



One pandemic, numerous lessons and 17 goals that we must not put in lockdown

On the 11th of March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic. At that time, there were more than 118,000 cases and 4,291 deaths worldwide. At the time of writing this statement –the 14th of April 2020– the number of confirmed cases is 1.9 million (real cases are estimated to be many times higher), and the death toll is close to 120,000.

These are troubling times for us all, and on behalf of the Advisory Council for the Sustainable Development of Catalonia (CADS), we would like to express our profound sadness at the loss of so many loved ones and convey our deepest sympathies to their families and friends. We also offer our gratefulness to those working for the benefit of the population in the health and social care sectors, civil protection and other essential services. Without them, the consequences would have undoubtedly been much worse and, for this, we send them our heartfelt gratitude.

We are living through a moment without parallel in recent history. The consequences of COVID-19 are multiple. One which we will never be able to put right is the loss of thousands of human lives. To this, we must add the extremely significant –and negative– social and economic impacts, which are felt more keenly among the most vulnerable in our society. In the face of such adversity, there is widespread consensus that the post-coronavirus world will be very different from the one we knew before.

Although we are still in a state of shock, we will need to find composure, tenacity and perspective to manage this new reality. In terms of sustainability, it is precisely this new reality that forces us to reflect on the multiple outcomes of this crisis, both from a Catalan and European perspective, but also from a global one. After all, as Nobel Prize winner Joseph Stiglitz reminds us, COVID-19 is a global problem that demands a global solution¹.

A recognised risk that compels and urges us to act

The 2020 edition of the Global Risks Report published by the World Economic Forum² identifies infectious diseases as one of the top ten global risks in terms of impact (not in

¹ Stiglitz, Joseph (2020). "[Internationalizing the Crisis](#)".

² World Economic Forum (2020). "[The Global Risks Report 2020](#)".



terms of probability). It points out that, although considerable progress has been made since the 2014–2016 Ebola epidemic in West Africa, health systems worldwide are still under-prepared for significant outbreaks of other emerging infectious diseases, such as SARS, Zika and MERS. The report also says that a comprehensive assessment of health security and related capabilities across 195 countries found fundamental weaknesses around the world: no country is fully prepared to handle an epidemic or pandemic.

The risk of a pandemic caused by an infectious agent, however, had already been acknowledged. The first report on global preparedness for health emergencies was drafted in autumn 2019 by the Global Preparedness Monitoring Board (formed in 2018 by the WHO and the World Bank). It warned that humanity was at risk from an epidemic equivalent to that of the so-called Spanish Flu of 1918, which sickened one-third of the world population and killed as many as 50 million people³.

Despite this, the world has never seen a pandemic caused by a coronavirus, and a hundred years have passed since the influenza of 1918, the last great pandemic to affect humanity. With all probability, however, it won't be the last. Thus, COVID-19 calls on us as a society. Firstly, because it has exposed our fragility and the need to address the resilience of our systems. Secondly, because it has highlighted how, even when armed with evidence from scientific reports, we generally tend to resist changing our behavioural patterns until we suffer a direct and immediate threat to our lives.

A pandemic that will force us to reinterpret the world and the way we live

The scientific community is analysing the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 genome to try and identify the source of the virus and its transmission. We know that the highly mutable characteristics of other animal-borne viruses have been responsible for previous epidemics, such as SARS, MERS and Ebola.

It is also clear that the disruption of ecosystems and the trade of live animals in the markets of some Asian countries creates the optimal conditions for those viruses to jump across to the human species. To avoid potential new pandemics, therefore, we must adopt a planetary health perspective (which understands that human health depends on the health of natural systems), and take action on a global scale to reduce the destruction and over-exploitation of natural ecosystems. However, we will have to do this in a world with (1) rapid population growth (potentially reaching 9.7 billion people by 2050), half of

³ Global Preparedness Monitoring Board (2019). "[A world at risk](#)".



which will reside in just nine countries, (2) an increase in the number of people living in cities (between 2025 and 2030 it's estimated that 40 cities with more than 10 million inhabitants each will be home to 630 million people), and (3) increasing resource consumption.

In economic terms, the pandemic is wreaking havoc worldwide. The forced decline in economic activity resulting from population confinement in many countries around the world has increased unemployment, decreased the purchasing power of the middle classes and increased inequality; consequences that must be reversed.

The key to recovering from this situation must lie in applying sustainability criteria to our production and consumption patterns to guarantee a circular, carbon-neutral economy that helps to achieve the Paris Agreement's climate change goals and reverse the accelerated process of biodiversity loss.

Given that the socially vulnerable population are more susceptible to the consequences of turbulent episodes like the one we are currently experiencing, we need an inclusive economy that promotes dignified work and, therefore, leaves no one behind. We also need to find structural solutions to problems such as the lack of access to housing, the black economy, the growing unemployment and the prevalence of temporary work contracts.

In short, our way out of this crisis lies in curtailing degradation of nature and fostering an economy that serves humanity while respecting the biophysical limits of the planet. It also lies in better funding for public health and social care systems, especially for older people, and committed investment in research. To achieve this, however, we will need to prioritise investments and spending in a highly complex economic scenario.

Collectively, we must seize this opportunity to learn from these troubled times, act on the causes of the pandemic and take steps to become more resilient in the face of possible future pandemics and the challenges presented by the climate emergency. The forced decline in global economic activity over the last few weeks proves that a disruptive change in the current production and consumption model is possible. We must use this experience, then, to try and reverse the social and environmental degradation of our planet and progress towards a more just, egalitarian and supportive society.

The 2030 Agenda; now more than ever

The beginning of this year marked our entry into the Decade of Action to meet the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) laid out in the 2030 Agenda. Despite the



emergence of COVID-19, the SDGs are as valid as ever, and we must not place them in lockdown. On the contrary, they provide an essential framework for analysis and reconstruction.

At a time when the spread of COVID-19, accelerated by environmental imbalances, has had a direct impact on fundamental welfare issues, the 17 SDGs in the 2030 Agenda can act as a compass to guide us to overcome the current crisis, improve our resilience as a society and help the planet.

The fight against the pandemic has, in a very short time, activated essential elements such as innovation, non-profit public-private partnerships, large-scale citizen solidarity, and monumental social and individual behavioural changes. All of these elements have a pivotal role to play in our efforts to meet the SDGs, confirming that meeting them is not only necessary but more achievable than ever.

In this context, the Catalonia 2030 Alliance, created on the 21st of February this year and open to all public and private organisations committed to working together to achieve the SDGs, can provide a framework for the reconstruction of Catalonia after COVID-19.

Finally, and in the light of the complex situation at hand, this Advisory Council would like to reiterate its firm commitment to present and future generations, to our country, and to the planet as a whole. Therefore, we will continue working to formulate pathways that lead to a sustainable Catalonia.

Barcelona, 14th April 2020