How to avoid a second lockdown

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We are heading fora new lockdown. Is it inevitable? I don'tthink it is. However, to avoid it, it is necessary to change our approach to the problem. First, we must stop focusing exclusively on the health side of the problem. It has many more sides, which is why the strategy of tracking and confiningpositive cases, and isolating theirdirect contacts, does not work. Many people cannot afford to stay at home because their economic situation does not allow it; others will not do so out of sheer fatigue, or because satisfying a palpable, immediatedesire is more stimulating than an ethereal threat. Finally, we all know that there are those who even deny the existence of the virus. It would be strange if they voluntarily complied with public health recommendations.

Why does the strategy not consider these factors? Probably because we were not prepared to face a virus that allows asymptomatic people (and some symptomatic ones soaked in antipyretics) to continue withnormal life without anyone detecting its inherent dangers. Nor do we have models for a virus that strikes in a hugely different way depending on the age of the patient. It is our bad fortune that those who least suffer its consequences are precisely those that usually have (and need) a more active social life. The campaigns and the messages, which are usually centered on solidarity, are not working well. In fact, they can be counterproductive.

What if we introduce exemplary sanctions into the equation? It sounds good, but it will work poorly, I am afraid. It would quickly turn anyone who cooperated with a tracker into an informer. In addition, it would encourage petty vendettas with acquaintances and neighbours who might be unsympathetic to us. Not to mention the difficulty of controlling thousands of people with the means at our disposal, while respecting the guarantees of the rule of law. Culturally we are not China, nor Vietnam, nor Singapore. It is worth remembering this.

All these variables contribute to a concerning scenario: there is no way to avoid having virus carriers among us. And it is enough for some of these to provoke super-contagious events in environments that are prone to creating serious problems. Under these circumstances, it seems that the only possibility to reset the system is a lockdown, like the one we had in March-April. The problem is that this could kill us economically, not to mention that it would just melt us psychologically. In confinements, as in world wars, there may be a second or a third at most. The next one would be with stones.

I think there is an alternative to this strategy, one that should be tried. The key to stopping the pandemic is, as the WHO says, testing - lots of testing. However, massive screening is not useful on its own, because it does not ensure that people behave according to the results obtained. That is precisely what must be encouraged. The best way to do it is by changing perspectives.

Let'sstop focusing only on people. Let'slook at the spaces. Let'sput in place controlledaccess to closed spaces, so that only those who can prove that they will not infect others can pass through. This will lead to several positive consequences: it will reduce the number of isolated people, expand spaces, and ensure that those who test positive do not spread the disease. In addition, the more people who have valid certificates, the more likely it is that they will be able to prevail in family and social gatherings, which are the ones that spread the virus the most.

How can this be achieved? To avoid problems of fairness and equity, the easiest way would be to force everyone who wishes to enter a safe space to take a test, subsidized by their employer or public administrations. This is unfeasible in the case of PCRs, because of the time they require, and misleading in the case of an antigen test, which, if not performed every three days (maximum), gives many false negatives. No, the option must be a centralized system of testing, one that is always subsidized. We would have to create approved centres (such as pharmacies or health centres) that would attest to the date on which a test was performed (with a negative result), through an electronic device associated with a specific person. This certificate would be the key to be shown at each access point. In this way, we would reduce the two main problems: the cost in terms of time, and the cost in terms of money, of the tests.

Obviously, a system of this type is logistically complex, but not impossible. It is also expensive, very expensive, even if we use pool PCR tests (about €7-8 per test) or

antigen tests at €5. It wouldbe difficult to sustain it in the long term- if it is viewed as a standard method for combating COVID-19 (we will see if the test prices go down). However, at the present moment, that's not the point. It is simply a matter of avoiding confinement, which is a lot – really, a lot – more expensive.

Would it work? I cannot say for sure. It is likely that it would generate some problems. Ultimately,there is no completely reliable system. It may also be that we exaggerate or fall short in defining safe spaces. Alternatively, that the logistics fail at some point. But what I am sure of is this: in a situation as desperate as this one, it deserves consideration.