

Environmental and economical ethics collide: Business as usual after COVID-19 or shifting towards a planetary health perspective?

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INTRODUCTION

In January 2020, during China's COVID-19 outbreak, the NASA Earth Observatory captured aerial images indicating significantly lower emissions of nitrogen dioxide (NO₂), a major air pollutant, across China's mainland.¹ Scientists across the globe have reported preliminary empirical data that amid shelter-in-place directives and the shutting down of large-scale economic activity, the environment is flourishing. Abnormal sightings of wild animals roaming freely in deserted cities have been widely reported. For example, monkeys in Lopburi, Bangkok and leatherback turtles on deserted beaches in Florida, US are thriving.² This pandemic has given mother earth a chance to 'breathe.' Environmentalists are asking how long the breather will last and whether it will sustain the earth for years to come, when business as usual returns bringing environmental challenges.

ANALYSIS

This pandemic has shaken up business as usual including major economic drivers of supply and demand. At the moment, the demand for oil is at an all-time low whereas personal protective equipment (PPE) markets are booming. The world has entered into a recession, with estimates of a US \$2 trillion loss. Approximately 11 million people are being pushed into poverty.³ People are functioning differently: there is a shift toward working remotely, micro gardening in urban settings, more mindful use of resources, and spending more time at home with friends and family. These trends may put less strain on people as well as on the environment. As people find a better work-life balance and commute less, the 77.5% of pollution caused by car and air travel, may be reduced.⁴ Some scientists also argue that if the planet were healthier we would see fewer viruses take hold.⁵

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Although scientists estimate that the impact of COVID-19 on the environment may be temporarily positive, long-lasting action and commitment are necessary to mitigate climate change. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by United Nations member states in 2015 aim to achieve climate action, sustainable cities, and sustainable use of the earth and ocean's resources by 2030. While there is a short-term environmental benefit of lower emissions, the long-term goals may be set back due to the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶ The SDGs include eliminating poverty, protecting the planet, and ensuring prosperity and peace for all people.⁷

The SDGs are a stark reminder that the pre-COVID-19 world was far from perfect. Most countries' economies are driven by exponential capitalist growth in which the environment and people are exploited for the sake of profit. Nearly half the world lives on less than \$5.50 a day.⁸ 44 percent of the world's net worth belongs to 0.8 percent of the world's individuals⁹. This crisis has exposed systemic flaws even more, as those who have lower socio-economic standing are disproportionately affected by this pandemic. They are more susceptible because they do not have access to basic sanitation and are often forced to live in places affected worse by climate change and pollution.

In 2019 Greta Thunberg, the 15-year-old environmental activist, made the case that the economics to solve the current environmental constraints did not yet exist. In 2020, amid the pandemic, the United Nations (UN) reported that there is a need to rebuild economies differently.¹⁰ Individuals and governments may be spurred to change their approach to climate action requiring a shift of societal norms to value the environment and people's happiness more than profit growth.

In Amsterdam, donut economics will be used to help the economy recover.¹¹ Donut economics originated from Kate Raworth of Oxford University's Environmental Change Institute's book, 'Donut Economics: seven ways to think like a 21st century economist.' The inner ring of the donut refers to the minimum that people need to live a good life, which is based on the UN's SDGs (such as food, clean water, housing, sanitation, energy, education, healthcare, gender equality, income, and political voice). Any person who does not have access to these minimum standards of living is described as living in the doughnut's hole. The outer ring of the doughnut, where the sprinkles go, represents the ecological outer parameters, drawn up by earth-system scientists. These outer parameters delineate the boundaries which humanity should not progress beyond if it is to avoid damage to the ozone layer, oceans, freshwater resources, and abundant biodiversity. In developing countries such as South Africa, the opportunity to rebuild the economy by means of donut economics seems idealistic because a large percentage of the population lives inside the doughnut hole. The immediate challenges of debt, poverty, and food shortage brought about by the COVID-19 lockdown are pressing.¹² However, visionary leaders should take a long-term perspective as there is opportunity to do so now. For example, during this time President Cyril Ramaphosa aims to reduce the number of 'people living inside the donut's hole' by improving housing infrastructure in rural areas.

