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Human life or *some* human life?

Gabriel Kuhn

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Many people are writing intelligent and insightful things about COVID-19 and the current crisis. I don't feel I have much to add. Yet, there is one aspect that is addressed surprisingly rarely, although I find it obvious and highly irritating: the hypocrisy involved in the global-north response.

We regularly hear global-north politicians, media pundits, and know-it-alls, not least from the left, stress that "human life must come first," that it "needs to be protected at any cost," that saving it "must be our utmost priority." We must not "sit idle while people die," we hear. Yet, the sad truth is that we do this all the time.

Close to half a million people die of malaria every year. The AIDS pandemic has killed more than 30 million people since 1981, reducing life expectancy in some African countries by 30+ years. A similar number of people die *every year* from curable diseases, malnutrition, and imperialist war.

In the face of COVID-19, great sacrifices are demanded from people in the Global North to avoid the number of deaths rising. Make no mistake: I abide by the principles of social distancing

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and expect everyone to do what they can to slow down the spread of the virus, ease the pressure on health and care workers, and create an environment that will keep the loss of life at a minimum. But we should be ready to make similar sacrifices to protect all human life, no matter how far removed it seems to be.

People often roll their eyes at such comparisons, deeming them “simplified,” “inapt,” or “tactless.” These things, it is said, cannot be compared. But they can. Either a moral principle applies universally, or it doesn’t. Either saving human life is our utmost priority, or it isn’t. Either we are ready to make great sacrifices to do so, or we aren’t. It is no more complicated than that.

We all know that the moral principles evoked during the current crisis do not apply universally. With a fraction of the sacrifices asked from people in the Global North now, millions of lives in the Global South could be saved every year.

We can always hope that people will remember this once the dust on COVID-19 has settled. We can always hope that the principle of saving human life at any cost will indeed be applied universally. Perhaps it could even become a guiding principle for international relations. Needless to say, the political and economic systems we live under would have to look very different.