



Lessons from the Covid-19 Pandemic to Better Address Climate Change

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"If we look at the planet as if it were a patient, we can see that our activities have been damaging her immune system and she has been struggling to breathe and thrive due to the strain we have put on her vital organs... I am confident that we can use this crisis to reset our course by putting people and planet first". Prince Charles, April 22, 2020.

This paper makes a few reflections about similarities and differences between the Corona Virus pandemic and the planet's sustainability, particularly in regard to climate change. The logic behind placing the two side by side is that they have global reach: both affect every nation and every individual in the world, and there is an unequivocal common interest that all countries and all people in the world work together to fight both problems – irrespective of gender, race, income and perhaps past responsibility.

There are many similarities and differences between the two problems. Climate change finds its roots in the Industrial Revolution in the mid-1700's and has slowly come to the forefront in the past four decades or so. The pandemic was triggered by the spread of Covid-19 in late 2019, and in less than 6 months the virus has infected roughly 3,5 million people in every nation in the world, killing so far more than 280,000 people (WHO 2020). Despite the completely different speed and economic impacts of the two problems, many lessons emerge from the way the pandemic has been handled worldwide by individuals and by nations, that help us to better address the longer-term threats from climate change. While we still do not know when and to what extent the pandemic will be "fully" under control, the quick response adopted by all countries to fight it teaches us valuable lessons for addressing climate change.

1. Global problems, different origins and responsibilities, different speeds and duration: but similar incentives to act?

A problem is of global scale when it threatens or affects the global community and environment. It can be physical, like the current Covid-19 pandemic or climate change, or it can be less tangible, like gender inequality, racism or global trade. While countries may take different sides in things like global trade, all people and nations in principle should be "on the same side" when it comes to the Corona pandemic or climate change. In the case of the pandemic, no one benefits from – and rather suffers when – seeing a neighbor contaminated by the virus. Countries share experiences with one another, look for a vaccine or effective medication and think about best strategies to avoid transmission. In summary, there is a collective common interest to "win the battle" when everyone is on the same side.

In the case of climate change, there are two sides of the problem: mitigation and adaptation. The approaches for dealing with each are rather different. Mitigation is a global common problem that needs to be addressed by all countries and individuals at the same time. Some countries take the problem more seriously than others, and such different levels of commitment have been seriously delaying the implementation of actions. Adaptation is more individual, in the sense that each country remains sovereign to decide how much it wants to spend on anticipating the impacts from climate change. It is much more similar to the pandemic: whether or not the virus originated in China, and whether or not rich countries are the main culprits of climate change, it is entirely up to each individual country to act and protect its citizens – by forcing isolation and preventing the spread of the virus, or by preparing and anticipating the impacts from climate change early on. In both cases too, there is no time for pointing fingers. In the case of adaptation to climate change, countries may legitimately seek compensation from the main culprits of the problem, but they will not wait until a solution is found before taking their own adaptation measures.

2. Consumption and limits of our planet

According to the World Bank, in 2005, the consumption of the 20% richest people was 76.6% of the total world consumption, and that of the poorest 20% was just 1.5%. Such disparity reflects the income inequalities between countries and between individuals in different income classes.

Higher consumption levels imply higher consumptions of energy, water, land, emissions of CO₂, etc. As countries and individuals become richer, they will inevitably consume more. Since both countries and individuals will indeed become richer in time, the projections of future consumption become disturbing. Will there be enough?

The “Silent Spring”, a book written by Rachel Carson in 1962, which is considered a landmark document that ignited the environmental movement worldwide, and “The Limits to Growth” book by Meadows et al. (1972), served as early warnings that putting together population and income growth against the limited production capacities of agriculture and industries, nonrenewable resources, and pollution would lead to some sort of collapse. While most of these limitations did not really materialize (largely due to the parallel enormous advancements in technology and efficiency gains), their conclusions appear to be right in terms of other resources – like climate change and now the pandemic.

Men have previously exhausted and created holes in the ozone layer, severely destroyed the remaining world forest cover, depleted so many aquifers and fish stocks, and irreversibly made so many animal and plant species extinct. We have equally crossed the limit of nature's balance in the case of CO₂ emissions. In the last 800,000 years, concentrations of CO₂ have stayed below 280 PPM, having once reached the peak of 300 PPM. Since the Industrial Revolution, we have made concentrations surpass 400 PPM, and despite all apparent efforts worldwide to control climate change, emissions have been systematically growing every year.

