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Planning for a world beyond COVID-19: Five pillars for post-neoliberal development



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1. Introduction

COVID-19 has shaken the world. Countless lives have been lost or devastated, and as of December 2020, the pandemic shows little sign of abatement.¹ Emergency responses across the world have led to drastic changes in local and global development trajectories within a very short period of time. Yet precisely how these changes will take shape depends on underlying historical and socio-economic forces that must become part of our understanding of, and plans for, a world beyond COVID-19.

The fact that COVID-19 immediately had such a major economic impact is due to the neoliberal economic development model that has been dominant globally over the last 30 years (Harvey, 2005; Brown, 2019). This model demands ever-growing circulation of goods and people, despite the countless socio-ecological problems and growing inequalities this generates (Kovel, 2002; Krausmann et al., 2013). The COVID-19 crisis has painfully exposed the weaknesses of this neoliberal growth machine. Amongst other immediate impacts we have seen: large companies begging for immediate state support once effective demand falls away for even a short time²; countries depending on debt-fuelled export-oriented growth

models falling into major financial difficulties;³ tremendous strain placed on already underfunded healthcare systems; looming hunger and famine in low-income societies as inequitable food systems are stretched to their limits (Kalu, 2020); chaos and near stand-still in global tourism⁴; precarious and insecure jobs being lost or put on hold; and much more. At the same time, people who were embroiled in struggles for recognition and decent salaries prior to the pandemic were, suddenly and remarkably, considered to belong to 'vital professions' in healthcare, elderly care, public transport, education, food provisioning and the service sector.⁵

The pandemic further exposed the link between economic development, the loss of biodiversity and ecosystem integrity, and the opportunity for zoonotic diseases like COVID-19 to spread among humans (Davis, 2005; Wallace, 2016; UNEP, 2020). Experts warn that with continuing severe degradation of ecosystems - immanent under business-as-usual economic scenarios - even stronger viral outbreaks are to be expected (UNEP, 2020). Moreover, the WHO estimates that 4.2 million people die each year from outdoor air pollution, and that climate change is expected to cause 250,000 additional deaths per year between 2030 and 2050.⁶ These unfolding catastrophes are not unrelated to the COVID-19 pandemic and require equally drastic action (cf. Bedford et al. 2019).

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¹ See the figures on <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/>, accessed 11 November 2020.

² See e.g. 'After \$ 16 billion of stock buybacks, a tech company seeks government aid' (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-24/tech-firm-s-call-for-help-draws-public-outcry-policy-rethink>), accessed 26 May 2020. See also: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52420312> (accessed on 25 May 2020).

³ For instance, in its latest *Global Financial Stability Report*, the IMF (2020) estimates that emerging markets saw capital outflows of over \$100 billion since the beginning of the crisis, nearly twice as big (relative to GDP) as those experienced during the Global Financial Crisis. See <https://blogs.imf.org/2020/05/22/covid-19-worsens-pre-existing-financial-vulnerabilities/>.

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/02/covid-19-throws-europes-tourism-industry-into-chaos> (accessed 25 May 2020).

⁵ See <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/21/undervalued-heroes-coronavirus-crisis-cleaners-supermarket-workers> (accessed on 29 May 2020).

⁶ https://www.who.int/health-topics/air-pollution#tab=tab_1; <https://www.who.int/globalchange/publications/quantitative-risk-assessment/en/> (accessed 24 May 2020).

Early into the pandemic, some short-term positive social and environmental impacts also emerged—including support for care workers, local community organising, mutual aid and solidarity, declining pollution and emissions (Berman and Ebisu 2020). Yet, it quickly became clear that these were temporary and that the pandemic has become a powerful vector for upward redistribution and increasing inequality, while net negative environmental effects are a looming possibility if the early signs of a fossil-intensive 'recovery' come true.⁷ In other words: any apparent short-term gains from this pandemic or similar interruption of business-as-usual will be ineffective without concerted efforts for broader and deeper political-economic change. Indeed, we argue that this moment makes it incumbent on all of us, including the development studies community, to envision how the current situation could lead to more sustainable, fair, healthy, caring and resilient forms of (economic) development going forward; ones that acknowledge the structurally unsound pressures of the neoliberal model on people and environments, and that put into place policies and political strategies to achieve meaningful, sustainable and equitable transformation.

All these dynamics make it vital to urgently start imagining and planning for a post-COVID-19 development paradigm. In this opinion article, we present five research and policy priorities.⁸ While it is clear that 'pluriversal' designs need to guide the way forward (Kothari et al 2019), defining a set of key pillars can provide direction and purpose across this pluriversality. We conclude with a call for increased academic and political action to build the pressure needed to push for their implementation.

2. Five priorities for a post-COVID-19 development paradigm

Our five priorities are not meant to be exhaustive, but aim to stimulate debate on the key levers needed to place communities, nations and indeed the globe on a different development path. The current hegemonic idea of development is, basically, *capitalist* development, with central pillars focused on economic growth, capital accumulation and increased consumption of goods, services and travel, all within an economic framework characterized by private property rights, dominance of markets and market logics, and the commodification of human and non-human life (Arsel and Dasgupta, 2015; Hickel, 2017). The following priorities challenge and move beyond this neoliberal model explicitly, and the longer development trajectory within which it is embedded.

2.1. A move away from development focused on aggregate economic growth

A reorientation of priorities away from generalized economic growth is urgently required. The blind pursuit of economic growth is predicated on violence, destruction and appropriation of ecological and human bodies and cultures (Galeano, 1997; Sassen, 2014). Furthermore, economic growth does not necessarily translate into wellbeing (Victor, 2010; O'Neill et al., 2018).

⁷ <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2020/06/why-covid-19-will-end-up-harming-the-environment/>; <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jun/19/coronavirus-pandemic-billioinaires-racial-wealth-gap>, accessed 11 November 2020.

⁸ These were suggested earlier in a manifesto signed by over 170 Netherlands-based academics working in the broad fields of development and environment. After it was published on 11 April in *Trouw* newspaper, the manifesto gained widespread support and response in the Netherlands and internationally, including different actors and sectors such as political parties, the Dutch water boards, youth movements and others. <https://www.trouw.nl/duurzaamheid-natuur/manifest-van-170-wetenschappers-het-is-een-blunder-als-we-niet-groener-uit-de-coronacrisis-komen-b12864df>.

Economic progress instead needs to be differentiated between sectors of society and the economy that contribute to wellbeing within ecological and climatic boundaries (the so-called critical public sectors, and clean energy, education, health and more) and sectors that need to radically *degrow* due to their fundamental unsustainability or their role in driving unnecessary consumption (especially private sector oil, gas, advertising and so forth) (Jackson, 2016; D'Alisa et al, 2015; Pouw, 2020). As COVID-19 reaffirms, this is the only way we can tackle the climate, biodiversity and related socio-economic crises. More research is needed on how growth differentiation can be established and how degrowth can best be accomplished.

2.2. An economic framework focused on redistribution and care

Achieving a sustainable shift away from growth requires a massive scaling up of redistribution, locally and globally, whilst respecting principles of autonomy and self-determination (Fischer, 2014; 2018). This should start by ending the regressive redistribution of wealth to the rich (Hung and Thompson, 2016; Piketty, 2014). This especially includes the massive hemorrhaging of wealth from poorer parts of the world through tax avoidance and evasion by some of the richest corporations in the world (Ajayi and Ndikumana, 2015; Cobham and Janský, 2020). Alternatives include, for example, establishing a universal basic income rooted in a universal social policy system that decommodifies essential public services such as health and education, financed through a strong progressive taxation of income, profits and wealth.⁹ In addition, development alternatives based on care are required to confront the immiseration, and racial and gender discrimination of the current economic model that have been exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic (Di Chiro 2019: 304). Such redistributive approaches need not only be conceived in terms of taxing and spending, but also in terms of wage equality, reduced working hours, job sharing and recognition of care work (Barca 2020: 33). Research can support the ways in which redistribution can be imagined and implemented holistically and in different contexts.

