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Home / Editorials
Wed, Apr 24, 2020 page 4

Pandemic presents an opportunity

By Vincent Rollet [@V_Rollet](#)



With the coronavirus pandemic, Taiwan's expertise and experience in public health have reached unprecedented international visibility. Numerous academic journals, newspapers and magazines around the world have taken Taiwan as a "model," as a "champion" or as a "reference" for its efficient response against a global health issue that has already killed more than 211,300 people worldwide.

If we take Taiwan's visibility in France as an illustration of this phenomenon, most of the major French newspapers have dedicated articles to present such success, and health professionals and journalists invited to daily television programs followed by millions of French people in confinement have recurrently talked about Taiwan as one of the few countries able to jugulate the pandemic at home, but also as a fruitful partner following Taiwanese donations of millions of masks to EU member states.

In other words, today, even in the most remote village in France, citizens who receive newspapers and watch TV have heard about Taiwan's successful response to COVID-19.

Taking place while China's and the WHO's responses to the pandemic are questioned, this positive dynamic for Taiwan will certainly contribute to its participation in global health governance. Indeed, it is likely that it will convince governments, international organizations, health institutes, research institutions and medical universities, as well as civil society organizations, to connect with their Taiwanese counterparts and further cooperate with Taiwan on common health issues.

However, can this worldwide positive perception of Taiwan help to convince the WHO to invite Taiwan as a member? This is a much more complex issue.

Here, past experiences revealed that scientific arguments explaining that Taiwan should be part of the WHO, first, because of its valuable and well-recognized experience in numerous domains of public and international health, and also because of the risk that such exclusion represents for global health security, have brought very limited results in terms of Taiwan's participation.

Indeed, as it was confirmed by the WHO's response to COVID-19 and its director-general's accusations, politics plays a big role in the WHO's decision toward Taiwan. In this biased context, while it has always tried to avoid it, playing the political card to secure its long-wanted participation in the WHO could be an option for Taiwan.

Indeed, while one could question its pertinence in a time of global health crisis, US President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw US funding from the WHO could represent a profitable situation for Taiwan, if the Taiwanese government succeeds in convincing the US to condition its decision to provide its financial support to the international organization to Taiwan's — not meaningful — but full participation in the WHO.

Conditionality — which is a widely-used instrument in international relations to convince countries to improve their policies in many domains, such as the environment, human rights or gender equality — has in general concrete and positive effects in these fields.

Conditioning US financial support to the WHO to Taiwan's participation would not be interpreted as favoritism, but rather as a correction of a mistake that has gone on for too long — Taiwan is fully legitimate to participate in the WHO as a member.

Furthermore, such conditionality could represent a robust medium of exchange to open the WHO's doors to Taiwan, as the US is by far the largest donor to the international organization, with US\$893 million (assessed and voluntary contributions) provided during the two-year funding cycle of 2018 to last year, when Beijing — which ranks 15th, far behind the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (second), the UK (third), Germany (10th) and Japan (sixth) — has pledged to contribute about 10 times less (US\$82 million).

Now, if after this pandemic, which highlights how every one of us and every single country play a crucial role in the effectiveness of our global response, the WHO is not able to recognize such deep interdependency between nations and people by inviting Taiwan to fully participate to its activities, the growing argument that considers that it would be better not to waste time and efforts to beg for Taiwan's participation to such an archaic international organization is likely to gain in pertinence.

Vincent Rollet is an associate professor in the Graduate Institute of European Studies at Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages.