Europe. As long as the hope of getting off better than the others prevails, there will be no solidarity. Which in turn means that the common fight against climate change risks failing as well.

#4: Becoming European – out of national interest

For the European Union, Corona is a huge test from which it could emerge stronger. So far, the Union has not passed this test. The European states have reacted to the crisis – to their own detriment – with national isolation and a "save yourself, who can" mentality: firstly visible in the lack of mutual support in the fight against the virus, now even more so in the lack of solidarity to cushion the economic consequences of the crisis. If this continues, it will be tantamount to a "Euxit", a de facto withdrawal of *all* member states from the Union. All experts agree: The currently better off countries like Austria or Germany can only be well off in the long run if Italy or France and other extremely affected countries are also well off. Mutual help within the EU is in the interest of all!

#5: Willingness to overcome our "imperial mode of living"

Not only Corona questions our Western "imperial mode of living" (Ulrich Brand). The crisis reveals a truth we do not want to know, namely that we live at the expense of people in other regions of the world and at the expense of future generations, including our own. This inevitably has to go wrong, and it will go wrong. Sustainability – that is more than electric cars and saving energy. It also means a painful renunciation of many of our privileges. We have to want that first. Corona shows that we – the well-off in the rich countries – do not need everything we have. Conclusion: Any recovery programme has not only to follow the spirit of the European *Green Recovery Alliance* but has also respect fair economic relationships with the Global South.

#6: From a culture of war to a culture of peace

Our way of life at the expense of the "rest of the world" requires permanent access to resources of the entire globe. This access is militarily protected – from those whose resources we use as well as from potential rivals. Economic globalization and military expansion are mutually dependent on each other, but the military logic has long since become independent. Overarmament, especially weapons of mass destruction and nuclear weapons, deprives humanity of essential resources for a just prosperity for all, it also creates insecurity and is a major cause of the climate crisis. Especially today, we can no longer afford this waste. To really understand this, we need a culture of peace. The UN has dedicated the first decade of this century to this cause. Let us make use of the insights gained from this campaign!

#7: Politics can work without demagogic populism

In the Corona crisis, the population is willing to trust politicians who communicate uncomfortable insights and announce unpleasant measures as long as they seem well-founded. Now they are taking steps that they would never have dared to take to mitigate climate change. Demagogic populism has a break for now. But this only works because we are now more interested in facts and want to distinguish them more strictly from fake news, because we check all restrictions with critical eyes to see if they make sense. This alert political awareness will be absolutely necessary beyond the crisis in order to reject the totalitarian temptation from which politicians are not immune, even in democracies.

#8: The welfare state means human security

For decades, neoliberal ideology has demonised, attacked and undermined the welfare state. As recently as last year, the EU Commission reprimanded the "inefficient use of resources" of the Austrian health care system, saying that despite the reduction in the number of hospital beds, Austria was still 40% above the European average! Today everything looks very different. The countries that have cut back their health care systems the most or expanded them the least are suffering most from the pandemic. Without decisive state intervention, neither the health nor the social consequences of the ensuing economic crisis can be absorbed. At the moment of need, it makes sense to everyone. It is important to save this experience that there is a logic of human well-being that is capable of winning political majority support, into the time after. For it is to be expected that the coming economic crisis will fuel the distribution struggles – within each country as well as in the global context.

#9: Overcoming the national reflex through transnational structures

As long as the European Union does not have a common health policy, as long as UN institutions like the WHO are as weak as they are today, in short – as long as there are no transnational mechanisms and structures, the national reflex, "crisis nationalism", will be inevitable. So we need more EU, we need reform and democratisation of the UN system. But the prerequisite for this is a lived cosmopolitan culture. This in turn requires a fundamental reform of the educational system, which has so far always reproduced nationalism. Instead of national education, planetary education and global citizenship must become the guiding principles.

#10: "Relearn our terrestrial finiteness" (Edgar Morin)

The COVID-19 virus has come to stay. We must learn to live with it. That also means changing our habits so that we *can* live with it. To do this, we must rethink our basic assumptions about our role as humans on "Homeland Earth". For far too long we have felt ourselves to be "masters of creation" who can "subdue the earth" with impunity. In doing so, we have repressed or even destroyed many of our natural "life-mates" – but our behaviour now falls back on us. This is evident in the case of climate change, but pandemics are also encouraged by the loss of biodiversity and the restriction of wildlife habitats. We have to realize that we are only fellow inhabitants of the earth. It is not available for our ruthless exploitation. Understanding this and applying it to all areas of life is arguably the most profound change that is about to take place.