

SPAIN AND SOUTH KOREA: CONTRASTS IN COVID-19 TIMES

Spain is preparing to enter the first stage of coming back to "normal" life after COVID-19 stroke the country. Although the first coronavirus case was detected in Spain on January the 31st, it wasn't until mid-March when the Government ordered national alarm status.

While I am writing this, we have been already 54 days confined at home. And the effects have been devastating not economically and emotionally for many people. But as I lived in South Korea last year and I keep in contact with people who still live there, I couldn't help but compare how both countries managed the health crisis. It made me think: Did Spain do something wrong?

I remember two specific things from last March:

- 1) My acquaintances telling me: "It's a relief you're already in Spain and not in South Korea anymore. It's so close from China. Also, did you see what happened in Daegu?"
- 2) Media and people claiming that "coronavirus is just a highly contagious flu, but its death rate is below the annual number of flu deceased in Spain."

Currently, thinking about the extreme process that Spain has had to take, these statements seem ridiculous. Spain was the second most dangerous and contagious country in Europe for several weeks, only behind Italy, and underestimating the virus as a "flu" at the beginning made our situation worse. Suddenly, we realized that COVID-19 cases were increasing by thousands every day, and we had to strictly shut ourselves up at home. Besides, we had very few tests available at the beginning of the pandemic, and many of them were defective. Only in April, Spain rose carrying out several hundred thousand tests. During March, the worst month, we barely reached 100,000 tests. This affected the real number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 since no test available meant no way to know the actual number of people affected by the virus. In contrast, South Korea carried out thousands of tests daily since the beginning and developed a sophisticated system of warnings to acquaintances based on proximity.

It would be difficult to compare Spain with China because they are demographically and economically quite different, but how about South Korea? Both are peninsular countries, almost equally developed in economic areas. Their population is very similar: South Korea 51.4 million and Spain 47.1 million inhabitants, with a similar average age (42.2 years in Korea; 43.4 in Spain) and an almost identical life expectancy: 82.6 and 83 years, which means both countries have an aged population, and as old people are especially vulnerable to COVID-19, both nations could have suffered similar mortality rate. But it hasn't.

Comparing data we have: 10.810 cases and 256 deaths in South Korea, while 221.447 confirmed cases and 26.070 deceased in Spain. It is terrifying. There have been more deaths in Spain than total positives of COVID-19 in South Korea. But, why?

The answer would be long and would elaborate on political topics, but what I can say after more than fifty days of reflection is that it is important to take people's health seriously since the first minute, and bear in mind that although countries may seem similar from the outside, social consequences will never be the same for two different countries.

I hope that a similar catastrophe will not happen again, but if it happens, I want to believe that Spain has learned the lesson, and if we have to adopt the measures of a neighbouring country whose characteristics are similar, we can share strategies and resources with South Korea. It would be a great way to celebrate their 70th anniversary of diplomatic relationships.

Best regards to all of you and your families.

SUSANA MATONDO

Sources:

<https://www.newtral.es/sanchez-espana-es-de-los-paises-del-mundo-que-mas-test-realiza-a-su-poblacion/20200425/>

<https://www.redaccionmedica.com/secciones/sanidad-hoy/coronavirus-infectados-espana-y-evolucion-covid19-desde-origen-4148>

<https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-52507143>

<https://elpais.com/sociedad/2020-03-15/corea-el-ejemplo-para-controlar-a-la-epidemia-que-espana-no-siguio.html>