

Realigning Sustainability in the Post-pandemic World¹

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As the Covid19 pandemic spreads into more regions, the national priorities are moving towards supporting the stretched health systems, hard-hit small business owners and the labor force working in various sectors. National governments are working overtime to ensure the availability of basics like food, water and sanitation to their population. Redistributive actions, hence, have become the focus. With the general belief that the pandemic will continue for some time, though hopefully in a minor capacity, what will sustainability look like in the post Covid19 world?

This article attempts to ignite the discussion on sustainable futures at the end of the beginning of the coronavirus crisis. The nature of the world after the pandemic crisis remains to be fully understood. As the situation evolves rapidly, the predictions about economic, environmental, and social impact become highly dynamic. The article forms the first in a series to understand the various shapes sustainability can take in the new future.

How does COVID-19 influence the current sustainability pillars?

Coronavirus pandemic has triggered economic degrowth leading to a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. But obviously, we didn't want to reduce the footprints via such a heavily cascading economic systemic failure. Surely, these reductions in emissions are temporary and will regain in some form once systems try to get back to their own normal. However, that normal will be different from the pre-pandemic normal and, furthermore, the current degrowth does not reflect positive development

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for sustainability. The leading defenders of degrowth-based sustainability transitionⁱ don't advocate for the same as well, as this nature of degrowth expresses itself through extreme societal sufferings and hardships.

The production-consumption patterns, expectedly, are heavily disordered as well, evident through the lowering of crude oil prices due to a significant decrease in demand worldwide. We witness reduced production of crude oil through a tentative agreement between the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), Russia and other countries recently.ⁱⁱ

The severity of the pandemic crisis has also brought forth the socially unsustainable growth in healthcare systems. Faster breakdowns and strains on the existing systems due to the sudden surge in a number of Covid19 patients are shreds of evidence of the systemic unsustainability of the current healthcare system. The causal factors are several, including decreased prioritization of public health systems, lack of focus on good health and well-being (SDG 3)⁴ and research focus on personalized medicineⁱⁱⁱ. Number of government hospital beds⁵ or percentage GDP spending on public health care across various economies before the pandemic eruption identifies vividly with the pre pandemic focus in the health sector.

Post pandemic commons are in disarray, and are leading to increased unemployment, salary cuts, unnatural resource diversion on social welfare, reduced spending on nonessential services, the involvement of Government machinery in distributing food and essentials, corporations are pushed to manufacture non-core products like medical equipment and health essentials, and these practices can be considered as a prelude to changing financial frameworks.

Sustainability during- and post-pandemic

The current crisis has broken the process of a steady-state progressing sustainable growth. The outbreak brings forth newer global vulnerabilities as well. The question to ask, therefore, is, what will the new steady-state progress of sustainability be like?

⁴ UN's SDG 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages, <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/health>.

⁵Number of beds per 1000 people: China- 4.2 (2012); France- 6.5 (2013); Germany- 8.3 (2013); India- 0.3 (2011); Italy- 3.4 (2012); South Korea- 11.5 (2015); Spain- 3 (2013); Switzerland- 4.7 (2013); United Kingdom- 2.8 (2013); and United States- 2.9 (2013); Source: Data at World Bank <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/sh.med.beds.zs>.

Localization of economic activity

While emissions have fallen around the world due to reduced economic activity, investors still want the companies to have long term plans that go beyond temporary reduction. The high fossil fuel utilizing industries will keep feeling the pressure to lower emissions. Along with the pressures of emissions reduction, the argument on linkages between the spread of endemics and globalization surface more frequently in the recent discussions^{iv}. Localization of economic activity and serious international considerations of restricted travel are being discussed in the light of poor global governance. Of course, a global health crisis is not the answer to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, but the phenomenon should give us a cause to reflect on the impact human activity has on the planet – including how we travel. The shift of focus towards a larger discussion on climate change, through localization of the economic systems and more controlled global supply chains, seems a nearer possibility.

Stronger focus on SDG 3

In the wake of the Covid19 pandemic, the time taken to develop the vaccine or medicine becomes an important milestone in the prospects of sustainability. Unless Covid19 gets mitigated just like smallpox, poliomyelitis, and others, and pandemic escalation and virus resurgence are carefully monitored, the economic degrowth will put unwanted unsustainable burdens on the economies. For the continuation of economic recovery, the dominance of public health system growth and health system policies may take precedence over other SDGs. A stronger focus on SDG 3, that is, health systems and wellbeing, in the short and medium-term, therefore, becomes a strong possibility.

