**Post-COVID-19. Reflections on the role of the firm in addressing environmental sustainability**

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The COVID-19 pandemic currently wreaking havoc across the world has pushed millions of people into confinement, and is raising uncertainty over the extent of the crisis and a deep fear that successive waves of infections could occur in the future. One alleged advantage of quarantine is that it can be used to renew ideas and think about how to live in what seems to be an inevitably changing world.

As researchers in the field of business sustainability, we have been witnesses to, as well as responsible for, the narrative that has dominated the global economy in recent times and that has placed the firm at the forefront in addressing environmental sustainability challenges. Although there is no apparent objection to companies contributing to solve problems in this field, it is worth reflecting on how the COVID-19 pandemic may affect the way they deal with the challenge of environmental sustainability and, especially, the extent to which they should remain as the primary agents of response.

Regarding the first issue, corporate sustainability has traditionally been based on innovation and eco-efficiency derived from technological development in production-consumption processes. However, the dynamics associated with economic growth and consumption patterns, which constitute the focus of true unsustainability, continue to be non-negotiable because they represent the current dominant hegemony. Eco-efficiency is, in some way, the route capitalism has taken to colonize environmentalism. Yet this paradigm has failed dismally to manage the generally destructive relationship between humanity –especially in industrialized societies– and its biophysical environment. This profound disconnection has led to widespread ignorance among the majority of the population of the importance of biodiversity, not only for our survival, but also for our health and our physical and emotional well-being. Even with all of our technological advancements, we are animals, subject to the biological and physical limits of our habitat.

As William Rees –human ecology and ecological economics professor– noted, “*However horrific the COVID-19 pandemic may seem, it is merely one symptom of gross human ecological dysfunction*”[[1]](#footnote-1). Studies show how the destruction of habitats in pursuit of the current development model is behind the origin and expansion of numerous infectious diseases that seriously affect people’s health. There is also increasing evidence that economic growth contributes to biodiversity loss via greater resource consumption and higher emissions[[2]](#footnote-2). Thus, Vaclav Smil, in his recently published [book](https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/growth), highlights that *“the past practices –pursuit of the highest possible economic growth rates, extending the culture of excessive consumption to additional billions of people, and treating the biosphere as a mere assembly of goods and services to be exploited (and used as a dumping ground) with impunity– must change in radical ways*[[3]](#footnote-3). Politicians, social researchers and society in general must assume, once and for all, a more committed position on the natural environment in the fundamental debate on the incommensurability of economic growth and environmental sustainability.

Much of the current narrative on the crisis focuses on defeating the virus to hasten the return to a supposed (and desired?) normality that will restore growth. However, in addition to boosting a shift towards de-globalization, the COVID-19 pandemic could lead to a post-growth society. In this scenario, a new narrative would be needed, one that recognizes the biophysical limitations of material growth, and identifies a possible replacement for the ever-rising material standard of living on which society is based. ‘Strong’ sustainability aimed at profoundly transforming our lifestyles and consumption habits should prevail, as opposed to a ‘weak’ vision of sustainability, technical in nature and based on eco-efficiency, which remains anchored in the growth paradigm.

With regard to the second issue –the discourse that has turned companies into the main agents of response to the sustainability crisis– underlying this narrative is the desire of corporate power to redirect environmental demands towards its own proposal for action. That is, companies deliberately set out to manage and control, beyond public powers and for their own benefit, the processes of transition towards greater sustainability. In the field of sustainable mobility, the case of the electric car offers a good illustration. Beyond the question of climate neutrality, any discussion of the need to redefine the current mobility model has been largely absent. There is no real debate on the desirability of private or public transport; rather, discussion is limited to the relative merits of electric and combustion engine cars, although the transition to the former seems to have already been agreed upon. Whatever the decision taken, the mobility sector will continue to be managed by the same actors –in this case, the car manufacturers.

The economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic will require governments to inject large sums of money into the economy to prevent many companies from collapsing. This provides an opportunity to lead transition processes from the public sphere, thereby responding to the interests of the whole society. Prioritization of the public interest in the organization of the economy and society is now acquiring special relevance. Various sectors such as aviation, car manufacturing and agribusiness are already stepping up the pressure through their powerful lobbies, not just to ask for bailouts to get through the crisis brought about by the pandemic, but also to weaken and delay previously approved plans on emission cuts. Public incentives to tackle the economic crisis caused by the coronavirus must require beneficiary companies to make structural reforms that help curb the other global crisis: climate change.

1. <https://thetyee.ca/Analysis/2020/04/06/The-Earth-Is-Telling-Us-We-Must-Rethink-Our-Growth-Society/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Otero, I., Farrell, K. N., Pueyo, S., Kallis, G., Kehoe, L., Haberl, H., ..., Martin, J. L. (2020). Biodiversity policy beyond economic growth. *Conservation Letters*. https://doi.org/10.1111/conl.12713 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Smil, V. (2019). *Growth: From Microorganisms to Megacities*. The MIT Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)