Coronavirus in Times of Climate Change

30 MAR 2020

A Reflection:

Causes of zoonotic diseases

Covid-19 belongs to the category of zoonotic diseases like ebola, SARS, MERS and Zika. The increasing spread and persistence of these diseases over the past 20 years is not a matter of coincidences. In fact, our modern world encourages the transmission of harmful germs from animals to humans causing illnesses. To illustrate, *David Quammen,* author of 2012 bestseller, *Spillover: Animal Infections and the Next Human Pandemic*, explains to *The Independent*: "Our highly diverse ecosystems are filled with many species of wild animals, plants, fungi and bacteria. All of that biological diversity contains unique viruses. When we tear down tropical forests to build villages, timber and mining camps, kill or capture wild animals for food, we expose ourselves to those viruses." So basically when we destroy forests, grab land from small scale farmers and replace it with large scale industrial farming and livestock, we disrupt ecosystems and by that increase the chance of viruses losing their natural hosts. Consequently, a new host is needed which is often another animal consumed by humans, and hence reaches us indirectly. It can also be directly spread to humans in confined environments where humans interact with these animals (e.g. meat markets). This way the virus easily travels from disrupted ecosystems far away to our metropolitan cities, and it continues to be transmitted by travellers all around the globe. Often the virus spreads very easily from one animal kept by humans to the other, as they live much closer to each other than it would ever happen in nature.

This risk is further enhanced by the fact that our industrialised food system encourages specialisation. In a system of specialisation, many of the same species of farmed animals are kept in confined spaces and identical crops are grown in vast monocultures. This lack of diversity allows the ideal environment for viruses, diseases, pests and bacteria to multiply. In a more diverse system these pathogens would struggle to spread as they would run into a species which they are not adapted to. It is good for us to know that only viruses which can survive on animals are dangerous for humans. However, this still leaves us and our food system extremely vulnerable. As stated above virus outbreaks from animal agriculture have become more common over the past 20 years and crops in monocultures are continuously being destroyed by pests, bacteria and diseases. The false solutions offered by our industrial food system are GMOs and more pesticides to make plants unnaturally resistant.

To conclude, the **connection between the continuous outbreak of viruses with our industrial way of producing food** is clearly evident. Through this same system, multinational agribusinesses make immense profit while nature, animals, farmers, local communities, consumers and carriers of the virus have to pay the price. Above all, indigenous people have been fighting against this system and the land grabs, and have proven to be an essential part of the survival of our planet. Yet they continue to be threatened, chased away and even murdered.

Corona and economics

The COVID-19 pandemic brings forth the reality of our societal systems: the neo-liberal capitalist model failed to address this crisis.

The last time global society faced an immediate crisis (besides the constant climate crisis) was the 2008 recession. During this time there was a drastic decline in the emissions of greenhouse gases, just like we are seeing now. Having learned from 2008, governments around the globe are ready with financial aid to help companies and individuals. Back then, they pumped money into fossil fuel giants such as Shell, Total and BP. What will they do this time? Take a look at how the US government is responding to the situation; last week a bill was passed sending 25 billion USD in economic support to airlines, delaying payroll tax, and making access to business loans more easily available to private businesses. Instead, they could have prioritised social security for all those who are currently in desperate need. Just as we are witnessing with the climate crisis, economic growth is prioritized over the well-being of humans and the planet.

Systemic socio-economic inequalities are making it even more evident how the most vulnerable groups are going to be affected by the disease. These groups include homeless people, refugees, people on low income or below the poverty line, people who lack access to basic hygienic and sanitation facilities living in precarious, overcrowded settlements, and women who live in abusive households where they are expected to quarantine themselves.

English

Events

DeKweeper Community Garden – Solidarity Gardening Session
June 10 @ 11:00 am - 1:00 pm

DeKweeper Community Garden – Workshop #4 – Seedling Care & Summer Sowing
June 26 @ 11:00 am - 1:00 pm

DeKweepeer Community Garden – Solidarity Gardening Session
July 8 @ 11:00 am - 1:00 pm

DeKweepeer Community Garden – Workshop #5 – Eco-Fertilizers & Chop n' Drop
July 31 @ 11:00 am - 1:00 pm

DeKweepeer Community Garden – Solidarity Gardening Session
August 12 @ 11:00 am - 1:00 pm

View All Events

Projects

Food Autonomy Festival (FAF)
Behoud Lutkemeer
Solidarity Projects
Reading Group
Guerilla Gardening
Farmer Portraits

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Last but not least, waged workers are facing an extremely unstable situation: many have already lost their jobs and many are set to face such losses. We have to start a conversation on how we prioritize and distribute financial resources.