CONCLUSION

Rebuilding a more ethical post-COVID-19 world of both environmental and human flourishing¹³ will require a planetary health perspective.¹⁴ The Lancet¹⁵ suggests that a planetary perspective must move beyond an emergency response toward resilience and prevention planning. In "Happiness explained: What

human flourishing is and what we can do to promote it,” Paul Anand explains that the principles of human flourishing are fairness, autonomy, community, and engagement. These principles may be the pillars for post-COVID-19 environmental policies. Amid the chaos and trauma of this pandemic, it is up to individuals, leaders, scientists, and bioethicists to take a breather to reflect. It is time to dare to imagine what human and environmental flourishing may look like in a more sustainable post-COVID-19 world and start rebuilding it one step at a time.

¹ “These Satellite Photos Show How COVID-19 Lockdowns Have Impacted Global Emissions,” *World Economic Forum*, March 25, 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/03/emissions-impact-coronavirus-lockdowns-satellites/>.

² Harry Kretchmer, “These Locked-down Cities Are Being Reclaimed by Animals,” *World Economic Forum*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/covid-19-cities-lockdown-animals-goats-boar-monkeys-zoo/>. Deena Robinson, “Endangered Sea Turtles Thriving Amid COVID-19 Restrictions,” April 20, 2020, <https://earth.org/endangered-sea-turtles-thriving-amid-covid-19-restrictions/>.

³ World Economic Forum, “Why We Cannot Lose Sight of the Sustainable Development Goals during Coronavirus,” April 23, 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/coronavirus-pandemic-effect-sdg-un-progress/>.

⁴ Hiroko Tabuchi, “‘Worse Than Anyone Expected’: Air Travel Emissions Vastly Outpace Predictions,” *The New York Times (Online)*, September 19, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/19/climate/air-travel-emissions.html>.

⁵ “First Person: COVID-19 Is Not a Silver Lining for the Climate, Says UN Environment Chief,” *United Nations News*, April 5, 2020, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061082>.

⁶ The World Bank, “Poverty,” April 16, 2020, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/overview>.

⁷ United Nations Development Programme, “What Are the Sustainable Development Goals?,” 2015, <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals.html>.

⁸ The World Bank, “Nearly Half the World Lives on Less than \$5.50 a Day,” October 17, 2018, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2018/10/17/nearly-half-the-world-lives-on-less-than-550-a-day>.

⁹ James Davies, Rodrigo Lluberas, and Anthony Shorrocks, “Global Wealth Report 2018,” *Credit Suisse Research Institute*, 2018.

¹⁰ “First Person: COVID-19 Is Not a Silver Lining for the Climate, Says UN Environment Chief,” *United Nations News*, April 5, 2020, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061082>.

¹¹ Daniel Boffey, “Amsterdam to Embrace ‘doughnut’ Model to Mend Post-Coronavirus Economy,” April 8, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/08/amsterdam-doughnut-model-mend-post-coronavirus-economy>.

¹² A van den Heever et al., “South Africa Needs a Post-Lockdown Strategy That Emulates South Korea,” *The Conversation*, April 18, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/south-africa-needs-a-post-lockdown-strategy-that-emulates-south-korea-136678>. “‘People Need to Eat’: South Africa Eases Coronavirus Lockdown,” *Aljazeera*, January 5, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/05/eat-south-africa-eases-coronavirus-lockdown-200501072927207.html>.

¹³ Rose Deller, “Book Review: Happiness Explained: What Human Flourishing Is and How We Can Promote It by Paul Anand,” *The London School of Economics and Political Science*, August 24, 2016, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2016/08/24/book-review-happiness-explained-what-human-flourishing-is-and-how-we-can-promote-it-by-paul-anand/>.

¹⁴ Alistair Brown and Richard Horton, “A Planetary Health Perspective on COVID-19: A Call for Papers,” *The Lancet* 395 (April 4, 2020): 1099.

¹⁵ Brown and Horton.