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Research Paper

Environmental changes during lockdown

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused industrial activity to shut down and cancelled flights and other journeys, slashing greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution around the world. Streets are empty, cities are silent, factories are closed and skies are quiet. Surely this has to be good for the environment. If there is something positive to take from this terrible crisis, it could be that it's offered a taste of the air we might breathe in a low-carbon future. Well-resourced healthcare systems are essential to protect us from health security threats, including climate change. The support to resuscitate the economy after the pandemic should promote health, equity, and environmental protection. When we eventually overcome the COVID-19 pandemic, we can hopefully hold on to that sense of shared humanity in order to rebuild our social and economic systems to make them better, more resilient, and compassionate. Social distancing, inevitably, implies hits to economic activity, which implies a reduction in emissions. That risks linking a clearly bad thing (a pandemic) to a long-desired good (carbon mitigation). The financial and social support packages to maintain and eventually resuscitate the global economy post-pandemic should therefore promote health, equity, and environmental protection.

Keywords: *Covid-19, Environment, Global, Pandemic, Pollution.*

The environmental changes wrought by the corona virus were first visible from space. Then, as the disease and the lockdown spread, they could be sensed in the sky above our heads, the air in our lungs and even the ground beneath our feet. While the human toll mounted horrendously from a single case in Wuhan to a global pandemic that has so far killed more than 88,000 people, nature, it seemed, was increasingly able to breathe more easily. The pandemic means that this widespread and co-ordinated youthful passion, one of the most striking developments in recent climate politics, is instead being expressed indoors and online. This in itself will inevitably lead some to contemplate how climate change and covid-19 fit together. There is no doubt that these lockdowns are hitting the fossil fuel industry. With fewer drivers on the roads and planes in the air, the price of oil has slumped almost two-thirds since last year. This is potentially good news for the climate because oil is the biggest source of the carbon emissions that are heating the planet and disrupting weather systems. Some analysts believe it could mark the start of a prolonged downward trend in emissions and the beginning of the end for oil. Others strike a more cautious note about the fuel that has dominated our lives and polluted our atmosphere for the past century.

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The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that about 3 million people die each year from ailments caused by air pollution, and that more than 80% of people living in urban areas are exposed to air quality levels that exceed safe limits. The situation is worse in low-income countries, where 98% of cities fail to meet WHO air quality standards. We live in an age in which intersecting crises are being lifted to a global scale, with unseen levels of inequality, environmental degradation and climate destabilization, as well as new surges in populism, conflict, economic uncertainty, and mounting public health threats. All are crises that are slowly tipping the balance, questioning our business-as-usual economic model of the past decades, and requiring us to rethink our next steps. The 2020 corona virus pandemic may lead to a deeper understanding of the ties that bind us all on a global scale and could help us get to grips with the largest public health threat of the century, the climate crisis. The ongoing pandemic illustrates how inequality is a major barrier in ensuring the health and wellbeing of people, and how social and economic inequality materializes in unequal access to healthcare systems. For example, the health threat of the novel corona virus is, on average, greater for cities and people exposed to higher levels of pollution, which are most often people living in poorer areas. The same is true for the health impacts of climate change, with one of its major causes, the burning of fossil fuels, also adding pollution to the air and disproportionately impacting the health of those in poverty.

The WHO estimates that by reducing the environmental and social risk factors people are exposed to, nearly a quarter of the global health burden (measured as loss from sickness, death and financial costs) could be prevented. Creating healthy environments for healthier populations and promoting Universal Health Coverage (UHC) are two of the most effective ways in which we can reduce the long-term health impacts from – and increase our resilience and adaptive capacity to – both the corona virus pandemic and climate change. The global health crisis we find ourselves in has forced us to dramatically change our behaviour 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 behaviours 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 behaviour will be needed to prevent irreversible damage. There is one thing, however, that almost all health shocks have in common: they hit the poorest and the most vulnerable the hardest. They act as poverty multipliers, forcing families into extreme poverty because they have to pay for health care. At least half of the world's population does not enjoy full coverage for the most basic health services. When health disasters hit – and in a business-as-usual scenario they will do so increasingly – global inequality is sustained and reinforced, and paid for with the lives of the poor and marginalized. Environmental campaigners say that is a dangerous misconception. The picture is different across our unequal world. Rich, industrialised nations are seeing a temporary recovery of nature because there is so little of it in the first place. Poorer countries, on the other hand, especially in the southern hemisphere, fear an increased threat to wildlife because the pandemic means they have less money and personnel with which to conserve endangered species and habitats.

