'How do we build from the current corona crisis towards a more sustainable future?'

Introduction

The current corona crisis has stopped the world as we know it. In doing so, it has provided perhaps a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to rethink and restart. Before corona, we already knew that time was running out to mitigate climate change before we crossed what most scientists agreed were acceptable thresholds. But the world kept turning and the problem seemed too large, too distant. Now that countries have been stopped in their tracks, we have gained the opportunity to consider what is truly important in our societies and finally noticed clearly some glaring shortcomings. The situation has changed. Scientists estimate that carbon emissions have dropped by up to 17% during lockdown (Costa Figueira, 2020). At the same time, most people in the UK agree that they do not want to return to the same world as before (Wood, 2020). To achieve true sustainability post corona, we must consider both social and environmental conditions, including a call for inter and intragenerational justice (Brundtland, 1987). So how do we rebuild from this great shock towards a more sustainable future?

Cultural, behavioural and societal change

One of the most obvious societal changes caused by corona has been a rise in community spirit and local interactions. The caring and helpful nature of these relationships should be strongly encouraged to continue even once the crisis is over. There is no reason why current community group chats and local support systems should be allowed to disintegrate, given how beneficial they have proven themselves in this situation. Equally, many of those with money or time to spare have been donating this to help both local and national charitable efforts. It is hard to image that a rapid transition to a more sustainable world will be possible without such acts of generosity. However, much more is needed.

A subject which has gained particular attention during the current crisis is the fragility of global food systems, which are themselves incredibly environmentally detrimental due to greenhouse gas production, water pollution and so on (Wanza, 2018). Therefore, the opportunity should be taken to amplify many people's recent interest in activities such as gardening, chicken-keeping and bread-baking (e.g. Brown, 2020). Although people may lack the space and time to do this on a large scale, even small changes will substantially reduce environmental damage. Perhaps more importantly, home food production raises awareness of where food comes from and the effort required to produce it. This has huge significance in the battle to reduce household food waste, with both social and environmental benefits. UK households waste 8.3 million tonnes of food annually, constituting 3% of national greenhouse gas emissions (Quested et al., 2011). Simultaneously, around 2-3 million UK residents are considered undernourished (UK Parliament, 2019) and this situation is likely to worsen during a corona-driven recession. When people better understand where their food comes from, and personally invest in its production, they may be less likely to waste it, since wasting time and money are motivators for reducing food waste (Neff, Spiker and Truant, 2015). Additionally, the categories of food items which are most commonly wasted at the household level are the same ones that people are more able to produce at home, including salads, vegetables and baked goods (WRAP, 2009). Home-growing and home-baking also allow much better portion control, tackling another key driver of household waste (Parfitt et al., 2010). Reductions in waste should also be targeted more broadly throughout food systems through measures such as legally enforcing charity partnerships and relaxing cosmetic standards.

There is a high likelihood that many people will be reluctant to travel internationally for a significant time after lockdowns are lifted due to nervousness, ongoing outbreaks in other countries and government controls such as forced quarantine periods. These conditions present a rare opportunity to push for growth in domestic holiday markets, allowing economic regrowth in forgotten spots and reducing CO_2 emissions from aviation, which in 2018 accounted for 2.4% of global emissions from fossil fuels (Graver, Zhang and Rutherford, 2019). Many people have also been spending more time outdoors, walking, exercising and travelling to local beauty spots. The popularity of such activities should be maintained, not just for their low-carbon value, but also because wildlife recreation can foster a greater appreciation of nature, which is likely to translate into increased environmental concern and pro-environmental behaviour (Nisbet, Zelenski and Murphy, 2008).

<u>Government policy, regulatory & institutional change</u>

We are facing a rare opportunity for drastic policy change. Kingdon's Multiple Streams Framework (1984) identifies the importance of problem, policy and politics streams intersecting to create a policy window, allowing policy entrepreneurs to more easily achieve significant policy outputs. In this case, there is a clear problem (climate change), political pressure (environmental issues have remained in the public eye throughout the corona crisis) and plentiful suggestions of alternative pro-environmental policy options. Unlike previous attempts, such as the UK Climate Change Act or the Paris Agreement, the policy shifts must be more stringent and more ambitious. Crucially, they must genuinely aim to deliver on their goals.

