

WFPW International - Effective Leadership in the Time of COVID-19

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May 19, 2020

Georgetown Institute for Women Peace and Security hosted a virtual panel discussion on May 19th entitled "Effective Leadership in the Time of COVID-19". The ambassadors of Germany, New Zealand, and Norway were invited to share their strategies on effectively battling COVID-19. The program, moderated by Executive Director and Ambassador Melanne Vermeer, provided attendees with an expert analysis on the importance of effective leadership in the time of COVID-19.

Germany, New Zealand, and Norway have all received favorable commentary on their leadership and ability to prevent a catastrophic spread of COVID-19. These countries are profound examples of having some of the best containment strategies in the world. New Zealand, for example, currently only has 21 deaths in a population of 5 million, with only 1,500 confirmed COVID-19 cases. All three governments seem to have notable qualities in common: credibility and legitimacy, transparency between their governments and civil society, and active pandemic strategies having already been in place early on. Another point worth noting is that Germany, New Zealand, and Norway all have women as leaders.

H.E. Emily Haber, Ambassador of Germany to the U.S., attributed her government's success in battling COVID-19 to effective pandemic strategies already being in place early on, as well as the presence of an intensive system of labs and testing being readily available everywhere and not only just in hotspots. Chancellor of Germany Angela Merkel and her ability to be effectively coherent and candid about how much her government knew and did not know is also worth noting in analyzing Germany's strategy, because it highlights their government's full transparency. Merkel was able to explain the complexity of science and translate it into actual policy requirements, which was key in creating a sense of credibility and legitimacy.

H.E. Rosemary Banks, Ambassador of New Zealand to the U.S., delineates her government's success to their early lockdown, as well as New Zealand's complete closure of borders. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern implemented a strategy early on in order to contain the virus, and notes that because of her government's early actions, the virus was tightly constrained. In the earliest days of COVID-19, Prime Minister Ardern was seen visibly working with a cabinet of scientific advisors. Together, they were able to devise a national response. Ardern stressed the importance of an early national emergency for the first time in her government's history, which included the complete closure of borders and a "Level 4" pandemic response that was effectively put into place.

H.E. Kåre Aas, Ambassador of Norway to the U.S. emphasized how closely the parliament of Norway worked with medical experts in order to identify and implement a COVID-19 strategy. Ambassador Aas further attributes their success to Norway's general sense of transparency and legitimacy. In Norway, measures taken by the government are always taken seriously by the public due to the overall trust in leadership and the frequent usage of open communication generally being reassuring to their civil society. Norway also made sure to implement early mass contact tracing of COVID-19 by strongly encouraging the use of apps that can track the spread of the virus.

Germany, New Zealand, and Norway all share common threads -- divisiveness and clarity. Each of these women leaders made it paramount to provide the public with a concrete response to the crisis, and are continuously applauded for their honesty, authority, and empathy. Prime Minister Ardern of New Zealand, for example, was completely transparent in communicating to the public of the stark choice of a complete lockdown, or tens of thousands of deaths. In doing so, people trusted her declaration, thus saving thousands of lives.

Former New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark highlighted how the style of leadership that works most effectively in a crisis is inclusiveness, less hierarchy, and the inclination to consult and communicate. She also notes that these qualities are not unique to women, but are most commonly found amongst women. A collective effort is imperative by not only the government, but by society as a whole in order to effectively weather a crisis. This is often only achieved through channels of trust, communication, and effective leadership.