Emergence of new socio-economic models

Transition to sustainable development through the coronavirus caused tunnel-like situation offers unique and best chance to equate the importance of sustainable economics. The pandemic provides an opportunity to adapt innovatively designed solutions in recovering the economic routines followed before the crisis and the lockdown period. Rebuilding the prior economic models and recreating the old worsened environmental situation makes little sense. For example, the economic efficiency logic of global supply and value chains, have led to more fossil fuel use through transportation.

Guidance from the hybridity concept⁶ can address careful redesigning of approaches to handle new sustainability priorities due to the pandemic crisis. Incorporation of hybrid models and economic principles has tremendous potential however, these measures are interwoven with a higher degree of complexity. The market based economic fundamentals of value extraction and efficiency will have to be amalgamated with the mechanisms of economic justice. For example, designating some months of the year as no travel months, flexible production capacity, equitable distribution of goods and services (anti-hoarding laws and price control of essential goods), and work from home options (community costs) for employees can promote models of efficiency as well as sustainability. Systemic reforms to address market-based economic imbalances and building more economically sustainable policies aimed at the common good, should emerge as a significant economic discussion.

Global cooperation, collaboration and partnership

Global information sharing and various spontaneous initiatives in trying to manage the crisis has widened the doors of international collaborations. The development of Covid19 diagnostic kits merely in a matter of weeks after the outbreak⁷, uniformity in guidelines globally to contain the propagation of the virus, international cooperation in sharing medicine, vaccine development, and informatics on casualties are some of the examples of sustainable global cooperation. These kinds of sustainable practices may extent to the social and economic domain as well. For example, global employment systems, better accounting of unorganized sector, and common renewable resources norms may emerge as part of the global exchange of knowledge and desire for global uniformity of response. Similarly, health care technologies and broader health issues like obesity and immunity etc. will face more investor interest in the face of the virus, making pharmaceutical firms to work collaboratively on larger social health areas.

Circular economy as a global sustainability program

Such conscious human stewardship can be brought in reality through the practice of circular economy⁸. With wider doors opened for international cooperation, the circular economy concept may accelerate and become a global sustainability program. Global

⁶ A hybrid system mixes elements, value systems and action logics (e.g. social impact and profit generation) of various sectors of society, i.e. the public, the private and the voluntary, within its structure, roles and processes (Borys and Jemison (1989). *Hybrid Arrangements as Strategic Alliances: Theoretical Issues in Organizational Combinations. The Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Apr., 1989), pp. 234-249).

⁷ Rebecca Tan, COVID-19 Diagnostics Explained, Asian Scientist Magazine, <https://www.asianscientist.com/2020/04/features/covid-19-diagnostics-explained>, April 08th, 2020.

⁸ <https://kenniskaarten.hetgroenebrein.nl/en/knowledge-map-circular-economy/what-is-the-definition-a-circular-economy/>

concerns like plastic reduction, use of sustainable materials, recycling, and waste management^v could push governments to support companies towards global cooperation. For example, corporate renewable energy initiatives could become more important through solar installations, through a shift from household single solar installations to large building and factory level installations.

Circular economy frameworks, thus, need immediate attention on several fronts as a sustainability transition progression. The new regime phase demands shifts across various dimensions. Such dimensions include policies, technologies, infrastructure, user practices, industrial networks, and cultural aspects. National regimes may, therefore, redesign and coevolve taking sustainability to a coordinated global scale.

Conclusions

Everyone on the planet seeks a safer exit from Covid19 catastrophe, from nationwide lockdowns, and disrupted daily lives. But these actualities somewhere deep in our thoughts have triggered the sense of vulnerability and dependence on the ecosystem among societies. Here's the ray of hope for sustainability, it's the sign of solidarity among the brotherhood.

Global cooperation, advocated by 17th UN-SDG, has revitalized the nature of our Covid19 tackling approaches worldwide. The leadership roles of supranational organizations like WHO, UN, UNICEF, and others, will be important as most world economies are facing financial breakdowns. These organizations require to orient themselves in identifying the segments to be prioritized during the transition and should not wait for the crisis to rest in peace.

In the immediate future, Governments would be focusing more on the measures to tackle the strains on healthcare systems and hence, prioritized segments might belong to social health and financial aspects which further represent important pillars of sustainability namely, social and economic. Whereas, in the long run, world sustainability might share spaces on top priority list along with others.

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ⁱⁱ The press release of OPEC and non-OPEC Ministerial Meeting, https://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/press_room/5882.htm, April 09th, 2020.

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^{iv} Hans Yue Zhu, YaleGlobal Online, COVID-19: Turning Point for Globalization?
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