Global Citizenship and Global Political Instability Through the Lens of COVID-19

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Abstract: The 21st century has been widely considered an era of globalization. Nevertheless, the outbreak of COVID-19 reveals that this ongoing interdependence not only brings opportunities for cooperation and common development but also global crises. In this turbulent world stricken by the pandemic, the significance of global citizenship, in which individuals identify themselves as citizens of the global village and collaboratively take actions to address global challenges, has been reiterated. This global citizenship awareness is expected to be developed through education – so-called global citizenship education (GCE). Therefore, this paper sheds light on the importance of GCE for global political stability through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly taking geopolitical dynamics into account. It starts by enunciating the COVID-19 pandemic as a consequence of the lack of global citizenship awareness and how it precipitates global political instability. It then goes on to explore how the pandemic contributes to the promotion of GCE at a societal level. Finally, back to the school level, it analyses how the pandemic acts as a motivation to expand and reify GCE, allowing students to be prepared for the unforeseeable challenges and ensuring global political stability in the future.

Keywords: global citizenship, geopolitics, political stability, global citizenship education, COVID-19.

1.   Introduction

Globalisation is broadly defined as 'the widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life' [1]. Specifically, in the 21st century, it is a transformative process that links people and places across boundaries through economic flow, political collaboration, social interaction, cultural exchange, and technological development [2]. However, it is necessary to be aware that this increasing interdependence between nation-states is not a unidirectional process and a force for public good. According to the transformationalist view, globalisation is a complicated and dynamic process intertwined with political authority, economic practices and social activities, reshaping societies in unpredictable ways [1]. In other words, not only does it bring cooperative opportunities and cultural diversity, but it also exposes the whole globe to various risks and challenges, which, therefore, forms a community of shared destiny.

The outbreak of COVID-19 showcased how viruses and "viral diseases do not respect national boundaries" [3]. It can be interpreted as a globalised phenomenon from the following three

dimensions. The first is extensity. The geographical spread of the coronavirus prompts the World Health Organisation (WHO) to announce a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) and label the outbreak as a pandemic [4]. Secondly, velocity can be seen in the spread of the virus. Two weeks after its origination in Wuhan, China, COVID-19 cases were detected in Thailand and further spread across continents [5]. Thirdly, in terms of intensity, COVID-19 provokes global health crises with its surging infection and death numbers, as well as leads to the restriction of social interactions and disruption of economic activities, risking individual, national, and global development.

In the midst of the pandemic as an impediment and crisis for world development and stability, global citizenship has been reiterated and is receiving increasing concerns. In the field of education, this awareness is expected to be developed through global citizenship education (GCE) - referring to a transformative form of education aiming to empower students with the necessary knowledge, skills, and values to address global challenges [6]. Previous research has shed light on the relationship between COVID-19 and GCE. The pandemic causes historical discontinuity and uncovers the unpreparedness of human beings in the face of misfortunes and crises, which raises GCE as a necessity for the sustainability of world development [7]. Nevertheless, simultaneously, the purposes of GCE concerning shared responsibility and cross-cultural understanding are fundamentally challenged. Hungwe points out that this unexpected deviation inevitably evokes nationalistic reactions; the xenophobia arising with the border closure and the repatriation of non-citizens is hardly mitigated by the advocacy of the citizens of the globe in GCE [8]. Likewise, student mobility, which has been considered a prominent means of cultivating cultural tolerance and promoting global citizenship, is going downhill due to lockdowns and travel restrictions imposed by COVID-19 [9]. However, these existing analyses posit COVID-19 as a still backdrop to which GCE should respond and accommodate. None of them utilises the pandemic as a lens to investigate the role of global citizenship in the political turmoil involving geopolitical factors and power dynamics.

Therefore, in order to fill this gap, this article aims to draw a comprehensive picture of the significance of GCE for global political stability from pre- to post-COVID-19. The first half of this research enunciates the COVID-19 pandemic as a consequence of the lack of global citizenship awareness. Engaging the perspective of geopolitics, it provides a detailed analysis of how this health crisis precipitates global political instability. The second half then goes on to explore how the pandemic contributes to the promotion of GCE at a societal level. Finally, back to the school level, it analyses how the pandemic acts as a motivation to expand and reify GCE, allowing students to be prepared for the unforeseeable challenges and ensuring global political stability in the future.

2.   A Lack of Global Citizenship Awareness and the Transition of COVID-19 to Global Political Instability

Looking back on the sweep of the COVID-19 pandemic, a lack of global citizenship awareness can be considered a contributing factor to the uncontrollable spread of the virus, leading to a worldwide outbreak. Global citizenship emphasises the interconnectedness and interdependence of countries and fosters individuals to identify themselves as accountable both in their local community and the global context [10]. It is characterised by participation in global issues, advocacy for mutual support, and empathy with others [11]. However, none of these can be discerned in the infancy of the coronavirus catastrophe. When China first suffered from high infection and mortality rates in December 2019, most countries were temporarily satisfied with their current public health and didn't take any protective actions or even prepare a contingency plan "until the COVID-19 threat was within their frontiers" [12]. Even though a cross-boundary tendency of the virus had been detected in January 2020, Italy initially underestimated its severity, with the local authority downplaying the risk. The state-of-emergency declarations were doubted by many policymakers and politicians, despite weeks