What happened when the 2008 recession finally came to a halt, was an ever growing increase in the use of fossil fuels and by this the continued pollution of the planet. If we are not careful, this could very well happen again. **Therefore, we demand that the financial aid governments are summoning goes towards building an environmentally friendly and socially just future.**

As if the socio-economic situation is not enough, we also have to account for the amount of arrogance and underestimation of Western governments towards the first countries hit by the crisis: China and Iran. No one reacted until it was in their own countries, except with racism and prejudice towards east-asian and middle eastern people. This inaction must be replaced by international solidarity and coordinated action, not based on fear, but on compassion.

Impact of corona crisis on the climate movement

Despite the financial and societal threat, we are wondering how the pandemic will influence the current climate movement. Based on research conducted over the past days and conversations in our activist communities, there seem to be two potential scenarios for the climate movement following the current pandemic. ***The first path*** could lead us to feeling disempowered and paralyzed as most climate camps, direct actions, conferences and political events related to environmental policy making have been cancelled. Activism can already be very challenging, frustrating and exhausting without a pandemic. Now, these potentially empowering events which bring hope and continue the fight, have been cancelled. This can indeed lead to a feeling of helplessness. Not only the feeling of disempowerment can be problematic, but also the economical situation as described above. The predictable economic crash may impact individuals' lives to the extent that they cannot participate in climate action anymore.

The second path could lead us to an even stronger movement than that which currently exists. **Namely taking the corona crisis seriously and finding an opportunity to look at the world in a new way, for example from a degrowth perspective.** It can inspire us to build stronger communities; use the situation now to realise how many meetings can be done online, and thus help us to connect with networks all over the world, making our movement stronger and more resilient. We can also take this time to reflect upon our own priorities in life. **What is it that you value and want to keep? What do you have to let go of in order to stop making matters worse? What is it that we have lost in our industrial society and need to bring back?** This is the time now to realise that short-sighted, egoistical decisions are prone to leading us into the next crisis. If we do not take this wake up call seriously, we may be able to destroy our existence. As the Bulgarian writer *Maria Popova* once said, **"Critical thinking without hope is cynicism, but hope without critical thinking is naivety". So let's go for the second path and stay critical while we move along it.**

The current crisis demonstrates that it is possible for politicians and the economy to stop business as usual. This has revealed which work keeps us alive, ironically that same work is often underpaid and marginalised in our society. It also makes it very clear that we as individuals are willing to restrict our daily life when a crisis is perceived as an existential threat. We have to get to the same point of urgency with the climate crisis in order to make such drastic collective responses possible. As we can currently see, the corona crisis has triggered a global slowdown, just like in 2008. Let us not repeat the mistakes made then. The economic measures in response to the corona crisis should be linked to solving the climate crisis.

What do we mean with that? What do we demand?

- **Stop investing in fossil fuels**
- **Invest in green energy and create jobs here**
- **Autonomous food systems with government support for local, organic, small scale agriculture**
- **Cutting global supply chains**
- **End of exploitation**
- **Decolonial practices**
- **Rethinking consumer behaviour and tourism**
- **Banning traffic of wildlife species**
- **Protecting ecosystems and biodiversity, reforestation**
- **Free health care systems**
- **Less flights**
- **Free public transport**

Currently, citizens and politicians have to realise that the climate crisis has to be treated with the same urgency as the corona crisis, but highlighting a fair and just transition for people! The climate crisis is a global emergency, it has already killed millions and will continue to do so. It forced millions of people to flee, suffer economically, mentally and physically, and it will continue to destabilise economies and overwhelm infrastructure, deplete our resources, destroy our ecosystems and kill animal species. For the privileged and ignorant top 1%, it seems to be far away but it clearly is not. Obviously, urgent action to prevent a pandemic is necessary and highly important. However, the climate crisis represents another serious and existential threat, and yet the same sense of urgency is absent. On that note, with climate change, more pandemics will come around. Responses to the coronavirus show it can be done – but it must be done with determination and willpower, which, when it comes to the future of our planet, are desperately lacking.

Before we take this article to an end, let us emphasize that **justice should always be in the center of our actions, strategies and conversations**. Always, not only in times of crisis. No one should die in order for others to realise that our CO_2 emissions have to decrease. After all, it is our absurd amount of travelling, our capitalist economy and our insane consumer behaviour which is responsible for dirty skies and oceans. Please let us not forget this. Let us collectively demand long-term structural change in our food system and the replacement of fossil fuels from all sectors as quickly as possible. This is the kind of change we want to see, not a virus threatening the existence of the elderly and vulnerable.

Before you go over to your next task on your "daily to do list in times of quarantine", think about all the workers in the health-, child-, elderly- and home care sector, food sector, garbage collectors, cleaners… Reflect about their role and position in society, especially in times of crisis. These are the people that keep us strong, healthy and alive.

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