**The Covid-19 Pandemic, Paradox, and Sustainability**

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First and foremost, the Covid-19 pandemic is a human tragedy. At the same time, it leads individuals, organizations, and states around the globe to adopt unprecedented measures at breathtaking speed. While all the attention is focused on the crisis, the situation is at the same time highly paradoxical. States such as the UK that have been known as harbors of free market economy renationalize private railway companies. Individual freedoms are restricted drastically for the collective benefit. We are all urged to keep social and physical distance while our emotional and empathic senses long for proximity and close contact. Compassion is expressed through distance. The public and economic life of the vast majority of the vital and productive population is stalled to protect the minority of the vulnerable and the infirm. The health and survival of the vulnerable depends on the inactivity of the young and healthy. Epidemiologically, we face the tension between swiftly reaching herd immunity to stop the spread of the virus and the need to slow down the spread of the virus to protect the vulnerable and to avoid the collapse of health care systems.

When facing paradoxes, humans oftentimes react defensively. The handling of the Trump administration displayed almost all the defensive reactions to paradox that have been discussed in the literature (for a glimpse <http://thebulwark.com/anatomy-of-a-viral-lie/>). We have seen denial of the problem and the pretention that the situation is fully under control. We have heard Trump putting the blame on scapegoats (China) and creating false we/they distinctions that undermine necessary collaboration, for instance by trying to take over a German biotech startup to develop vaccines exclusively for the US. Misleading comparisons to influenza outbreaks in the past were put forward as well as false expectations that the situation will be over in just 15 days. Luckily, many people have also reacted with solidarity and innovation to the extreme situation and the paradoxes that we are all facing. People play music together alone on their balconies. People start sharing and caring while keeping their distance. Competing firms help each other out with personnel and resources. Governments expedite multi-billion measures to protect small businesses and people in need.

What do this crisis and its paradoxes have to do with sustainability? First, public health is one of the Sustainable Development Goals of the UN. But of course sustainability is more multi-facetted. Only a few months ago, a singular and exclusive focus on just one sustainability goal would probably have been criticized heavily. Sustainability is marked by tensions between different grand societal challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, inequality, and poverty alleviation just to name a few. Pursuing these goals simultaneously oftentimes confronts governments, firms, and individuals with paradoxes. Like a pandemic, most sustainability challenges can only be tackled collectively. Rampant individualism will most likely aggravate the situation and sharpen paradoxes. Responding to challenging paradoxical situations collectively is key for sustaining our life-supporting and life-enhancing social-ecological systems. Be it to tackle climate change while allowing millions of people in the global South to enjoy economic development, education, and sanitation. Be it to preserve and regenerate the biological diversity on Earth while feeding a growing population.

The sustainability challenges we are facing may not (yet) have the same urgency and immediacy as the Covid-19 pandemic. But hopefully, what we can all take away once we have surpassed the current Covid-19 crisis is this sense of a collective and solidary approach to respond to paradoxical situations. In some respect, responding adequately to sustainability paradoxes is even more demanding. It requires that individuals, organizations, and governments act collectively and with solidarity even in the absence of the immediate threat of a deadly infection or the collapse of health systems. Climate change is a prime example in this context: Tackling climate change only when its consequences are immediate will be impossible and the toll will be much higher than with the current pandemic; rather, we need to take bold action to curb carbon emissions today, even in the absence of an imminent threat. One important thing to do once the Covid-19 pandemic will have passed will be *not* to go back to business as usual. Rebooting our economic activity as if nothing had happened will come at a high cost. Let us use this period of confinement to think about how we can convert the collective and solidary action to tackle the pandemic into robust collective action for sustainability.