of warning from scientists about the potential for a disaster, by emphasising that the economy should not be paralysed by fear of the virus [13]. Because of this ignorance and innocence, Italy ended up suffering as the epicentre of the pandemic in Europe by March 2020. Similarly, the US politicians regarded wearing masks as a farce and politically accused it of being un-American, alongside the President claiming that 'Somehow, I don't see it for myself' [14]. Their bystander gesture reveals governments' mosaic view of the world pattern in which they firmly believe that the world is separated, only care about their domestic affairs, and hold apathy to crises beyond their boundaries. Consequently, this ignorance of global awareness, social responsibility, and civic engagement – as three components of global citizenship – transcends a regional epidemic disease to a global catastrophe [15].

The COVID-19 pandemic inevitably provokes global turbulence and political instability. According to Ake, political instability refers to the irregularity of "the flow of political exchanges" [16]. In other words, it involves turmoil and conflicts nationally and internationally. Aligning with Ake's claim about the ambiguous definition and pervasive manifestation of political behaviour, the social, economic, and cultural changes brought by the pandemic can, therefore, be examined under the political framework [16]. More importantly, these social, economic, and cultural factors are interwoven and collaboratively result in the exaggeration of inequality.

For individuals, pandemic-related social restrictions – lockdowns, quarantines, and remote working – compound personal income disparity. Evidence from multiple nations, including Germany, the UK, and Spain, suggests that low-income workers experience a higher risk of unemployment and financial loss than high-income earners because jobs with low salaries sometimes involve physical and manual labour, which hardly support working from home [17]. Even worse, research from the US reveals that the wealthy are benefitting from the widespread social and economic ramifications of the pandemic, whereas people at the bottom are disproportionately struck and threatened by the joint impact on their health and economic status [17]. This widening gap between the rich and the poor signifies a worsening vertical inequality, which stands in the opposite of social justice and sustainable development of the world.

In addition, at a national level, the pandemic exaggerates inequality between the Global North and Global South. The strike of COVID-19 brings social struggles in the public health sphere in countries in the Global North, despite their well-developed medical infrastructure and advanced healthcare systems. For instance, in Lombardy, Italy, one of the European regions massively hit by the pandemic, the local hospital capacity is far lower than its surge of confirmed cases and deaths, revealing a potential issue in the healthcare system: hospitals typically structured to provide patient-centred care are not adequately prepared to offer the kind of community-focused care required during a pandemic [13]. Nonetheless, the impacts of COVID-19 on the Global South are far more severe and complicated than the pressure it exerts on healthcare systems in the Global North. In Africa, because of the initial weakness of its political and socioeconomic infrastructure, other humanitarian crises emanated from the pandemic. Since Africa's revenue and its citizens' career opportunities highly rely on the export of primary goods, international restrictions exacerbated the widespread hunger across the continent, worsening the already fragile state of African nations [18]. Similarly, the disparity between the Global North and Global South can be examined through the lens of cultural hostility. While travel restrictions resurge nationalism and egocentrism, fostering a sense of insularity and reinforcing borders, anti-Asian racism intensifies to unprecedented levels [19]. This is starkly illustrated by calling COVID-19 a 'Chinese virus', a label that stigmatises the entire ethnic group as well as aggravates xenophobic sentiments, which further marginalises Asian communities [12]. As a result, these social, economic, and cultural factors deployed by nation-states lead to horizontal inequality, which potentially is a source of political conflict.

Bodea and Houle's research delineates how economic and racial inequality tends to engender political unrest by precipitating riots, anti-government protests and even large-scale civil wars, as well as endangering the existence of numerous democratic regimes [17]. Resonating with their findings, the evidence discussed above further enunciates that vertical and horizontal inequality, generated by economic, social and cultural tensions, challenges the pre-existing social structure and rearranges the world pattern, contributing to global political instability. Noticeably, geopolitics plays a crucial role in this turbulence. The prioritisation of national interest over global consciousness delayed collective actions and allowed the virus to spread unmanageably, fundamentally contrasting with global citizenship. By neglecting the interconnected nature of the world, geopolitical dynamics elevate social, economic, and cultural inequality, which shakes the present global pattern and causes political instability. To sum up, a paucity of global citizenship awareness, seen as a form of geopolitical fragmentation, ended up rendering COVID-19 a global crisis, whereby the pandemic is a determinant of global political instability per se.