Although environmental issues have been gaining increased attention in policy, such as during the UK 2019 election campaign, political attempts at sustainability to date have often focussed on the wrong issues (such as the unprecedented attention given to simply planting more trees) and lacked true radical spirit (Sharma, 2019). Moreover, those responsible for the failure of past attempts are yet to be held accountable. Something must urgently change in the way we assign blame and responsibility in our institutions and amongst our policymakers. A clear legal and institutional backing is needed to hold politicians to account for the sustainability goals and policies to which they commit. Presently, the diffuse distribution of power and responsibility within Multi-Level Governance Systems allows for blame shifting and 'fuzzy accountability' structures (Bache et al., 2014). This problem is exacerbated by the short terms of elected politicians, who prioritise immediate gains and easily evade responsibility for failure to advance towards long-term goals. A new legal framework is needed, through which each senior politician who is in power during commitments like the Paris Agreement must demonstrate the work they had carried out to meet these goals and the progress this resulted in. Failure to do this satisfactorily must result in legal prosecution at the highest levels in government, since these individuals are in a hugely influential position to drive progress lower down.

Another vital, although perhaps trivial sounding, change needed is a shift in the economic indicators used by politicians. Multitudes of media articles speak of the impacts which corona has had on nations' GDP, creating the impression that the regrowth strategies needed are ones which place rapidly increasing GDP growth as their highest priority. However, GDP remains a frequently poorly understood and poorly used indicator, which does not represent well economic, social or environmental welfare (Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi 2009). Importantly, it is also recognised that endless GDP growth may be incompatible with sustainable strategies. Governments should therefore rethink their choices of national indicators, moving towards ones which consider the social and environmental welfare of their populations, such as health, education, life satisfaction or air quality. This can be framed as a shift towards a more a-growth strategy – not dismissing economic growth, but placing the emphasis on achieving environmental and social welfare instead (van den Bergh,

2011). This cannot be a purely internal process – instead, the shift must be clearly communicated to the public, who have been taught that GDP growth is what they should be judging politicians and national progress against. This would contribute towards a broader shift in sustainability mindsets, whereby social and environmental goals are given priority over purely financial ones.

With many firms clamouring for financial aid from the government, it is necessary to set stringent requirements about the sustainability performance of companies which are to receive such bailouts. The targets set should be clear and ambitious, designed for easy monitoring and without loopholes. Targets must relate to tangible improvements in environmental and social welfare which will advance progress towards targets such as the Paris Agreement, rather than procedural tick-box exercises such as writing plans. Given the urgency of the climate crisis, the time for weak non-compliance penalties is over. If a firm fails to meet its requirements, governments should demand a full refund of all financial aid provided within a timeframe specified in the original agreement. Although this may result in the eventual bankruptcy of some businesses, firms which cannot comply with their sustainability agreements are unlikely to contribute to a sustainable future. Financial aid packages should prioritise those companies most likely to support such a future, such as renewable energy providers or environmentally certified local farmers.

To achieve both social and environmental sustainability post corona, governments should create job safety nets for the unemployed and financially vulnerable. Such an approach, modelled on Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps following the Great Depression, was recommended even before corona (Baicich, 2017). It should involve the introduction of a large number of government-funded jobs supporting a sustainability transition and generating incomes. Given the complexity of current environmental problems, the emphasis must reach far beyond tree planting (although this should be a contributing component). Activities targeting a more holistic view of ecosystem health and functioning can involve invasive species removal, habitat restoration, solar panel installation and many more. Besides creating much-needed incomes and environmental improvements, such projects could also function to improve the attractiveness of domestic tourism by reinvigorating previously dilapidated areas, for example through litter picking or building restoration. Additionally, they would contribute to building up workers' confidence and job prospects. If truly radical change is desired, such programmes could become mandatory. For example, they could replace military conscription or require that every healthy citizen within a given age bracket contributes a set number of hours annually towards suitable projects.

