

# The COVID-19 pandemic and the climate emergency

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## COMMENT



As from midnight of March 27, South Africa became the latest country to implement unprecedented restrictions on the movement of people. In the global effort to slow the ongoing spread of the new coronavirus, a third of the nations of the world are now locked down, confined to staying home and forbidden to travel or socialise. Restaurants, cafés, theatres, cinemas, clubs and bars are closed and all gatherings of two or more people are being vigorously discouraged and, in many countries, enforced by police and soldiers.

Only essential services such as food shops and pharmacies remain open and all but the most essential businesses have been told to shut their doors to the public and, where possible, for staff to continue to function remotely from home. The economic consequences for businesses and individuals is enormous, leading to huge stimulus packages being put into place to assist millions of employees forced to stop working.

The enemy? A very infectious flu virus – every carrier is estimated to infect two other people. Now officially called ‘severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2)’, the high transmission rate is thought to be because, while the virus takes hold and becomes transmittable relatively quickly, carriers do not begin to experience symptoms for five or more days after becoming infected.

In addition, many carriers experience mild symptoms and can recover without the need for medical intervention. In elderly people and those with pre-existing health conditions such as diabetes, heart disease or asthma, however, SARS-CoV-2 can cause coronavirus disease (COVID-19), which is a severe and often fatal respiratory condition.

Simply put, the disease is largely spread by the relatively young and healthy, but it is their frail and elderly parents that are most at risk. As of March 27, 540 832 people from every corner of the world have been tested positive for the virus and 24 293 are known to have died. There are now 19 737 people who are critically ill with the disease and up to 25% of these are expected to die.

And while the pandemic in China’s ‘ground-zero’ city of Wuhan and the surrounding Hubei province, which have been on state-imposed lockdown since January 23, is largely under control, almost all other countries of the world are still several weeks away from peak infection rates.

Who can deny the appropriateness of the draconian measures being taken to protect our loved ones?

Compared to last-year’s almost forgotten climate crisis, Governments across the world have reacted much more strongly to the COVID-19 pandemic. Ironically, the decisions to ground aeroplanes, slow down public transport, stop people travelling and minimise workplace activity has impacted positively on emissions.

NASA and European Space Agency imagery show dramatic reductions in nitrogen dioxide (NO<sub>2</sub>) levels over locked down cities such as Wuhan, where levels are estimated to have dropped by 30%. NO<sub>2</sub> is emitted by cars, power plants and factories and exposure to it can aggravate the symptoms of asthma, while longer term exposure causes people to be more vulnerable to the very respiratory infections that make them dangerously susceptible to COVID-19.

In Italy, the near shutdown of cruise- and cargo-ship traffic around the notoriously foul canals of Venice has resulted in fish being visible in the lagoon and canals for the first time in decades, perhaps simply because the water is clearer, but potentially also because the waters are more life friendly.

Birdsong is also being reported as a positive in Wuhan. “I used to think there weren’t birds in Wuhan, because you rarely saw them and never heard them. I now know they were just muted and crowded out by the traffic and people,” reports Rebecca Arendell Franks, who has been confined to her apartment for over eight weeks.

Reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions is the immediate priority for overcoming the climate change crisis, however, which may not appear to be as dramatic as the current pandemic, but may well have life consequences that are as serious in the long term.

In urging governments to tie any bailouts for the aviation and shipping industries to requirements for climate action, former Irish president and UN high commissioner for human rights, Mary Robinson says: “Governments need to put huge amounts of money into trying to sustain jobs and livelihoods. But they must do it with a very strong green emphasis. The threat from climate change is as real as the threat from Covid-19, though it seems far away.”

Let us use our lockdown time to get used to new ways of working and living: more safely, harmoniously and sustainably, with each other and our environment. □

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