

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Climate Change: Why Have Responses Been So Different?

Written by Lukas H. Meyer and Marcelo de Araujo

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LUKAS H. MEYER AND MARCELO DE ARAUJO, APR 20 2020

The emergence of COVID-19 as a global threat has prompted states and civil society to take radical measures to limit the spread of the new virus. These measures are unprecedented in recent world history and resemble the effort of war in times of international violent conflicts. Most people alive today have some knowledge of the catastrophic consequences of two world wars, but few of them have witnessed, in their lifetime, governments calling their citizens to return from abroad immediately, or seen their governments closing airports and borders to neighboring states. Democratic societies around the world have been imposing a curfew on entire populations. Schools and shops have been shut down, while all forms of public gathering have been banned as an attempt to fight the advance of the new coronavirus. For all intents and purposes, it is as if states have declared war against a common enemy. Indeed, President Donald Trump stated in a press conference on March 22: 'We're at war, in a true sense we're at war'. In addressing the nation on March 16, French President Emmanuel Macron declared: *nous sommes en guerre* – we are at war. In the following days, further comparisons with a world war loomed large in the press.

Whether in China or Austria, Germany, Brazil or Japan, most people around the world seem to support, or at least to accept, the drastic measures against the new enemy – regardless of the political regime in which they live. They have not perceived the war effort as non-democratic, at least not yet, as over 130,000 deaths resulting from COVID-19 have been reported from every part of the world. Some people go as far as to suggest that their own governments have been too slow in recognizing the graveness of the situation; that their political leaders have been unable to deal with the impending crisis, failing to enforce more stringent measures to contain the virus. Citizens and governments around the world seem now to recognize the current pandemic as a real threat to their most fundamental interests.

But, here is the catch. In spite of mounting evidence that climate change will also have devastating consequences for humanity over the next decades, governments and civil society have been far less engaged in adopting effective measures to avert dangerous climate change. Why? One possible reason for this is that the effects of viral infections are more conspicuous than the effects of climate change. However, some of the deadly consequences of climate change have already become quite visible too.

Consider the heatwave of 2003 in Europe. It has claimed over 70.000 lives (Robine et al. 2008). According to a report recently published by the World Meteorological Organization, extreme weather events are expected to occur more frequently over the next decades. Entire populations will have to be dislocated due to the risks of floods or bush fires. Even though the number of statistical premature deaths resulting from climate change are much higher than the number of deaths that are likely to occur due to COVID-19, climate change has not elicited global measures comparable to those we are currently observing to stop new infections.

It might be reasonably suggested that we have far more time to mitigate greenhouse emissions and to adapt to the new environment in the future, than we have to curb the advance of COVID-19 now. But this is only part of the truth.

Mitigation and Adaptation Measures Differ from Quarantine and Social Distancing

In order to counter climate change, both mitigation and adaptation measures are necessary. Mitigation measures

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include, for instance, restriction of CO₂ emissions, development of low-carbon and non-fossil sources of energy, or preservation and expansion of carbon sinks. The effects of mitigation measures are global, for they spread across state borders. Every state, therefore, benefits from successful policies in this area. However, mitigation measures mostly will benefit people after approximately forty years. Adaptation measures, on the other hand, are effective at a local level. They aim, for instance, at reshaping the infrastructure of cities in order to make them more robust against the consequences of extreme weather. However, the longer-term effectiveness of adaptation measures depends on the success of mitigation measures. Without substantial reduction of global emissions, dangerous climate change will not be averted, and adaptation measures may turn out to be of no avail for many people in the long-term. They will be of little help, for example, if sea levels rise over one meter on average by 2070. Without societal and economic changes leading to net-zero emissions by 2050, millions of people are likely to suffer or die. Moreover, mitigation measures will be effective only if the high emitters are willing to pursue them collectively and over a long period – at least thirty years. This will require the joint effort of actors such as China, the United States, Australia, Europe and Russia.

Now, responding to the current coronavirus pandemic is far less demanding in this regard. The drastic measures that have been implemented thus far arguably are justifiable as long as there is no vaccination, and so long as effective and affordable treatment is unavailable for those infected with the virus. For sure, nobody can predict how long the development of both preventive and therapeutic measures will take. However, given the history of medical progress, COVID-19 seems likely in the next few years to pose no greater threat to humanity than other common viral infections. Moreover, measures such as quarantine and social distancing are expected to be effective within a few weeks or months. These measures are supposed to be temporary, and their results can be assessed and adjusted at the local level. More importantly, states have the authority to enforce them within their borders. Under these conditions, governments have good reasons to respond to the pandemic with drastic measures. Citizens will assess the legitimacy of their governments, depending on how politicians succeed in steering the country during the crisis. This also means that politicians have a strong desire to be perceived as successful problem solvers. Their re-election may depend on this.

