



Reversing atmospheric infection

The Coronavirus crisis has taught us a number of lessons on how we should approach climate change



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The worst pandemic for 100 years has shown that our globalised world is much more fragile than we like to think. The speed with which the disease has spread and the disruption it has caused to health systems, supply chains and financial markets are unprecedented. That it is currently wreaking the greatest havoc in the richest and most medically advanced countries in the world only underlines our vulnerability to new threats all the more.

But human beings have evolved to learn fast in the face of life-threatening dangers and the policies now being adopted globally around social distancing, while alien to our species, match the urgency of the moment. The parallels with climate change are self-evident, and three insights stand out with particular clarity.

First, the heightened frequency and severity of extreme weather events over the last two decades has revealed the fragility of our climate system as the concentration of greenhouse gases (GHGs) in the atmosphere has accelerated. The parts-per-million (ppm)

count of GHGs in the atmosphere is the equivalent of the pandemic's infection rate, and with this hitting an all-time high of 415ppm in 2019 at the monitoring station in Mauna Loa¹ we urgently need the equivalent of social distancing in climate policy to halt and reverse it.

Such an equivalent policy already exists and as the collapse in UK coal emissions over the last four years² has shown it is a proven palliative: carbon pricing. Ramping the cost of burning fossil fuels globally would reduce the GHG ppm count in the atmosphere just as social distancing is reducing the infection rate of Coronavirus. The limited amount of space left in the atmosphere for storing more GHGs before we burn through the Paris Agreement's carbon budget is the ultimate scarce resource and it needs to be priced accordingly.

Of course, in the same way that social distancing is not enough on its own to eradicate the Coronavirus, so carbon pricing on its own will not stop climate change: it can slow and then reverse the rate of atmospheric infection but if we are to stave off the climate tipping

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point then just as governments have implemented confinement as a reinforcement to distancing in fighting the pandemic, so too will we need continuing support for renewables and greatly strengthened incentives for energy storage.

Beyond the mitigation of fragility, we will then need policies on climate adaptation to improve the world's resilience to the warming that is already baked in. Most obviously this means improved infrastructure: enhanced flood defences to deal with rising water levels, better cooling systems for hotter summers, improved irrigation for drought-prone areas, and so on.

Policymakers have met the economic crash caused by the pandemic with massive monetary and fiscal stimulus, and the pay-off from an imaginative long-term financing package for green infrastructure – both for mitigation and adaptation – would be a liveable future for succeeding generations and sustainable and well-paid employment for millions of workers around the world today.

The second insight from the virus is that it has revealed our inter-connectedness and the importance of global institutions such as the World Health Organization. No country, no people, and even no age group has immunity. The way in which the world is coming together to contain, treat and defeat the disease is exactly what we need to see at the next UN climate summit in Glasgow in 2021 if we are to remain within the temperature boundary prescribed by the Paris Agreement. For as with the virus, if we crash through this boundary there will be varying degrees of impact across communities but no immunity anywhere.

And the third key insight from the pandemic is that people are willing to make simple but effective changes to their everyday behaviour when given a clear rationale for doing so. The comparison here is between

the handwashing rituals we have quickly become used to as a roadblock to the spread of Coronavirus and the changes we can make to our daily consumption habits as a brake on runaway climate change: saving energy in the home, reducing meat in our diet, buying more locally-sourced produce, flying less, and so forth. Direct and urgent explanation by government to citizens works in a crisis.

Politicians have been willing to shut down the economy in order to save lives. The short-term economic cost will be massive, but everyone agrees it is a price worth paying. We do not need to shut the economy down to tackle climate change, but we do need to act decisively now. Scientists think that climate change will be responsible for 250,000 unnecessary deaths³ every year within a decade, and at that point there will be no equivalent of social distancing that can save us. And when that point comes, how will we explain that we were willing to go all in to prevent deaths from a virus, but we prevaricated about taking far more modest measures to tackle the climate challenge and save future generations?

In the final analysis, just as we need a vaccine for the Coronavirus in order to prevent future mass infections, so too do we need an inoculation against the increase of GHG concentration levels in the atmosphere to prevent irreversible climate change. That inoculation is a net-zero global energy system by 2050. We all need to start working towards that goal now with the same urgency and dedication as the world's healthcare professionals and leading medical researchers are so selflessly doing on the frontlines of care and in the search for a vaccine. ■

1 <https://www.esrl.noaa.gov/gmd/ccgg/trends/>

2 <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/ng-interactive/2019/may/25/the-power-switch-tracking-britains-record-coal-free-run>

3 <https://ijmhs.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13033-018-0210-6>

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