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Will post COVID-19 pandemic lead to a climate compatible, more just, resilient and sustainable society? By Youba Sokona

As a result of the economic shutdown and physical lockdown triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, greenhouse gas emissions, in particular CO₂, have decreased and air pollution levels have seriously dropped. However, the temporary reduction of greenhouse gas emissions resulting from the pandemic is not to be celebrated as it is not a result of deliberate climate and sustainable development policy. People who are the most vulnerable, most marginalized, and least empowered are the hardest hit by both COVID-19 and climate change. Both crises require robust scientific, evidence-based, accurate information in order to inform adequate policies and actions. They are global in nature and as such need global participation at all levels as well as strong international cooperation and transparency for their resolution.

The COVID-19 pandemic is testing governments, shattering economic growth and causing disruption to the lives of billions of people around the world. The pandemic has already led to a major loss of human life (as of 26th April 2020, there are almost 3 million cases and over 200,000 deaths confirmed worldwide), imposition of quarantine, isolation and shutdown that disrupts social life, radical curtailment of transport, drastic slowdown of economic activities, jeopardization of the livelihood of vulnerable populations, and growing fears of uncertainties. Borders are closed, the real economy has become dysfunctional with millions of lost jobs, trade has contracted and many sectors such as industry, tourism, agriculture and food, are facing significant challenges.

COVID-19 is already having colossal economic and social impacts and yet there is no immediate end in sight. The virus is still spreading with no available vaccine to prevent it. The pandemic is putting on hold major multilateral processes including the annual United Nations Climate Change Conference which was originally scheduled to take place in Glasgow in November 2020, but has now been postponed to 2021. Although governments are looking at alternative ways of conducting business, there could be as well some unforeseen fallout associated with delaying important international negotiations and forums.



The annual United Nations Climate Change Conference which was originally scheduled to take place in Glasgow in November 2020 has now been postponed to 2021 due to COVID-19.

As a result of the economic shutdown and physical lockdown triggered by the pandemic, greenhouse gas emissions, in particular CO₂, have decreased and air pollution levels have seriously dropped. For example, in the Paris conurbation an improvement in air quality of around 30% during the second half of March has been measured, following the drop in emissions of more than 60% for nitrogen oxides, a pollutant linked to cars. Similar occurrences have been observed in major big cities across continents. However, the temporary reduction of greenhouse gas emissions resulting from the pandemic is not to be celebrated as it is not a result of deliberate climate and sustainable development policy, but is due to catastrophic economic slowdown and human distress. Addressing climate change by putting the economy on hold, limiting trade and imposing isolation has never been a plausible option. It is not certain that COVID-19 will have a significant effect on climate change in the long term. Indeed, the climate related positive outcomes due to COVID-19 response are temporary and they may reverse and even worsen when the pandemic is contained and economic activities rebound, particularly if oil prices remain low.

In some respects, the COVID-19 pandemic is very different from the climate crisis. The impacts of the pandemic are immediately threatening the health of oneself and close family, while the impacts of climate change are perceived as distant and invisible for most people, even if we are observing an increase in climate extreme events. But in other respects, both crises are similar. Both require robust scientific, evidence-based, accurate information in order to inform adequate policies and actions. They are global in nature and as such need global participation at all levels as well as strong international cooperation and transparency for their resolution. Information, awareness, education and behavioral change are essential to ensure broader participation to tackle both crises. High level political leadership is key for immediate intervention. Any delayed response makes both problems more difficult and dangerous and will result in higher economic and social costs, negatively impact human health and food security, and cause the loss of human lives. People who are the most vulnerable, most marginalized, and least empowered are the hardest hit by both COVID-19 and climate change. The COVID-19 pandemic, just like the climate crisis, calls for solidarity and coordinated responses at a global level. Both point to the importance of collective action and the key role governments can play in ensuring, promoting and building resilience. Private sector, civil society, educational institutions and the media can help but cannot solve the problem alone. Just as is happening with the COVID-19 pandemic, the world will come to realize this is the case with climate change as well.

Special and adequate finance is crucial for tackling both crises. Both exacerbate existing gender, health, income, inter-generational, wealth and digital inequalities within and across countries as well as likely increase poverty and debt burdens for households, enterprises and governments. Governments in many developing countries, who have little or no tax on digital services, the sector mainly benefitting in this crisis, will experience severe revenue shock. As with prior crises, the impact will undoubtedly fall on cutbacks in services that are critical for vulnerable populations. This will undermine their capacity to adapt to or be resilient to climate shocks.

The COVID-19 pandemic reveals how vulnerable our operating systems and institutions are and indicates the need for profound transformation as expressed in a recent report on Global Warming of 1.5°C by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Indeed, this report released in October 2018 suggests that limiting global warming to 1.5°C will require unprecedented transformations in all aspects of society starting with rapid and far-reaching transitions in energy, land, urban and rural infrastructure, and industrial systems.

While the two crises are different, their challenges as well as many of their root causes are inter-related and the urgent response to the pandemic offers an unparalleled opportunity to align these strategies with climate change responses. After the rescue and emergency relief period of the pandemic, the recovery and stimulus packages under preparation offer a unique opportunity to correct course and instigate the profound transition needed in all aspects of society.

The current worldwide response to the pandemic demonstrates that we can change our behavior and implement far-reaching rules, regulations, bans, incentives and public support schemes faster than we ever imagined. Teleworking, changes in mobility, greater solidarity and care, relying more on localized supply chains, circular economy, reduced consumption, and many other adjustments are becoming normal practices during this period of great anxiety. Aligning climate change goals and the COVID-19 pandemic recovery will enable us to build a just, resilient and sustainable society.

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