In 2020, the world is at a social tipping point. Scientists and civil society must jointly raise their voices and make every effort to ensure that we emerge on the right side of it. Young people have urged political leaders to listen to the scientists. And, as in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the scientific community stands ready to work side by side with governments and businesses to put humanity on a sustainable climate path while managing the development trade-offs responsibly. Since the start of the pandemic, it is not just from

space that the world looks different. The unthinkable is now thinkable. Positions are shifting. Libertarian governments are curtailing freedoms more drastically than wartime leaders. Austerity conservatives are approving trillions of dollars for healthcare and emergency spending. Small-state advocates are being forced into massive interventions. Leading business publications are calling for a deep reform of capitalism. Most importantly, the political focus has shifted from individual consumption to collective wellbeing. Like the person-to-person transmission of corona virus, climate change is happening in smaller increments that can be easy to ignore until the cumulative effects can be measured: a rise in average yearly temperatures, melting glaciers, more destructive hurricanes, more intense wildfires, droughts, species extinction — the list goes on.

COVID-19 and climate change are real but different health emergencies. The novel corona virus is a public health emergency caused by a new virus — COVID-19 — which has rapidly spread through communities across the world. Conversely, climate change is a slow-motion public health emergency, exacerbated by health crises associated with sudden events such as extreme weather and wildfire. Strong public health systems are essential for prevention and health protection. Public health experts have warned for years that a pandemic was inevitable. Yet our government failed to maintain the public health capacity, expertise and resources required to mount a rapid and coordinated response to COVID-19. Reducing climate pollution will save millions of lives each year by cleaning our air and water, and reducing heart and lung disease, diabetes, osteoporosis and obesity through improved nutrition and healthier transportation. We all have a role to play. COVID-19 and its lethal impacts are a wake-up call to pay attention to scientists' warnings on climate change. The climate health emergency may not yet be upon us as visibly as COVID-19, but the need for action is just as urgent. Ultimately, public health is a political choice. A choice we are now confronted with and one we will have to make over and over again as we transition to a more resilient, zero-carbon, just and healthier future. While the COVID-19 response has demonstrated the power of open, collaborative science and swift action in dealing with emerging threats, it also has highlighted deep-seated issues that limit our ability to respond to challenges like global environmental change. In particular, the world is waking up to the possibility that the pandemic – and the strict measures introduced to contain it – could result in an even deeper economic downturn than the one triggered by the 2008 global financial crisis. The world must now urgently adopt the same approach to the existential challenge of climate change.

A critical difference and a fundamental similarity

The argument for climate equity and justice has been built up over decades. The management of health crises has often focused on the developing world, because it is often the area of greatest need. This COVID-19 crisis has complicated the distinctions between privileged and vulnerable in unprecedented ways. There will be a temptation to pretend the distinctions no longer exist. As we head into the fourth month of the crisis, however, the impacts on the developing world. Even if demographics and sheer good fortune result in manageable impacts, it will not change the fundamental facts. In public health, as in climate policy, we share a common but differentiated vulnerability, and common but differentiated responsibility.

A climate-conscious stimulus is common sense

The renewable industry is obviously not the only one looking to the government. Unprecedented stimulus packages are fast becoming the norm, even among policymakers previously obsessed with fiscal deficits. This has resulted in calls for a clean stimulus, and

hope that current levels of stimulus will make climate proposals like the Green New Deal look more palatable. The argument linking the two crises is on a stronger footing here. It does not presume any outcomes based on notions of an inherent link, but makes the more limited point that any economic decision-making must be conscious of the ongoing climate crisis.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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