2.3. Transformation towards regenerative agriculture and convivial conservation

Capitalist agriculture contributes to broader socio-environmental development crises, and to the specific pandemic crisis we currently face. Healing agriculture requires methods and visions for food and farming that are not just circular, but actively regenerative and founded on taking care of people, animals, soils and the environment (Duncan et al, 2020). This implies models for food and farming that are based on biodiversity conservation (Perfecto, et al 2009); enable agrarian livelihoods and fair agricultural employment conditions and wages (Scott Cato, 2012); overcome separations of public and private spheres (Federici 2019); entail the production and consumption of mostly local and plant-based diets and take into account local climatic and cultural conditions. This also means that the conservation of biodiversity needs to be rethought, from dichotomous forms that separate humans and the rest of nature, productive from 'unproductive' land, and agricultural and conservation spaces. It must be a convivial form of conservation that moves beyond dualisms to put socio-ecological justice at the centre (Büscher and Fletcher, 2020). What this entails, precisely, should be a key area for further research.

⁹ For example, the Spanish government recently announced the introduction of a basic income: https://english.elpais.com/economy_and_business/2020-05-25/pains-minimum-guaranteed-minimum-income-scheme-set-to-rescue-850000-families.html (accessed 29 May 2020).

2.4. Reduction of consumption and travel

Following the first priority above, and in the light of strong evidence on the disproportionate environmental impact of luxury and wasteful consumption and travel (Oswald et al., 2020; Wiedmann et al., 2020), we need a drastic shift to basic, necessary, sustainable and satisfying consumption and travel; consumption and travel that focuses on the quality of individual and collective lives rather than to satisfy artificially created needs and desires that are continuously reinvented by advertisement firms to push growth (Latouche, 2009). Clearly what is 'basic, necessary, sustainable and satisfying' is a point of discussion and further research, but precisely the discussion we should be having. This means that there are limits to what is possible for some people (Kallis 2019), which allows the opening up of possibilities for others. Hence, there is an important emphasis on inequality here: the need to fulfil basic needs through redistribution. Poverty is a problem, but so too are wealth and conspicuous consumption. We do not argue in favour of closed, inward looking societies, but rather acknowledge the environmental and societal costs of our consumption and travel patterns and urge a move beyond these (McLaren, 2012; Lynch et al., 2019).

2.5. Debt cancellation

Debt cancellation is essential, especially for workers and small business owners and for countries in the global south. Even the World Bank has identified the surge in debts in so-called emerging economies as a risk in fighting the pandemic, and has called for a debt service suspension.¹⁰ Economists from the global south, however, worry that the conditions linked to suspension will result in massive cuts in public spending, which renders societies even more vulnerable to epidemics (Chimowa et al. 2020). Hence, this point needs to be seen in combination with point two above. Moreover, our argument here is not against debt *in general*, but against its effects on specific actors: on the one hand, debt creates tremendous pressure on countries and companies to remain solvent and pushes them into unsustainable activities; on the other hand, debt undermines meaningful forms of development by imposing punitive subordination through financial (neo-)colonialism (Durand, 2017). The difference between various forms of debt and its effects thus needs further investigation.

3. Conclusion

We recognize that these five priorities depend on local context, history and positionality. They are meant to provoke further debate, research and political action in search for a better world. We propose that this research and policy vision can be the basis for more sustainable and equal societies, that can better prevent and deal with shocks and pandemics to come. At the same time, moving beyond the currently hegemonic neoliberal development model aims to challenge the idea that 'one model fits all' and to replace it with principles and priorities that place care for others, and for the planet, at the centre of local and global relations. It is this vision that underlies the ongoing struggle to oppose the systemic inequalities, continued (neo-)colonial subjugation and the violence experienced by those whose lives are most threatened by the global capitalist development paradigm and the way it intersects with the COVID-19 pandemic. Different, concrete development priorities, such as the above, should not be seen as a new development

model for all, but rather as priority areas for thinking about new possibilities, and for giving direction and purpose across difference and diversity.

Moreover, it is framed explicitly to recognize already-existing alternatives around the world. Alternatives that are remaking economies and politics in ways that respect ecological limits, that centre on social justice, and that depart from a hegemonic single vision model to a pluriversal model or 'a world where many worlds fit' (Kothari et al 2019). As we acknowledge those hardest hit by this particular crisis, we can do justice to them ensuring that a future crisis will be much less severe, borne more evenly across social groups, cause much less anxiety or may not happen at all. This starts with planning around a vision based on key pillars that we can hold on to in turbulent times.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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¹⁰ See <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/factsheet/2020/05/11/debt-relief-and-covid-19-coronavirus>, accessed May 28, 2020.

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