

The Pandemic & the Global Environment: From Despair to Hope



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The world saw a dramatic improvement in air quality and amount of pollution and a proliferation of flora and fauna during the Covid-19 lockdowns in many countries, giving humanity hope that substantial, rapid change is achievable. However, once restrictions eased, this positive effect did not linger long. Nevertheless, there have been some lasting benefits, such as the ongoing popularity of working from home, reducing road traffic, air pollution, and the stress of commuting. Many things that had seemed impossible before, such as greatly reducing air flights, consuming much less, housing the homeless, and generally slowing down, have proved doable. If we can take drastic measures in response to a virus, surely we can do the same for climate change, a much more urgent issue.

Although the pandemic may have eclipsed the climate crisis over the last few months, it has also shown us that, with the political will, fundamental systemic changes are not only possible, but can be faster and more profound than we had hoped. In April, Janet Stephenson, director of the Centre for Sustainability at New Zealand's University of Otago, stated, "The changes we need to make to reduce the risks are significantly less disruptive than lockdown. If we don't, the long-term devastation of human welfare, and that of other species, will be far worse than Covid-19."

As the momentous 2020 draws to a close, what lies ahead? Can we draw on the lessons learned from our experience of Covid-19 to create a more equitable, sustainable world and to develop responsible stewardship of our planet? Below I consider some of the initiatives and drivers for change for a better future – ways in which, rather than returning to the old business-as-usual norms that were based on an unsustainable industrial growth model, we can "stitch a new garment that fits all of humanity" (Sonya Pence Taylor).

Addressing Climate Change: Signs of Hope

Every day we read of melting ice caps, heat waves and widespread fires, rising sea levels, disastrous droughts, and other calamities. The pandemic has worsened things for vulnerable groups such as indigenous peoples in the Amazon, whose homelands are already devastated by decades of exploitation, illegal deforestation, mining and industrial farming, and unlawful occupation. Leaders have expressed concern that the older generation may be lost to Covid-19, leaving no one to pass on ancestral wisdom to the next generations (*Japan Times*, Aug. 7, 2020).

Moreover, there has been an increase in rubbish directly related to Covid-19, such as piles of used masks and personal protective

equipment (PPE), and the waste arising from coffee shops that will no longer let customers bring their own reusable cups, or from pubs selling takeaway beers in plastic cups. To avoid the risk of spreading infection, throw-away, one-use items have often become the norm, such as the two million disposable pens employed for use in the recent New Zealand general election.

Confronted with the enormity of global climate change, many tend to give up and go on as usual, or become frozen with despair: succumbing to either panic or paralysis, as Joanna Macy puts it. However, there is another way forward: to see the situation clearly, but nevertheless to have hope and to take actions towards positive ends, regardless of how bad things may look. As governments will have to keep fiscally stimulating their economies for many years, this is an opportunity to transition from carbon-powered energy to renewables, which could ease the cost as well, by helping nations to meet their emissions targets while also creating new jobs in fields such as solar and wind generation, batteries, electricity grid improvement, and decarbonization of transport and manufacturing.

Joseph Stiglitz, Nobel laureate in economics, says, "The public has a right to demand that companies receiving help contribute to social and racial justice, improved health and the shift to a greener, more knowledge-based economy" and believes that green investment can be "timely, labor-intensive, and highly stimulative, moving countries closer to the societies they claim to be." In the United Kingdom, it will soon become mandatory for large companies and financial institutions to provide climate risk reports, while in 2021 the country's first green gilt will be floated in the financial markets, raising funds for investment in carbon-reducing projects and job creation.

Global activist movements such as Extinction Rebellion, Ocean Rebellion, Avaaz, Tree Sisters, Action Station in New Zealand, and numerous other parties have long been pointing the way. Macy urges us to make the shift from the industrial growth model to a life-sustaining civilization, which she dubs the "Great Turning" – "the essential adventure of our time". This Great Turning has three dimensions: actions to slow the damage to Earth and its beings, analysis of structural causes and the creation of structural alternatives, and a shift in consciousness. Karenni Gore, founder of the Center for Earth Ethics, sees the illusion of the separation between humans and nature as a core issue. Our current economic model, which is based on endless industrial growth, does not take into account negative effects such as pollution, inequality, and resource depletion, or consider the long-term benefits of environmental measures. A fundamental shift is needed, such as that formulated by Kate Raworth

Photo: Author



Mount Karangahake, sacred to Māori and treasured by many New Zealanders, is currently being mined for gold. Protect Karangahake (<https://protectkarangahake.org.nz/>) is protesting against this and favors more sustainable uses of the mountain.

Shift from International Travel to Staycations?

At a recent meeting, where participants discussed how we had been affected by Covid-19, I was struck by the reliance of so many of us on the regular use of international flights. Many believe this will have to change – and the pandemic has brought this issue into sharp focus, with clearer skies resulting from far fewer flights. But once we are able to again fly internationally, how many of us will refrain from doing so? Meanwhile, “staycations” – holidaying at home or at least in the same country – are growing in popularity. Airbus plans to develop the world’s first hydrogen-based zero-emission commercial aircraft by 2035 (*The Guardian*, Sept. 22, 2020). Through such developments, perhaps it will eventually be possible to travel by plane without causing ecological harm.

Environmental Conundrums & Initiatives

Some measures are not so clear-cut. The environmental effect of building an electric car, for example, might involve more CO2 emissions than a petrol-based car; however, over its entire life cycle the electric car has fewer total emissions. A recent study found that, although trees tend to grow faster in warmer climates, they have a shorter lifespan – accordingly, as temperatures increase, forests might grow more quickly, but could store less carbon with the shorter lifespan of the trees. And, unexpectedly, in some countries, the pandemic has had a negative effect on attitudes to public transport, with many people now preferring to use their own cars rather than public transport.

However, new environmental initiatives with potentially far-reaching beneficial consequences are constantly emerging. One is the “syntropic farming” developed by Ernst Gotsch, a process-based farming that goes beyond sustainability or regenerative agriculture to actively improve the soil and overall environment and create a positive energy balance.

Fairphone makes an ethical smartphone and “aims to motivate the whole industry to take action on social and environmental issues in the electronics supply chain” through innovative long-lasting design, fair materials, good working conditions and recycling, and encourages people to keep their phones for as long as possible, since “the most sustainable phone is the one you already have.”

“Green” hydrogen is made entirely from renewable sources and could be used as fuel to supplement solar and wind power, to decarbonize public transport, to provide green fuel for heavy-duty vehicles, and to fly zero-carbon planes. Renewable hydrogen can also be used to produce steel with near-zero emissions. Lithium has recently been found in hot salty springs in Cornwall in the UK, which could be used for electric car batteries.

Covid-19 has allowed us to re-think our future, a matter of utmost urgency. Let us build on our hope and strengths to work together for a greener, fairer world. **JS**

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in her doughnut economic model, with its detailed plan for transforming degenerative, divisive economies into regenerative, more distributive ones.

The Dalai Lama says that, since we are all inextricably interconnected with each other and with nature, it is to our own benefit to care for each other and the planet, and sees problems arising when we address new realities with old mindsets. “Our Mother Earth is teaching us a lesson about universal responsibility.” Some have suggested that there should always be three empty chairs in rooms where major decisions are made, symbolizing the marginalized, all future generations, and all non-human life.

Damon Gameau provides many reasons for hope in the film *2040*, which extrapolates what the world could be like 20 years from now, even if we make use only of currently existing technology and innovative ideas.

In Borneo, Health in Harmony and local NGO Alam Sehat Lestari have achieved a 70% reduction in deforestation by providing easier access to affordable healthcare, after being told by indigenous communities that they worked as loggers to earn enough money for medical treatment. This shows the importance of listening to local voices.

According to a just-released report by the International Energy Agency, global renewable electricity installation will hit a record level in 2020.

Global peace activists have long been calling for a transfer of funds from military goals to more peaceful purposes, which would free up a huge amount of money. *A Call for Action after Covid-19* by New Zealand Quakers “calls on every person in Aotearoa New Zealand to bring about whatever changes they can to enable us to live in harmony with one another and with the planet.”

Finally, the election of Joe Biden as the next president of the United States has brought renewed hope for climate action, since Biden has promised to rejoin the Paris Agreement, as well as to substantially lower US emissions by investing in low-carbon technology. Moreover, strong US leadership in this area is likely to have a powerful effect on other countries as well.