

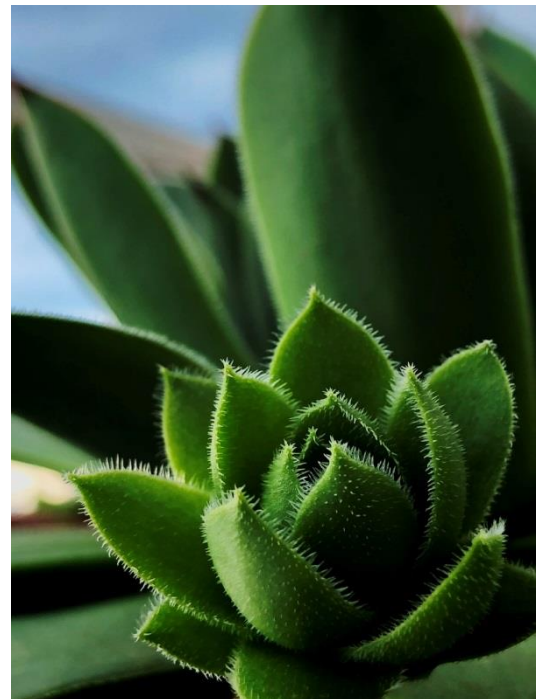
Coronavirus fostering the implementation of the European Green Deal and boosting sustainability transformation

In December 2019, the European Commission released the European Green Deal, an ambitious environmental programme. The aim of the programme is to make the European economic system environmentally sustainable. The programme focuses specifically on climate change mitigation, as well as on the loss of biodiversity. Its leading idea is to implement changes in a financially and socially just manner. The Green Deal has a broad scope, covering different sectors, such as the food system as a whole. This allows the identification of any trade-offs and joint benefits between different goals. The European Commission has acknowledged the need and urgency to restructure the entire economic system. The Green Deal is a kick start for this necessary transition. The coronavirus crisis is no reason to stay still. On the contrary, it should be regarded as an opportunity to gain a head start.

Challenges in the coherence of policies

Although the Green Deal can be considered meritorious in many ways, it also has some flaws from the sustainability perspective. Well-functioning global environmental systems and ecosystem services are treated as instruments for short-term benefits, rather than as the foundation of wellbeing, revealing an approach centred on people and the economy. Another flaw is that the current economic system, which is based on continuous growth, is not sufficiently challenged. The focus is primarily on the restructuring of production systems, not on consumption, which maintains and feeds unsustainable production through demand. All parties need to participate in systemic change.

Economic justice and social acceptability are absolute prerequisites for a sustainable transition. However, the Green Deal does not take a stand on how and to what extent it secures justice and decreases inequality. How can the active role of people and changes in worldviews be supported? After all, these are needed to legitimise change. The programme aims to improve the vulnerable position of people with weaker opportunities, but does not take a clear stand on any unreasonable overconsumption by wealthier people or the excessive use of natural resources. The risk is that the principle of justice remains a rhetorical tool due to the lack of concrete action.



The Green Deal tested by coronavirus

Only a couple of months after the Green Deal was released, the coronavirus epidemic began to spread all over in Europe. The implementation of the programme, which had started well, and the broader climate debate have been set aside, at least for the time being, as Finland and other European countries are taking action to tackle the coronavirus crisis. What will happen to the European Green Deal and the Finnish Government Programme, which has ambitiously promoted sustainable development? Can the spread of the coronavirus be prevented and the goals of sustainable development advanced in tandem?

The European Commission has already announced that the Green Deal will remain a political priority, regardless of the pandemic. However, the biodiversity strategy and the From Field to Fork - programme, for example, have been postponed. An investment plan of roughly EUR 1 billion has been proposed to fund the programme. New funding of EUR 7.5 billion has also been proposed for the Just Transition Fund, while different EU member states will provide the same amount of funding. These plans may need to be revised, as the member states have been forced to restructure their economies and even take on additional debt to handle the coronavirus situation. However, opportunities to accelerate the Green Deal, supported by the aftercare provided for the coronavirus crisis, have already been identified. The bravest estimates suggest the Green Deal could alleviate the financial and social problems caused by the coronavirus situation. Now, research has an excellent opportunity to show how joint benefits can best be achieved. We can start putting existing green economy and wellbeing solutions into practice, and co-create and experiment measures together with public and private sectors.

The sustainability transformation rises from the ashes of the crisis

Sustainability researchers have long called for an all-encompassing systemic change to advance sustainability. This is also one of the goals of the Green Deal. Such a systemic change has traditionally been considered too difficult to achieve. To react to the coronavirus pandemic, the Finnish Government has even been forced to limit people's basic rights by virtue of the Emergency Powers Act. The situation permitting, emergency measures will be revoked as quickly as possible. To advance a comprehensive systemic change, control measures need to be conducted in a normal situation. As a result of the coronavirus crisis, even a false start can be permitted.

The coronavirus crisis has exposed the most vulnerable parts and groups of society, and resulted in casualties and financial losses, as well as uncertainty about the future. A high price must be paid for the side effects highlighted by this exceptional situation. Finding rapid solutions to them is important. It would be in everyone's best interest if these solutions were connected to the goals of the European Green Deal to ensure they can support each other. As a result of the crisis, people have been forced to adopt new skills and resources. Many have found that reviewing their existing resources and learning new ones can also be inspiring and empowering, increasing the feeling of togetherness. These experiences may also offer opportunities to build completely new operating methods. It will thus be possible to find new foundations on which the European Green Deal and the sustainability transformation can be built.

This text is based on the statement issued by the Expert Panel for Sustainable Development to the Committee for the Future of the Finnish Parliament on 25 March 2020 regarding the European Green Deal. Sources also include different expert statements on the impact of the coronavirus crisis on the implementation of the Green Deal (e.g. [Club of Rome](#), [IOGP](#), [Foresight Climate & Energy](#), [EURONEWS](#), [euobserver](#)).