

COVID-19 and the opportunity to create a sustainable world through economic and political decisions

The concept of sustainability emerged in 1987 from the Brundtland Report, prepared by the United Nations, which defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland, 1987).

The United Nations General Assembly approved, on September 25, 2015, the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development. The aim is to generate inclusive, universal and integrated development by tackling challenges at the global level, leaving no one behind, with a central focus on the most vulnerable population. The Agenda, through its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), aims to “end poverty and hunger worldwide from aquí to 2030, combat inequalities within and between countries, build peaceful, just and inclusive societies, protect human rights and promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, and ensure lasting protection of the planet and its natural resources. We are also determined to create the conditions for sustainable, inclusive and sustained economic growth, shared prosperity and decent work for all, taking into account different national levels of development and capabilities” (United Nations, 2015).

Five years after its adoption, coordinated action to address the planet’s enormous and complex social and environmental challenges is becoming increasingly urgent. The survival of the planet will be conditioned by all decisions and actions taken in the face of these great challenges. There is increasing awareness, or at least more information, about environmental problems, climate change, natural disasters or economic inequalities. Campaigns from international bodies, such as the UN, to make humanity aware of the need to make major changes to avoid destroying the planet are increasing. It is necessary to mobilize and demand concrete commitments and actions from current governments that will allow a sustainable and healthy planet.

The Sustainable Development Solutions Network, which seeks to promote sustainable development, produces an annual report to evaluate the degree of compliance with the 17 SDGs in 193 countries. In its fourth edition (Sachs *et al.*, 2019) Sweden, Denmark and Finland lead the list, being on the right track to achieve the SDG, but they still have a lot of work to do to reach them in 2030.

The containment caused by coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is leading to a turning point in Agenda 2030 and the achievement of the SDGs. Some of the effects of the pandemic may be positive, such as reduced traffic and improved air quality, as they help to reduce the effects of climate change (SDG 13).

However, the pandemic will also adversely affect the progress of several SDGs. For example, we will see a setback in improving health (SDG 3), generating decent work (SDG 8) and increasing access to education (SDG 4), as school closures and moving lessons to online form are likely to be inaccessible to all.

The COVID-19 health crisis is affecting millions of people around the world and is the main concern today. Prior to this crisis, we were already facing challenges as a society such as climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss, which are still present in the world today



(Solow, 1993; Robertson, 2014; Cruz, 2016; D'Amato *et al.*, 2017; Vargas Pineda, 2017; Geissdoerfer *et al.*, 2017; Scarpellini *et al.*, 2019) and are very connected to the situation we are experiencing.

Global environmental problems, including climate change, may have irreparable consequences for the current population and future generations (Le Quang, 2015; Charan and Venkataraman, 2017). Therefore, increased environmental education will be critical in raising awareness and conserving the environment (Aikens *et al.*, 2016).

A change in thoughts, values and actions is needed from all professionals and social leaders, as well as from the general population (Cortese, 2003). A social change is needed, and for this, an educational change is needed, in which environmental education is used as an educational strategy to create a participatory and democratic citizenship (Krizek *et al.*, 2012; Severiche Sierra, 2016). Environmental education and research must be strengthened, as they are fundamental pillars for achieving a new economic and social model.

This crisis should be a turning point to learn from the mistakes of the past. More investment must be made in essential public services that include humanitarian actions and the SDGs (Ciocoiu, 2011; Biswas and Roy, 2015; Cãmara, 2014). This extraordinary situation must become a new opportunity to demand that both companies and citizens act in accordance with the principles of sustainable development (Wagner, 2010; Wu, 2013; Zamagni, 2013). Without a doubt, the new order that we build after the pandemic must be focused on sustainability.

This virus has also aggravated existing inequalities in today's society. These disparities should also be a catalyst and a call for better reconstruction. The pandemic has highlighted the need to strengthen multilateral cooperation, governance and, above all, global solidarity.

The reduction in commercial activities and the restrictions on transport caused by COVID-19 have led to a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, particularly from industry and road transport. In the short term, this is great news for the achievement of the SDGs and the reduction of polluting gases.

The problem now lies in the process of deconfinement of countries. If the exit from quarantine is not gradual and staggered, there will be peaks in the consumption of goods and services, which will cause a massive emission of contaminating gases in a production and consumption model still based on the use of fossil fuels.

If the recovery plan after the COVID-19 is aimed at growth at any price, there will be a rise in CO₂ emissions. The aim must be to work on a European recovery plan that integrates the ecological transition and the digital transformation as a basis for boosting this recovery. The rise in emissions could even compensate for the reduction recorded during the containment phase.

Furthermore, this crisis must lead to an unprecedented maturity as a society, with an increase in social co-responsibility and collective awareness, which will be a key to addressing the challenges that society must face.

We must reaffirm the urgency of reducing the emission of polluting gases in order to curb the climate change that is damaging the planet. This climate change could also accelerate the appearance of diseases like the one we are suffering from.

High rates of air pollution could be linked to a higher incidence of cardiorespiratory diseases such as COVID-19, and could have serious consequences for health, especially for the elderly and the most vulnerable groups. This crisis is an opportunity to change those habits that harm the progress and development of citizens and the planet.

If teleworking is introduced in a majority way, the number of cars that will circulate daily will be reduced notably, so that streets and public spaces will be safer and the population will be more encouraged to use other means of transport such as bicycles or electric scooters.

In addition, SDGs open up a wide range of economic opportunities that could be the way out of the great economic crisis to come. The loss of jobs could be compensated by the employment generated through the implementation of a circular economy model in the European Union (European Commission, 2014, 2015) or by investment in the field of renewable energies, thus generating new jobs and opportunities.

For this transition towards these sustainable production models to take place, action by public administrations and support for a sustainable development strategy is necessary, which includes measures and aid for companies that decide to invest in them.

Public investment in innovation and nature-based solutions must be enhanced, supporting the most sustainable sectors and the most vulnerable environmental areas or those in ecological transition. In addition, the financial sector should be involved by promoting and developing sustainable investment plans in renewable energies or the conservation of natural areas. Training aimed at sustainable jobs, green growth and the promotion of healthy living should be encouraged.

SDGs need to be integrated in order to achieve an adequate economic revival. The investment made in the field of health and in the purchase of health equipment during COVID-19 should be an opportunity to expand universal access to health and to promote epidemiological research (SDG 3). The current improvement in air quality should motivate businesses to rethink their activities to further reduce the effects of climate change (SDG 13). In addition, it will be necessary to invest, among others, in the promotion of sustainable cities (SDG 11), the transition to clean energy (SDG 7), the creation of decent employment (SDG 8) or the creation of alliances to advance this agenda (SDG 17), as this will be the only way to contribute to the development of the planet and to eradicate poverty (SDG 1).

What is clear is that this crisis must be a turning point for the entire population, where every citizen is aware of the importance of acting responsibly in order to contribute to the development of a more sustainable world.

Conclusions

The increase in pollution levels in recent years is highly detrimental to humans and the planet. The health crisis produced by the COVID-19 has meant a drastic reduction in commercial, productive and economic activity, which has led to a reduction in the emission of polluting gases into the atmosphere. However, the process of recovery after this crisis must be done on the basis of the SDGs, and making the population aware of the need to continue contributing to the reduction of harmful gas emissions. Without taking sustainability into account in the process of decontamination, the long-term recovery will be even greater and the crisis will last even longer. A proper reconstruction of the planet is needed, and we must all contribute to and be a part of it.

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