Business leadership, governance and practice

The current corona crisis has emphasised the important role which businesses play in our societies. Over the last few months, many businesses have demonstrated just how quickly they can adapt to drastic changes in circumstances, for example through implementing social distancing or transitioning their activities online. Not bound by the same slow and incumbent decision-making processes as governments, businesses are in a prime position to alter their working practises to put sustainability first without waiting for the establishment to catch up. As such, they have a vital role to play in building from the current crisis towards a more sustainable future.

One aspect of many businesses which has changed due to corona has been a shift towards remote working practises. Other firms should follow the example of pioneers like Twitter, who have already announced a permanent move to allowing remote working (Christie, 2020). It is perhaps neither feasible nor desirable for all office-based work to cease, given the opportunities for collaboration and relationship-building which this presents. However, the shift towards much greater flexibility in both the location and timing of work would prove both socially and environmentally advantageous.

Whilst reducing emissions of carbon and other harmful gases like nitrous oxides, greater utilisation of remote working practises could also hugely empower those with special requirements like childcare responsibilities. This can contribute to advancing gender equality by permitting single stay-at-home parents to continue working. Similarly, flexible remote working policies could allow both parents to balance their time between home and the office, instead of forcing one parent (typically the mother) into a stay-at-home position. Moving away from an almost universal 9am-5pm working routine would again allow workers to organise their working time around other responsibilities, while hugely reducing congestion by smoothing out rush-hour traffic. This would bring environmental benefits, since queueing traffic results in unnecessary emissions and much less efficient fuel use compared to smoother driving with fewer changes in speed (Vehicle Certification Agency, 2020). It is important to emphasise the leadership potential of businesses in paving a new, sustainable way forward. As key players adopt flexible working practises, this can increasingly become the expected standard in other organisations, encouraging other businesses to follow suit in order to remain competitive recruiters. Eventually, this shift can even pave the way for these new changes to be enshrined in national policies. Given many governments' hesitation to engage in new, radical approaches, it is likely to be easier for such changes to be business-led, so that they are already considered tried and tested by the time they are adopted by governments. Finally, businesses should take the opportunity presented by corona to permanently alter their travel policies. Lockdown has demonstrated that business can continue without traveling for face to face interactions. Therefore, business travel for meetings (especially internationally) should no longer be permitted, except in circumstances where there is an irrefutable need, such as to conduct inspections. This would form a significant step forwards in reducing many companies' carbon footprints.

Lastly, rebuilding from the current crisis should involve a greater shift towards different forms of doing business – ones which put social and environmental sustainability above a ruthless pursuit of profits for the owners. A rise in not-for-profits and socially responsible businesses should be encouraged, including through policy and consumer support, since these types of businesses generate important welfare gains. Additionally, the opportunity should be taken to move away from investor-led firms and towards a broader adoption of the cooperative model, whereby businesses are jointly owned by their members, who are given equal decision-making rights. Such companies present a more equitable power structure through which the interests of more stakeholders can be advanced, preventing issues such as workers' conditions and environmental pollution from being kept off the agenda.

Conclusion

With many countries already embarking on a gradual move towards lifting lockdowns, there is only a limited window of opportunity to introduce important changes at the optimal time, so that the world can be reopened to a new, better normal. To achieve the necessary progress towards a more sustainable future, businesses, politicians and civil society must all implement changes, with these groups mutually reinforcing each other's advances. Civilians should maintain existing support networks and positive habits, such as increased home-growing of food, which can help to tackle issues of domestic food waste. They should also more frequently choose domestic holidays and low-carbon activities which enhance attachment to nature, such as countryside walking. Politicians must seize this opportunity to introduce radical policy changes – politicians must be held to account for their progress against environmental targets, indicators of social and environmental welfare must be prioritised over GDP growth, stringent sustainability requirements must be imposed on firms seeking government bailouts, and governments should introduce a wide-scale rollout of sustainability jobs.

Finally, businesses must act as leaders, allowing flexible and remote working, banning all unnecessary travel and demonstrating a growth in alternative business types such as not-for-profits and cooperatives. The measures outlined here are not exhaustive, with many other potential options available for advancing social and environmental welfare. It is only if civil society, governments and businesses all come together to rebuild after corona that a more sustainable future can truly be achieved.

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