Nature does not tell us what her resilience or her capacity to resist and recover from our assault is. This should be an even stronger reason to be a little more conservative. The pandemic may be teaching us a lesson: that we have been too greedy and too disrespectful with nature and the planet's limits. We should come out of this pandemic and be more respectful and conscious – but have we really learned from past experiences? Have previous crises, of whichever type, led us to change our behavior and improve our habits and practices? Unfortunately, we know the answer is an overwhelming NO. As philosopher Hegel said, "what we learn from history is that we do not learn from history".

3. We are all part of both problems, even if some suffer more. No free-riding ...

Everyone in the world is suffering the impacts of these two problems – the pandemic and climate change. Irrespective of their causes, once they begin, countries, firms and individuals need to adjust. In the case of the pandemic, poor individuals have a strong (and logic) incentive to not fully endorse the isolation campaigns because they need to go out in the streets do their informal activities to survive.

Apart from these poorer people, that have a necessity to break the common rule, there are others who see an opportunity to take a brief walk or to go out safely in the streets while the immense majority is at home. This is the classic free-rider problem. In the case of climate change, too, countries believe they do not need to do anything because their neighbors will, or that they should wait until someone else takes a first step before acting. With climate change, the incentive to free-ride is even stronger because, until now, there are no penalties for lack of action.

This lack of sanctions against a free-riding country is not unique to climate change. In the name of national sovereignty and "diplomacy" among countries, the world

has repeatedly been seeing dramatic situations in individual countries and nothing is done by the world community. The deforestation of the Brazilian Amazon and the withdrawal of the USA from the climate negotiations are some of the current “tragedies”. In the case of the pandemic, too, many governments have been taking irresponsible attitudes towards it, putting all of its citizens at increased risk. The entire world watches this tragedy, but in principle there is little any other country can do about it. With or without a binding global agreement, the challenge remains how to interfere in these situations and by-pass the rules of sovereignty when a larger humanitarian problem occurs.

4. The later we act, the worse it will get

With both climate change and the current Covid-19 pandemic it is clear that countries, individuals and firms should anticipate the problems and address them as early as possible. Time is of paramount importance. The higher incidence of Covid-19 cases in Italy, the United States, Brazil, among others, has largely been attributed to the few days in which their Presidents or local leaders disputed the severity of the pandemic risks. Most other countries, however, quickly learned from their peers first hit in Asia, who quickly took action with mass testing and imposed isolation laws.

In the case of climate change, the message has been made loud and clear with regards to the importance of countries to act quickly and unwaveringly. The impacts are cumulative, the costs are escalating, and time is of the essence. Unlike with the pandemic, however, the world has been watching governments meet to address the problem for years now, but the results have been simply appalling. The big question now is whether this pandemic will further divert attention away from climate change, or whether the lesson will be learned that immediate action needs to be taken. The same question applies to us as individuals: do we need a break after the pandemic to focus on bringing the economy back to “normal”, or do we redefine “normal” to include taking better care of the planet?

5. Inequality and poverty

As with so many problems worldwide, a major feature of global problems is that they inevitably affect the poorest and most vulnerable much more intensely. Neither pandemics nor climate change discriminates between class, gender, religion, geographical location, etc.; the capacities of countries and of individuals to adapt and to protect against such effects are very different. Deprived of so many things according to their levels of poverty, it is much more difficult for poor people living in slums, for example, to stay at home in isolation than it is for richer, middle-class people. Equally, with regards to climate, they are much more vulnerable to floods, landslides, droughts, heat waves, and other events brought about by climate change.

In the case of climate change, in particular, inequalities become more perverse when we consider the fact that these vulnerable populations are precisely the ones who have least contributed to the problem: they consume far less energy and fewer goods & services than richer people. The exact same logic applies to countries.

6. The role of science

Virologists, epidemiologists and doctors have been heard worldwide about the best measures to contain the spread of the virus. Most countries are giving special support to their own laboratories and research centers looking for a vaccine and advancements to halt the pandemic. Our hope to better fight the virus is likely going to come from serious scientific research and cooperation.

Why have climate scientists not been equally heard in the case of climate change? Apart from unscientific arguments, we know the main threats, the speed and what is really at risk when it comes to climate change. Governments may be hearing their warnings – the IPCC has been granted the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize – but the response has been way too slow and ineffective compared to the recommendations.

