

It is time to think beyond vaccines (and there is not much time left)

End of October 2021. The government is satisfied. The SARS-CoV-2 vaccination campaign has been successful. More than 80% of adult Spaniards have agreed to be vaccinated. With a vaccine efficiency rate of 90%, and bearing in mind that more than 10% of the population had already had the disease, it turns out that 60% of the Spanish population - three out of every four adults - are now immunized against COVID-19. It is true that we have not achieved herd immunity, but this is not surprising. Anyone could have known that this goal would never be easy, especially in a country that receives millions of tourists every year.

What really worries the government now is the emergence of a scenario of strong social conflict that it had not foreseen. As vaccination rates have increased, social pressure has also increased towards a return to the old normality: more and more people are refusing to respect the reduction in capacity, keep their distance or adopt individual protection measures, instead pointing to their state of immunity. When their behaviour is shaken, they simply blame those who are not immune for refusing a vaccination, persisting in their attitudes.

It is obvious that their reasoning is not fair. To begin with, vaccination is still not compulsory, so those who do not wish to do so are, in fact, within their rights, and others should respect this. Moreover, there are many people who have no choice: those for whom the vaccine is contraindicated (the most vulnerable, in fact) and those who were given the vaccine but did not obtain immunity. Not to mention children, of course, who remain out of the picture because they were not included in the clinical trials. However, a large part of the citizenry does not want to take on board these reasons, and the economic powers that be are clamouring for a general reopening of society to allow the country to regain oxygen after a year and a half of terrible sacrifices.

In a situation like this, the government is considering four options. The first is to impose the continuation of the restrictive measures, and to assume their cost. This is not attractive. The second is to end the problem by forcing those who initially chose to 'stay outside' to be vaccinated. Two problems make it less solvent: it is not going to be easy to break the will of a determined group, nor is it certain that it will provide a definitive solution to the problem.

The third alternative, certainly tempting, is to allow a gradual return to normality, by suggesting that the vulnerable take protective measures and accept that this could cost a certain number of annual victims, as is the case with influenza. This third solution, however, carries serious risks of generating social division. The unimmunised - more than 15 million citizens - are likely to denounce a covert compulsory vaccination campaign or, worse, social apartheid.

There is another, final, option: to introduce certificates of non-infectivity into our daily lives, which will make it possible to combine a general reopening of society with a reasonable guarantee of safety. Citizens will have to present these each time they want to access a space which, it has been decided, must be free from the risk of infection for the greater safety of all. Those who are immunised will be able to obtain them for an extended period of time, while those who are not immunised will have to undergo periodic non-

infectivity tests (antigen tests, PCRs or others) to keep their certificates in force. Those who cannot be vaccinated, or who have not become immune despite doing so, may benefit from a large public subsidy to finance the tests. Those who choose not to be vaccinated will receive a smaller subsidy (the difference in cost will be the price of their free decision not to take a risk that others have taken).

The government is debating between these four options and does not know which one to choose. Waiting until the last moment was not the best decision. Ideally, this question should have been raised in December 2020. At that time, we were in what John Rawls, the most important political philosopher of the last hundred years, would call the initial position: nobody knew yet whether he belonged to the group of the immunised or not. In this ignorance, we would surely have reached an agreement that would have allowed us to live together in a reasonable way, that is, maximising the security of the vulnerable without excessively restricting everyone's freedoms. Now, when we all know what we are, the debate is much more poisoned. It is a pity, they think, that we didn't remember Rawls in December.

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