Responding to climate change, on the other hand, has been less relevant for the perceived legitimacy of governments and politicians' chances of being re-elected. Within the high emitting states, the younger generations, who might benefit from mitigation and adaptation policies in their lifetime, constitute a minority of voters. The majority of voters, on the other hand, comprises those who would have to bear the costs of transformation policies, without the prospect of benefiting themselves much from the measures that are necessary to tackle climate change effectively.

Reasons to be skeptical about the success of climate policies, therefore, are very different from reasons to be skeptical about the success of measures against the current pandemic. The benefits of measures against COVID-19 are primarily domestic, whereas the benefits of mitigation efforts on climate are global. For global mitigation strategies to be successful, international cooperation is necessary over a long period. Yet, after decades of international negotiations, it is still uncertain whether an effective cooperative scheme can be achieved and, indeed, maintained across generations.

A Moral Crisis

There is another reason which explains the contrast between the prompt implementation of radical measures to stop the spread of the new virus and the lack of success in adopting effective measures to avert dangerous climate change. This is our tendency to be partial to our own well-being and the well-being of people who are close to us, such as partners, friends, and family members. At a more general level, our actions and governments' responses also reflect a principle that Henry Shue calls 'compatriots take priority' (Shue 1980: 131-132).

As it became clear that measures such as quarantine and social distancing were unavoidable, indeed mandatory, many people rushed to stockpile toilet paper and food. This led to governments to intervene in order to prevent citizens from hoarding essential goods, or retailers from practicing price gouging. Many countries have also imposed trade restrictions on the exports of food and medical equipment in order to prevent an internal shortage. When resources become scarce, people are willing to go to great lengths either to obtain a share of valuable supplies, even

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at the cost of others, or to adopt measures to make sure that they will not be in need of some essential goods in the first place. Consider the current shortage of trained personnel and ventilators in intensive care units. It seems reasonable to assume that, for most people, the primary motivation to endure the psychological and economic burdens of the lockdown is the fear of being infected without the prospect of being provided adequate health care.

Indeed, there has also been a lot of international cooperation amid the ongoing pandemic, especially as regards the joint effort to develop a vaccine and adequate treatment for COVID-19. Yet, one reason why governments have been quick to implement draconian measures against the spread of COVID-19, is that they are primarily concerned with what happens within their borders. The governments intend to protect their own citizens first. The German government, for instance, was willing to spend 50 million euros for flying German citizens back home from holidays abroad. Brazilian citizens, who had been stranded in Namibia, were allowed to board a Lufthansa flight, but only after the German, and then other European citizens had been rescued. Donald Trump reportedly tried to obtain – without success – exclusive access to a possible vaccine against COVID-19 from a German medical company. The ‘compatriots take priority’ principle has been apparent everywhere during the pandemic.

It might be argued, though, that in periods of crisis there is nothing morally wrong in favouring friends, family or nationals. This is the way persons and political institutions have worked for centuries. Turbulent times might seem, then, the wrong moment to leave behind our survival instincts or question the moral credentials of family ties or national loyalties. One might go a step further and even say that keeping oneself healthy and safe in the first place is a precondition for providing health and protection to other people. As every frequent flier knows by heart: ‘In case of an emergency, air masks will drop from the ceiling. Put on your mask first, before you help another person.’ We can only hope, then, that the pilot will steer the plane through the turbulence and land safely on the ground. However, what if there is no pilot onboard?

As humanity emerges from the pandemic within the next months – or maybe years – we will be excused for feeling a sense of relief. The system of states itself may re-emerge stronger than before. People around the world will be reminded of the radical measures political leaders had had to implement in order to protect the lives and jobs of their fellow citizens. Some opportunists will feel encouraged to go as far as to suggest that the limitation of our basic liberties, acceptable during the crisis, should be extended for an even longer time – just in case a new lethal virus pops up again in some far-flung corner of the world.

Yet, the lack of willingness to carry out comparable measures to avert dangerous climate change also makes apparent that the system of states is ill-suited to address threats that pose existential risks, which can only be addressed through a scheme of cooperation involving most states, especially the most powerful ones. State borders have been originally designed to protect citizens from external threats and to promote internal cooperation. State borders, however, are inadequate means to keep viruses outside. It takes only one infected co-national to bring the virus home and spread a new disease throughout an entire country. If health authorities are quick to detect the problem, closing the borders may help to slow down the advance of new infections. However, it can hardly prevent the virus from entering a country in the first place. Similarly, the flux of greenhouse gas emissions cannot be controlled by state borders. State borders, therefore, are of little help to protect citizens from the consequences of climate change. Indeed, as far as climate change is concerned, the system of states itself is to blame. Here the system of states resembles an aircraft without a pilot. There is clear evidence that it is in a steep dive – metaphorically speaking. Most passengers are likely to be killed in the process. Still, all they can do is to get themselves a mask and wait.

The primacy of the ‘compatriots take priority’ principle seems to be the symptom of a profound moral crisis. Climate change is likely to affect first, and foremost populations in the poorest countries, who neither contributed significantly to the current levels of CO₂ nor have the resources to adapt to the new environment. That we have not been equally responsive to the needs of people in the poorest parts of the world or sensitive to the well-being of future generations is something that we should keep in mind as the public reaction to the current crisis gathers momentum.

