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Beyond health: The political effects of infectious disease outbreaks

Do infectious disease outbreaks breed political mistrust? Ore Koren, Indiana University Bloomington (USA), and Nils Weidmann, University of Konstanz (Germany), have found out that they do. Their study was recently published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America (PNAS).

The COVID-19 pandemic has drawn the attention to the far-reaching social implications of emerging infectious diseases, bringing to mind similarly impactful events like the Black Plague in early modern Europe or the Spanish Flu after World War I. However, how emerging epidemics shape the development of political mistrust and instability has been underexplored so far. In a recently published article in the PNAS, political scientists Ore Koren (Indiana University Bloomington and currently a Humboldt Research Fellow at the University of Konstanz) and Nils Weidmann (University of Konstanz) give empirical evidence that individuals who experienced an infectious disease outbreak show significantly less trust in the political establishment. This is especially true for their confidence in the president, parliament and ruling party of the country they live in. "Our findings provide robust empirical evidence that deadly infectious disease outbreaks can exacerbate political polarization and undermine political stability," the study concludes.

Declining trust in political institutions

The scientists focused on zoonotic disease outbreaks, i.e. diseases that originate in animal hosts and spread to humans, ranging from Ebola to H1N1 and Lassa, in several African countries. To evaluate the political impact of these outbreaks, the team combined outbreak data from the Geolocated Zoonotic Disease Outbreak Dataset (GZOD) with geolocated information from the Afrobarometer surveys. The latter database records the political and social attitudes of citizens in several African states through regular surveys, and also includes information about respondents' trust in various political actors.

To ensure that the results capture only the impact of an outbreak, the researchers "matched" individuals affected by disease outbreaks in their proximity with similar individuals from the same country who were unaffected. This approach reveals that residents that have experienced an outbreak have significantly lower levels of trust in their country's president, parliament, ruling party, electoral commission and police force. "An additional test of what happens when there are outbreaks in neighbouring countries – but not in one's home country – shows that these outbreaks abroad have no effect on political trust in the home country. Thus, the effect does not travel across borders," Weidmann points out.

Lessons learned

The loss of public trust could have various reasons, according to the researchers. It may be caused by the government's failure to protect civilians from exposure, its mismanagement of the disease, its enforcement of containment or other unpopular policies. These insights, so Koren and Weidmann, emphasize how crucial it is for policymakers to combine public health strategies with measures designed to preserve and rebuild political trust in case of infectious disease outbreaks. "Governments should integrate trust-preservation strategies into their epidemic response plans and make sure their decision-making is transparent, and communication is clear and consistent", says Koren. Weidmann adds: "During a health crisis, policymakers should rapidly engage with community leaders and trusted intermediaries to reinforce the legitimacy of public institutions." Both researchers also recommend constantly monitoring public sentiment during health crises to help identify solutions that not only mitigate the spread of disease but also rebuild trust in political leadership, thus reinforcing democratic norms.

Publication:
The study "Infectious Disease Outbreaks Drive Political Mistrust" was recently published in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* (PNAS). DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2506093122

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Further information

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