

Politicizing vaccination

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COVID-19 cases are soaring, and the new variants are spreading and pushing many governments to take the toughest restrictions. On the other hand, the newly approved vaccines are being saviors of human kind, and states are chasing the spread of the virus with the vaccination programs.

Despite the pace of vaccine distribution in some countries, there are three new coronavirus variants of concern from the UK, Brazil, and South Africa. The world is still struggling amid uncertainties with no clear forecast for how and when the COVID-19 nightmare will end.

Although COVID-19 is a global pandemic where developing and developed states are suffering equally, multilateralism is facing a lot of obstacles in vaccination and nationalism is rising. Each state is striving to secure vaccinations for its population before planning to support other countries in need, giving rise to obstacles of securing adequate vaccines in developing countries which will widen the gap of inequalities and hinder the effectiveness of vaccines globally.

We are also following how governments are taking decisions and measures weekly based on the status of cases, deaths and capacities of hospitals. The performance of governments puts under the spotlight the relationship between science and politics and their role in the public health crisis response. Policymakers are being oriented by scientific data to make their decisions based on evidence.

There is always the dilemma of the lockdown and tough restrictions facing people's intolerance and economic crisis, especially in countries that don't have a solid health care system or social safety nets. Besides, there is a margin of people who are COVID-19 skeptics who are not inclined to take the vaccine and instead spread conspiracy theories and misinformation about it.

Politics has substantial influence on convincing people to abide by the restrictions and to perceive the importance of the vaccine. It is time to have evidence-based policies based on numbers and science away from political games and dynamics. It is so critical to define the role of scientists and policymakers in the decision-making process to have a blended mixture of evidence and public persuasion to set or implement any decision or strategy.

We are following how the world's largest economies are suffering from COVID-19 and still devising the best path to implementing their vaccination programs. With that in mind, what then of Lebanon, which is already in the throes of an economic crisis, austerity, political deadlock, sectarianism, bad governance, and corruption?

We have been following the government's decisions which are usually inconsistent with the best practices and recommendations of scientific health reports. We have scientists that are taking the crisis as a political window of opportunity to campaign and brand themselves at a time when they are expected to put all their effort into setting up and implementing a crisis response plan. Meanwhile, policymakers are transforming into scientists that have evidence to take impulsive decisions.

Going beyond the roles of scientists or policymakers can be attributed to the political and governance problems that Lebanon has faced for decades, with announcements and media coverage on a vaccination program and the number of vaccines expected to reach Lebanon based only on assumptions. There is no communication plan with the public to communicate in a simplified manner the vaccination program or the scientific evidence that lead to the decisions that are taken.

The spike in infections is pushing the country into another health and social explosion. The accumulated polarization, corruption, and inefficiency cannot produce transparent, agile and holistic plans or responses. Isn't it time to break one of the decades-old political taboos for the sake of moving forward? Isn't it time to start a national census to have at least numbers that can identify the exact size of the population and how they are broken down into age groups and regions in order to identify the exact number of needed vaccines?

Last time Lebanon conducted a national census was in 1932. Every time the census issue is raised, the demographic and sectarian issues rise to the top to dump the importance of having a census as the minimum level of statistical capacity. This disaster can be transformed into an opportunity if policymakers acknowledge the importance of evidence and move rapidly to conduct a national statistical system that is empowered and supported.

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