The pandemic is clearly a more acute crisis than climate change, but do we have reason to believe that the lessons from the Covid19 pandemic will be learned to deal with climate change? Why not listen to scientists and follow strictly what has been suggested to deal with climate change? The economic costs of future remediation, as in the case of the pandemic, are way too large and can more easily be addressed early on, while there is still some time before more serious climate disruptions take place. Scientists have long been warning that this is only a matter of time.

7. Governments may not be delivering enough, but they remain crucial players

The vast majority of solidarity campaigns and initiatives do not come from governments, but from different segments of civil society, and examples abound: families clapping outside of their windows in support of health workers, numerous donation campaigns for supporting low-income families and communities, industries switching their main activities to produce materials immediately needed in hospitals, the immense sacrifice of health workers especially in hospitals, and many others at both the macro and micro scales.

More impressive examples perhaps come from the poorest slum areas in Brazil, where the existing solidarity networks have been extremely agile in responding to the pandemic, such as disseminating information, providing essential goods, assisting the poorest households and the most deprived areas, volunteering younger adults to assist the elderly, etc. To some extent, the response from such movements does not come as a surprise: they are used to a complete lack of support from governments during 'normal' times and they know they should not wait for any support in challenging circumstances. Time is of essence, but quick mobilization is indeed a major encouraging example and a major lesson.

Governments, however, remain crucial in times of such crises. Grass-root initiatives from civil society do not preclude the support, funding, coordination and the imposition of rules, regulations and norms to guide society and the broader population. In the case of the pandemic, there is no time for too much coordination and all efforts are welcome. Therefore, governments have a fundamental role to play.

In the case of climate change, every local or individual action to reduce emissions and to help minimize the problem is both laudable and fundamental. Without individual change of habits, nothing will be achieved to fight climate change, but the global scale of the problem calls for a prominent role of governments – and multilateral efforts. Governments will act according to what their citizens perceive as necessary and desirable for their country. Many movements worldwide have now appeared to put pressure on governments to act more firmly. This is perhaps the name of the game for our future handling of the problem. Unless pressured by civil society and a more empowered scientific community, we are likely to see a persistent lack of firm action by governments.

Lessons and scenarios ahead: will anything change after Covid19?

“It has already become a commonplace that the world will not be the same after Covid-19. The perception that there are risks that threaten human existence may help to raise awareness that science, technology and the whole relationship between society and nature will have to be governed by ethical norms that answer the basic questions: What do we want for ourselves and our descendants? In addition to our material reproduction, will we be capable of a social exercise of self-reflection that allows us and future generations a meaningful life worth living?”¹

This short paper suggests that we have good reason to be both optimistic and pessimistic. It cannot foresee which trend is most likely to happen. In a recent article², a climate change advisor to the WHO summarized well the argument supporting this optimistic post-Corona scenario as it relates to climate change. “The global health crisis we find ourselves in has forced us to dramatically change our behavior in order to protect ourselves and those around us, to a degree most of us have never experienced before. This temporary shift of gears could lead to a long-term shift in old behaviors and assumptions, which could lead to a public drive for collective action and effective risk management. Even though climate change presents a slower, more long-term health threat, an equally dramatic and sustained shift in behavior will be needed to prevent irreversible damage”.

Unfortunately, as previously mentioned, there is room for a much less optimistic, or perhaps more realistic perspective. Rephrasing the quote from Hegel, we cannot be optimistic when it comes to learning from experience and from history. In response to the previous quote, where are the incentives and organizational capacity to make us shift gears? The realistic expectation for the post-pandemic period is not a friendlier and more solidary world. People are likely to change their social behavior for a while, and countries will also focus on their individual efforts to rebuild their economies. However, in line with a tendency observed before the pandemic, countries and societies will continue their course towards more competition, greater inequality, and less solidarity.

Such reasoning may well apply to the way climate change has been and will be dealt with by governments. After decades of intense research and scientific debate, the

1 Abramovay, R. (2020). “A Era do Precipício” (*The Age of Precipice*). Pg 22, April 5 2020. <https://pagina22.com.br/2020/04/05/a-era-do-precipicio/>

2 Wyns, A. (2020). How our responses to climate change and the coronavirus are linked. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/climate-change-coronavirus-linked/>

major threats from climate change became unequivocal and the recommendations to halt the problem were made, but the world economy did not slow down or adjust accordingly. The sacred myth has been that “the world economy cannot stop”, because it would lead to a recession, unemployment and leave a huge economic impact. This myth was simply trashed with the appearance of the Covid-19 black swan. From one day to the next, economies entered into a lock-down. We should not need a lock-down for stopping climate change, but the economy has to consider nature’s own limits. Since the climate alarm became more unequivocal, energy related emissions grew from 12,2 Gt in 1990 to 18,6 Gt in 2018 (IEA).

