

GLOBAL PANDEMIC: NEW WAYS OF SEEING NOW

27 March 2020

As tiny spheres float into ever more of us, threading us all together on a delicate necklace of fear, hope, and reflection, it is clear we have awoken to a different world. The crisis is refracting a multitude of problems in our broken socio-economic system, as well as radical possibilities.

The veil has temporarily been ripped off, forcing all of us, including those of us campaigning hard for environmental or social change, to reconsider how we act and consider meaning in our lives and communities. We should have seen it coming, not this particular pandemic but the day in this century when the fragility of our global interconnected systems would begin to shake to the foundations.

For the first year since the 2008 economic crisis, global greenhouse gas emissions will be down, not because of any of our campaigning efforts, but because of the forced halting of the infinite growth based economic machine.

There are predictions that an imminent recession could even lead to global depression. While this would dip emissions for a while, this would obviously risk lock-in of existing polluting technologies for longer than we have, and huge suffering for many, unless accompanied by bold structural changes and an emergency plan to protect people and planet. Amidst the distress and loss of life, we recognise that the Corona virus pandemic exposes our broken systems. At the same time, it is also opening up beautiful stirrings of humanity, and new leverage points to trigger a cascade of regenerative change.

Where people have, so far, been lucky enough not to have been tipped into personal crises the slow down has deepened their connection with family, friends and community - a critical part of personal and community resilience - and they are valuing access to a healthy natural environment as precious and essential to mental health.

A new perspective on the interconnectedness of the world has invited us to define what is necessary for human health and wellbeing (needs) and what can be considered 'extras' or 'perks' (wants).

This crisis has opened up space for people to reflect on the importance of the provision of services that in many (although recognisably not all) developed countries falls under the concept of the 'welfare state' - equal access to healthcare for all, including the elderly, disabled, low income and migrants; a safe space to shelter free from violence and abuse; a clean water supply and access to healthy food. Added to this is the need for secure livelihoods that do not leave individuals exposed to stark choices between securing basic needs or protecting health. Yet it has also revealed that those on the frontline today, the nurses, cleaners, care workers, delivery drivers, the bin men and women, are often the lowest paid, and in monetary terms, of 'least value' to GDP, yet of critical value to society. The outpouring of recognition and appreciation for healthcare workers and those on the frontline of the public health crisis from wider society whilst they wait out their country's lockdowns is heartwarming and compassionate in the face of mass trauma.

Coalitions of kindness are sprouting up in communities – with neighbours singing from the balconies in unison, collective clapping hour on a given evening to publicly celebrate those in caring professions,

other cars beeping their horns in thanks at supermarket delivery drivers. Where can things go next if we continue to find new ways of seeing? What now?

The businesses, services and global trade in 'non-essentials' which primarily offer monetary value to shareholders, corporations and top level executives, whilst often exploiting people and planet, have been exposed for offering society little that is truly meaningful.

While new and long-forgotten forms of solidarity and mutual support are spreading and helping us cope with the pressures of this crisis, we all live in hope that these restrictions on our lives are only temporary measures, that soon it will be over and we will go back to 'normal'. But what is 'normal'? Do we want to go back to it? And can we go back?

We cannot go back to 'normal' because our economic activities have put the environment familiar to us on the brink of disruption. We cannot go back to 'normal' because this 'normal' is based on exploitation, destruction and massive impoverishment. The current crisis gives us an opportunity to see the root causes of these processes and find different ways of operating our economies and societies. Can we build our societies on the ideas of mutuality rather than blind individualism, recognition of our dependence on nature rather than its objectification, the pursuit of qualitative change rather than of ever-bigger GDP?

NOW is a moment when values could shift dramatically, with the right strategy - spurring a cascade of reforms. For the duration of the lockdown, we all have a duty to reimagine, forge and normalise new behaviours, and new shared 'hieroglyphs' by which we can understand the purpose of the economy, society, and community. In the coming weeks, Swarm will be inviting artists to partake in this process of re-imagination.

NOW is also the moment civil society groups must strategise beyond our sectoral silos. Carbon neutral societies cannot be achieved and maintained in democracies without deep redistribution of wealth and opportunity. The right set of policy demands, to protect the vulnerable, and those who fall through the cracks, such as the current UK petition for a Universal Basic Income, should be recognised as key structural steps that would also address barriers to deeper decarbonisation down the track, and help the prospects of keeping the environment sufficiently on the political agenda in an increasingly turbulent century. These, combined with other measures to begin to win back the 'commons' from corporations, can also help foster some independence from the global financial system. In the wake of the lockdown, the winning story might be one of resilience, new rights to survive the crisis, that can also make it easier for more people and communities to partake in sustainable transformations. Towards the flourishing, and more meaningful society we urgently need.

Signed:

Board of Trustees, Swarm Dynamics, 27th March 2020

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*Swarm Dynamics is a registered charity based in England that brings together artists and experts to explore and communicate system change on the path to fairer, zero carbon futures.

Find out more about Swarm at:

www.swarmdynamics.org and www.systemchangehive.org