Who Cares about Non-existent People?

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There is another issue we should bear in mind here, namely: scepticism about moral reasons to protect future people against the consequences of anthropogenic climate change. The British novelist L.P. Hartley once wrote: 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.' However, it seems that the future, too, is a foreign country. We treat its inhabitants differently. After all, future people, by definition, do not yet exist. They cannot make claims vis-à-vis currently living people. The non-reciprocal nature of the relationship between present and future people is such that, while currently living people can affect the conditions of life of future people, future people can do nothing to undermine the welfare of currently living people. This leads to what Stephen Gardiner aptly calls 'the tyranny of the contemporary' (Gardiner 2011: 143-184).

The sceptic might suggest that it is misleading to speak of tyranny in this case, as if we were trying to weigh up the interests and needs of real persons with the interests and needs of persons who do not exist today. The sceptic might also remind us of the well-known 'non-identity problem' and suggest that future people would not be entitled to complain about the actions of past generations, for the very existence and identity of future people depend on the actions their predecessors have pursued in the past (Parfit 1984: 351-390).

However, there is wide agreement, among both normative theorists and policymakers, that scepticism about the claims of future people vis-à-vis currently living people is not tenable. The latest Assessment Report of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), published in 2014, acknowledges that these theoretical issues have already been adequately addressed (Kolstad et al. 2014). Firstly, we do attribute rights to people who are not in a position to claim the fulfillment of their interests and needs such as, for instance, infants, mentally disabled persons, and non-human animals. We attribute these rights to them on the assumption that they are subject to suffering, or that they have the same interests, needs and capacities that prompt us to attribute rights to healthy grown-up individuals in the first place. Secondly, the normative force of moral reasoning can be coherently applied both to real living people and to people who do not yet exist. The currently living people, thus, are morally accountable for the plight of future people. Their unwillingness to prevent climate change is morally objectionable from the perspective of future people. Thirdly, recognizing that future people can be seriously harmed by currently living people also gives us reason to recognize that future people – as individual persons, and regardless of where they are going to live on our planet – have valid claims against currently living people. Currently living people ought to secure conditions that allow them to realize at least those welfare rights that are indispensable for the fulfillment of a minimally good life.

At this point, the sceptic might perhaps agree that future people do have valid moral claims vis-à-vis currently living people. The sceptic might also suggest, that due to the distance in time future people's rights count less than the rights of currently living people. The force of these rights would become weaker and weaker the farther in time future generations are from us. However, is this a fair claim? Does the force of moral claims necessarily fade in the course of time?

Philosophers from Henry Sidgwick to John Rawls have rejected the assumption that distance in time is morally relevant when some people affect the well-being of other people – regardless of whether they affect their well-being through action or inaction. They have pointed out that there is no good reason for unequal consideration on the grounds of distance in time alone, for instance, if excluding uncertainty. As Rawls puts the point in *A Theory of Justice*, 'The mere difference of location in time, of something's being earlier or later, is not a rational ground for having more or less regard for it' (Rawls 1971: 293). To assume that the interest and needs of future people weigh less due to distance in time is as arbitrary as to assume that the interest of the poor, in other parts of the world, should count less merely because they are geographically distant from us.

Let us assume now, just for the sake of argument, that most people accept that we have a duty to respect the fundamental rights of both contemporaries and future people equally. Granting this assumption, it is still possible that citizens and policymakers will not feel sufficiently motivated to respond to climate change. Unresolved political and institutional problems of collective action at a global level may stand in the way of a successful response to climate change. Arguably when people's actions seem not to come with a reasonable chance of making a difference in terms of the fulfillment of their duties to future generations, people might consider themselves excused from even attempting to make a difference. Though it is mistaken to think that ordinary individuals cannot make a difference in

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terms of the consequences of climate change. Success in averting dangerous climate change depends primarily on long-term international cooperation among states, particularly the high emitting ones. In the short-term, though, this is not a win-win situation.

Conclusion

It is still too early to assess all implications of the COVID-19 pandemic to the climate change debate. As the crisis recedes, some states will be eager to rebuild their economies, even if it means dismissing previously agreed international climate change goals. On the other hand, the COVID-19 measures indirectly and contingently go hand in hand with the prohibition or the coerced abandonment of particularly emission-intensive activities and the promotion of low-carbon practices. Citizens around the world may come to believe that establishing the status-quo is not their only option and not the best one. Rather, they might be willing to sacrifice at least some aspects of their lifestyles to avoid other forms of global threats in the future. The consequences of unmitigated climate change, then, may turn out to be perceived as an existential danger that we can and should avert. For now, given the system of states under which we currently live and the constraints it impinges on the actions of policymakers, there is little hope that our collective experience with the drastic measures that have been deployed in the war against the new virus will give rise to the establishment of long term cooperative schemes to avert the perils of climate change.

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