Perhaps the explanation lies in the different perceptions of the two problems. In the case of the pandemic, each day without isolation implies a high social and economic toll in terms of contaminated people and deaths. Time is indeed a critical factor. Many world leaders were reluctant and took a long time (gigantic in view of the severity of the pandemic) to accept the idea of having to “halt” their economies. They all eventually did accept the idea, with the notable exception of Brazil’s President.

Unlike the emergency of the pandemic, in the case of climate change countries have been rolling out binding commitments of emissions reductions, perhaps assuming that “there is still some time” during which they will seek to minimize their mitigation efforts, navigate placidly in their “business as usual”, and wait for other countries to take the initiative. Why have humanitarian health arguments forced world leaders to halt economic activity, while the possibility of the planet collapsing due to an adverse and unpredictable climate has not been enough? Despite the recent slow movement by key public and private sector leaders, we are still too far behind the problem.

Irrespective of the trajectories that will prevail after the Covid-19 pandemic, democracies must be protected at all cost. The discussions on climate change, like many others such as the pandemic, have been shadowed or bypassed by political agendas. Discussing renewable energy x fossil fuels nowadays is the same as discussing right x left, individualism x solidarity, globalization x nationalism. We cannot fall into this trap.

As with many problems, both top-down measures from central governments and bottom-up initiatives by individuals and societies are needed. Governments need to switch gears very quickly. Consumption is at the root of climate change and it is nearly enough to control or regulate it to reverse the problem. Reciprocally, changes in personal consumption habits alone may not be enough and need to include governments. The Covid-19 pandemic is being resolved through a combination of centralized policies from governments forcing isolation and an overwhelming positive response by citizens all over the world who are staying home.

The paper's overall message may be summarized by a recent short interview with the Director of the Kew Royal Botanic Gardens published in *The Guardian*³: "I hope that through our experience of this pandemic, we will learn that it is far better to preempt a global problem when we see it on the horizon than have to deal with it when it engulfs us. This is a lesson we should apply to the challenge of climate change, which also threatens hundreds of millions of people, as well as that of heeding and listening to the experts. We must also recognize that global challenges require globally coordinated responses."

Even as this paper's author remains skeptic with our capacity to take the opportunity and jump into a more solidary and sustainable world, the paper ends with two positive notes from well-respected academics. In a recent paper co-authored by Lord Nick Stern, the following has been suggested:

"Pulling the world out of recession means framing a vision of a much better future. Restoring confidence requires harnessing the growth potential of an inclusive, resilient and resource-efficient economy. Previous studies have highlighted opportunities associated with sustainable growth, but Covid-19 increases the urgency of shifting to a better growth model. ... The search for growth cannot mean a return to "business as usual". There is a need to measure and invest in a broad range of complementary assets including not only physical and human capital, but also knowledge and intangible capital as well as natural and social capital. ... We must prepare for future pandemics, but we must also recognize that climate change is a deeper and bigger threat that doesn't go away"⁴.

The other note is from 2019 Templeton Prize Laureate Prof. Marcelo Gleiser, who said, "We would be foolish not to embrace the central message of our predicament: that we must come together to survive, that we are fragile despite our capacity to create and destroy, that the tribal divisions that have defined our moral choices over the past millennia must be tossed aside for our own good".⁵Bottom of Form

3 [5] Deverell, R. (2020). "Earth Day 2020 could mark the year we stop taking the planet for granted". *The Guardian*, April 22, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/apr/22/earth-day-2020-could-mark-the-year-we-stop-taking-the-planet-for-granted-aoe>

4 Zenghelis, D. and Stern, N. (2020). "Now is the time for a strong, sustainable and inclusive recovery". *OECD Forum, Badges*, April 29. <https://www.oecd-forum.org/badges/1420-tackling-covid-19/posts/65636-impact-entrepreneurs-building-solutions-for-a-post-covid-19-world>

5 Gleiser, M. (2020). "Covid-19 will change us as a species". *CNN Opinion*, March 26, 2020. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/26/opinions/covid-19-will-change-us-as-a-species-gleiser/index.html>

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Cover photo:

men-wriiting-on-blackboard-with-chalks

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Author: Fauxels. Source: Pexels.com



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