3.   Global Citizenship Education Amid Political Instability

It seems that global political instabilities brought on by COVID-19 have halted the ongoing process of globalisation and torn the world further apart. Simultaneously, it poses practical challenges to GCE. With its aim to encourage individuals and communities to engage in global solutions and make positive change actively, GCE is conducted through experiential learning and youth engagement, involving student-led movements, whereas home quarantine requirements in the pandemic make the teaching activities of GCE illegal and unrealistic [20-22]. However, arguably, the pandemic can be considered a vehicle for enhancing global citizenship for every human being in society. Incorporating a transformationalist view of global citizenship that acknowledges globalisation as a dynamic and tangled network of local, national and global, the COVID-19 pandemic illuminates the necessity of collective responsibility and multilateral collaboration [23]. For example, although mask-wearing and self-isolation were initially criticised as a deprivation of democratic freedom, a consensus of following COVID-19 controlling guidelines aiming to protect individuals themselves as well as others has been gradually reached [17, 24]. Particularly, in the face of epidemics, recent findings indicate that individuals who are less susceptible to infection demonstrate a greater willingness to adhere to virus control measures, when they become aware of the potential risks to those with weaker immune systems [25]. In this situation, individuals learn to recognise themselves as part of a global community, in which they prioritise the well-being of vulnerable groups and the common good before their personal interests and take the responsibility to fight against global issues.

Likewise, mutual support and cooperation between countries and organisations have become ubiquitous and paramount in flattening the infection curve. From the early identification of the virus to the spread of the vaccines, the pandemic facilitates scientific globalism. For instance, the exchange of laboratory findings and clinical results becomes achievable even among researchers and organisations with distinct political ideologies, such as the US and China [26]. When it comes to the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, global cooperation takes various forms, involving financial support, extensive logistical coordination and equitable supply. The Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), a non-profit multinational organisation aiming to facilitate vaccine development, plays a paramount role in funding by bringing together resources from various international donors to support the pioneering vaccine research [27]. To ensure the reach of the vaccine, international organisations, governments, and private sectors worked together to address the challenges of cold chain storage, transportation, and distribution in remote and underserved areas. In addition to this, the COVAX Facility, a global initiative founded by the WHO and the European Commission, is eligible to negotiate better prices with vaccine manufacturers and secure doses for low- and middle-income countries that may otherwise struggle to afford them [27].

These measures for overcoming the pandemic give a lesson to every individual and agent on the significance of empathy and collaboration in the face of crisis in human society. The collaborative global response to COVID-19 has showcased that challenges can be mitigated more effectively by cooperating than acting alone. The pandemic has served as a real-world application of the principles advocated in GCE, such as international collaboration and global responsibility. However, more than just reinforcing these concepts, it provides a powerful experience that underscores the necessity of global solidarity. In this sense, not only does it prove that political stability on a global scale is achievable through collective action and mutual support, but it also potentially reshapes international relations and encourages a more empathetic pattern to tackle future global instability.

Finally, back to a traditional education context, the pandemic can be deemed imperative to specify GCE, which builds resilience and adaptability by developing students' values, knowledge and skills in health-related global issues. GCE has been criticised for its romanticised goals to guarantee sustainable development and encompass all positive outcomes [12]. UNESCO frames GCE as a panacea for "securing a world which is more just, peaceful, tolerant, inclusive, secure and sustainable" [20]. GCE is expected to encapsulate all issues regarding globalisation and citizenship, including human rights education, peace education, environmental education, civic education, social justice education, etc [12]. However, the turmoil caused by the pandemic reveals its over-idealistic goals and points out a lacuna related to public health issues that used to be omitted in GCE. A new branch, namely post-pandemic citizenship education (PPCE), with emphasis on "public health, empathy and compassion, self-sacrifice, and cooperative spirit" is, therefore, introduced [28]. Beyond these values to be added to the GCE syllabus, Saperstein proposes five PPCE-related units, covering public health issues, protective responses of the government, and preventive behaviours of individuals and encouraging students to initiate social media campaigns and develop action plans for future pandemics [28]. These units and activities contextualise the meanings of being a global citizen by using the COVID-19 pandemic as real-life teaching material and providing students with opportunities to predict and rehearse reactions to the threats of future health crises. As a result, through PPCE – an expansion of GCE, students are cognitively and practically prepared to confront and respond to unexpected challenges in the future. This preparedness is likely to not only inhibit the transition from a regional challenge to a global crisis but also enable future citizens to adapt their behaviours to minimise its influences in every facet of our society, which ensures the stability of the global political environment.

4.   Conclusion

In conclusion, through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic, the overlook of global interdependence and the unawareness of global citizenship push human society into this catastrophe, which inevitably causes global political instability. Particularly, geopolitical dynamics play a significant role in this process. Nationalistic responses, led by the hidden political competition between nation-states, hamper the early precautions against COVID-19 and transcend it into a global crisis. In this turmoil, the impacts of the pandemic on social, economic, and cultural activities exaggerated vertical and horizontal inequality between both individuals and nations, challenging the harmony of social and international relations and contributing to global political instability.

Although it appears to raise hostility and hamper the process of globalisation, collaborations between individuals, organisations, and governments to overcome the pandemic can be considered an exemplification of GCE at a societal level. These collaborations accelerate the virus-controlling process. By developing global responsibility and uniting the globe, it contributes to the recovery from the current global turmoil and maintaining global political stability in the long term. At the educational level, incorporating the pandemic as a real context that is currently affecting our society,

GCE equips students with essential values, knowledge and skills to react and resile in future challenges, by which global political stability is assured.

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