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What our response to the COVID-19 pandemic tells us of our capacity to respond to climate change

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1. Introduction

In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, many governments are currently implementing urgent, costly and radical measures to slow down the spread of the pandemic. Many of these measures result in very significant cuts in greenhouse gas emissions and atmospheric pollution—some of them sparing lives, as a result of lower levels of air pollution. Though the global impact of the pandemic on climate change will be difficult to assess, one thing is certain: it is possible for world leaders to take urgent and radical measures in the face of an imminent threat, and for the populations to accept them. Yet we have not been able, so far, to take similar measures to confront climate change, despite repeated calls from activists and scientists alike to declare a state of ‘climate emergency’.

In the midst of the sanitary crisis, many were prompt to point out the similarities between climate change and the pandemic. Both were global crises, requiring urgent responses on the basis of scientific advice. Therefore, many activists were quick to suggest that the measures implemented to fight against the spread of the pandemic had to be replicated to slow down climate change: ‘we must respond to climate change like we are responding to coronavirus’, argued Zero Hour founder Jamie Margolin in *Teen Vogue* magazine. Others went a step further and claimed the pandemic was an ‘ultimatum of nature’, a ‘revenge of the Earth’ or even ‘good news for the environment’. #WeAreTheProblem was a popular hashtag on social media as many countries were in lockdown, as if the pandemic were eventually a way for nature to reclaim its rights.

In this piece, we argue that climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic are not similar crises, even though they present some striking similarities.

This has important consequences for the response measures to be deployed, but also for the way we communicate about climate change. Though this is a reflection on a situation that is still unfolding, we try to outline some early lessons from the sanitary crisis to improve our action and communication on climate change.

2. Three lessons for climate action and communication

First, if many are much more afraid of COVID-19 than they are of climate change, this is probably because they are afraid of getting sick themselves. A central element of the response lies in the proximity and immediateness of the threat, though such perception might differ across countries: in the US, for example, citizens were more concerned about the threat to the economy than to their personal health [1]. This suggests that we should talk more about the immediate consequences of climate change, and less about the long-term objectives. We are well aware that COVID-19 is a threat for ourselves, while climate change remains perceived as a threat that will mostly affect others—the next generation, or far-away countries [2, 3]. Yet climate models are calibrated on the long-run, and policy objectives target 2050 or 2100. Less distant horizons are needed. Furthermore, the discussion on extreme weather events remains often disconnected from the discussion on climate change, though we know the latter will make the former more intense and more frequent.

Second, the impacts of climate change on public health have not yet been sufficiently emphasized in public debates on climate. Research has consistently shown that the arguments about the public health impacts of climate change were amongst the

most persuasive [4–7]. And, as *The Lancet Countdown Initiative* has shown, climate change will bear a heavy toll on human health, including on infectious diseases [8]. The World Health Organization reckons that climate change worldwide could claim 250 000 additional lives per year between 2030 and 2050, mostly in developing countries [9]. Here again, more immediate horizons would be helpful.

Third, it is important to acknowledge that the reason why lockdown measures are widely accepted—though not always perfectly applied—is because they are temporary: if they were permanent, one can hypothesize that they would be less accepted. But a crisis is temporary, and suggests a return to normality at the end of the day. Yet global warming is an irreversible transformation of the Earth climate: there will be no return to ‘normal’. And the measures that need to be taken to address climate change cannot be temporary: they need to become permanent transformations of our economy, politics and way of life. That’s why we need to stop describing climate change as a ‘crisis’.

3. Conclusion

Climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic share many characteristics: both are of global nature, requiring radical responses on the basis of scientific assessments. In both cases, these responses are required first and foremost to protect the most vulnerable. In that regard, the confinement measures taken against COVID-19 represent a remarkable display of solidarity: whole countries were in complete lockdown to protect the elderly and those with a fragile health. But this solidarity was often confined to national borders: there was no global response to the crisis, but rather a myriad of different national responses, sometimes very different from one to another. Climate change will require action beyond borders, not just within borders: whereas the effects of closing borders to slow down the spread of the virus can be disputed, there’s no question that climate change cannot be stopped at the border. This does not mean, however, that climate policies should be the same around the world: disparities of economic development, political or cultural context, and exposure to climate change call for tailored policies. They should, however, derive from a common framework of international cooperation.

Though the COVID-19 crisis is far from being however, we believe it is possible to take away some important, albeit preliminary, lessons for climate

action and communication: the need to focus more on the immediate and near consequences of climate change, to highlight its impacts on human health, and to no longer describe climate change as a ‘crisis’. For these reasons, we should not assume that the measures deployed against the pandemic can be replicated as such to fight climate change. Despite their similarities, climate change will require different solutions. But the coronavirus crisis tells us it is possible to take urgent, costly and radical measures, and gives some hints as to how these can be accepted by the population.

Data availability statement

No new data were created or analysed in this study.

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