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Lessons learnt from Coronavirus and global environmental challenges



Global Environmental Politics

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APRIL 15TH 2020

Continued 09:29

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dynamic, such a crisis provides crucial insights to the state of the current international system, including its capacity to respond to worldwide emergencies. This helps us gauge our system's ability to tackle more long-term issues, such as the global environmental crisis. Whilst these two things may seem very separate, there is a lot that links the current coronavirus outbreak and our global environmental problems.

Some bodies claim that the relation between the two is antagonistic, with the outbreak demonstrating how more needs to be done to protect wildlife and the environment. On 3 March the [United Nations Environment Programme](https://www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/story/coronavirus-outbreak-highlights-need-address-threats-ecosystems-and-wildlife) (<https://www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/story/coronavirus-outbreak-highlights-need-address-threats-ecosystems-and-wildlife>) (https://percolate.com/app/763/posts/post:46624396/content#_msocom_1) pointed toward environmental degradation as an explanation for the origin of COVID-19. It claimed that such an outbreak was related to ecosystem degradation and wildlife threats, which causes the transmission of viruses and diseases from wild species to humans. For the United Nations Environment Programme the outbreak therefore reveals the need to better combat environmental degradation.

Some bodies claim that the relation between the two is synergistic: whilst the pandemic is overwhelming a negative occurrence, it has had positive effects on the global environment. Comparing satellite images of China between January and February 2020, the National Aeronautics and Space Agency and the European Space Agency have demonstrated the positive environmental side effects of the quarantine measures taken by states to contain the pandemic, especially with regards to air quality. Similar observations are now surfacing in terms of the levels of air pollution in northern Italy. The drastic reduction in air traffic will also have positive side effects for climate change mitigation. Countries will benefit from these changes in terms of their commitment to climate change, even if these changes are to last only temporarily.

These observations, while noteworthy, do not take into account the seriousness of either of these crises. Whilst this is a seemingly positive time for the environment, environmentalists are less than happy that it has taken a pandemic to effect change in our environmental impact. It would have been preferred that these positive impacts be reached by progressive measures rather than through the current circumstances.

More importantly, the pandemic has brought several crucial issues about the world we live in back to the forefront of debate in global politics that need further inquiry, including social inequality, sovereignty, and adaptation. These are also at the core of global environmental politics.

The pandemic, and the measures taken in an attempt to control it, remind us of the realities of social inequality. As recalled by the [United Nations Secretary General](https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/above-all-human-crisis-calls-solidarity) (<https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/above-all-human-crisis-calls-solidarity>) (https://percolate.com/app/763/posts/post:46624396/content#_msocom_2), Antonio Gutierrez: "This is, above all, a human crisis that calls for solidarity". Every country, region, social class, and individual has different capabilities to tackle the pandemic. Already vulnerable countries and populations are unfortunately more susceptible to the outbreak. Current figures also indicate inequalities between generations, with older people more likely to develop a serious form of the disease, while young people are predominantly asymptomatic carriers.

Whilst inequalities are allowing the coronavirus to take a hold of the world, with the poorer populations not receiving the medical care and resources they need, the virus itself is highlighting the need for change to help balance social inequality. In global environmental politics, scholars have long identified equality and justice as important facets of society in need of protection. They have shown that justice can take many forms, from the protection of minorities rights (such as indigenous and local communities) to inter-generational justice. They have also shown how justice entails the need for adjustment mechanisms to be designed to help the most vulnerable. [Just as inequalities reinforce the pandemic](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/15/world/europe/coronavirus-inequality.html)

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/15/world/europe/coronavirus-inequality.html>), (https://percolate.com/app/763/posts/post:46624396/content#_msocom_3) inequalities reinforce and cause global environmental problems and should therefore be addressed. You can change your cookie settings at any time.

The coronavirus also exacerbates the sovereignty crisis. The European Union, one of the most advanced supranational organizations, speaking with one voice on many different topics, did not manage to corroborate to create a common strategy to fight the pandemic. All European Union external borders have been closed and, within the European Union, countries are closing borders that would usually stay open under the Schengen Area. This form of lockdown has now become the norm within Europe, with the majority of international flights being cancelled. Individual governments have taken back control, isolating themselves and their countries, whilst rumors and suspicions about other nations are rife.

Global environmental political scholars have been reflecting on the use of sovereignty as a political instrument for a long time. While sovereignty is an important instrument in enforcing environmental policies, and the pandemic clearly shows that individual governments can impose impressive regulatory means when needed, international and transnational collaborations are also essential to ensure information sharing, external control, and the sharing of good practices. National protection measures should be backed by international co-ordination mechanisms. The worldwide spread of the virus demonstrates how the world is highly interdependent and requires global governance and co-ordination.

Finally, the pandemic also reveals interesting insights on adaptation. People all around the world are being forced to change their habits and adopt new everyday practices. New techniques, such as the mass use of online interaction and communication, are flourishing. Global environmental scholars have been calling on our capacity to evolve and embrace changes to make our practices more sustainable for a long time. Some environmentalists suggest that the environmental crisis we are facing will mirror the coronavirus crisis.

By this, however, environmentalists are suggesting that, as with the coronavirus, people will take no action whilst the crisis is not directly affecting them as nations and communities. We'll only take action when the problem suddenly explodes because of its exponential dynamic (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/15/world/europe/coronavirus-inequality.html>) (https://percolate.com/app/763/posts/post:46624396/content#_msocom_4), by which time it might be too late to take any effective measures. The pandemic reveals the need to anticipate adaptation. To fight environmental degradation, some of the current pandemic adaptation strategies could remain in place even after the outbreak. As we begin to recover from COVID-19, we will have to think about how to rebuild our world and the global economy and should take this opportunity to direct our actions towards a greener future.

Featured Image Credit: Joshua Rawson-Harris

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