

CONVERGE COVID-19 Working Groups for Public Health and Social Sciences Research

Research Agenda-Setting Paper

Working Group Name: COVID-19 as a Catalyst for Sustainability Transitions

Working Group Description: This international initiative has been launched by the Future Earth Knowledge-Action Network on Systems of Sustainable Consumption and Production. It consists of several Working Groups and other projects focused on how the COVID-19 is contributing to sustainability transitions. These activities are organized around designing government action, new lifestyle practices, social solidarity and the care economy, supply chains, and digital automation and remote work. To date the initiative has convened two online symposia and a virtual conference as well as generated a “quick response” special issue of the journal *Sustainability: Science, Practice, and Policy*.

Priority Research Topics and Specific Research Questions:

Priority Research Topics	Potential Research Questions
1. Effects of COVID-19 on governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RQ1: To what extent do government-led innovations initiated during the pandemic reflect a more systemic approach to transitions? • RQ2: How are different tiers of government variously adapting to the challenges of the pandemic? • RQ3: What are the appropriate mechanisms to foster informed and proactive decision-making by local governments (and partners) to stimulate sustainable post-pandemic transitions?
2. Impacts of COVID-19 on household consumption practices and lifestyles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RQ1: How have pre-pandemic food-acquisition and preparation practices been disrupted? • RQ2: What have been the effects of the pandemic on various forms of non-essential purchases such as clothing, toys, and so forth? • RQ3: What is the likelihood that the pandemic is contributing to durable changes in established mobility routines?
3. Consequences of COVID-19 for women and families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RQ1: How has the pandemic affected the time allocations of women in different countries who are now maintaining their employment obligations from home? • RQ2: What are the primary challenges that women in different countries are facing when trying to combine work from home, care work, and household chores? • RQ3: How likely is the pandemic to alter traditional gender roles at the household level? • RQ4: What are governments in different countries doing to value and protect women in their households?

4. Impacts of COVID-19 on supply chains	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RQ1: What are the medium-and longer-term impacts of the pandemic likely to be on economic and management practices regarding supply chains? • RQ2: To what extent can the pandemic contribute to a transition to circular systems of production and consumption, as well as to a equitable, inclusive, and environmentally sound economy and society? • RQ3: How can the pandemic be leveraged to facilitate organizational innovations that contribute to a circular economy in developing countries?
5. Effects of COVID-19 on trajectories for digital automation and the future of remote work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RQ1: How will the pandemic disrupt pre-existing work routines and contribute to the reorganization of employment and production? • RQ2: How will the prospective long-term elimination of waged jobs affect the economic fortunes of households and the redesign of lifestyles? • RQ3: What has the effect of the pandemic been on people who were previously engaged in the performance of remote work?
6. Implications of COVID-19 on the research agenda on sustainability transitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RQ1: Is the pandemic likely to trigger a global “deep transition?” What is the time scale of this process likely to be and what will be its consequences? • RQ2: Why and in what ways have the impacts of the pandemic been geographically and socially uneven? • RQ3: What has the impact of the pandemic been on the legitimacy of national states, state intervention, and the value of the collective over the individual?

Ethical / Methodological Considerations:

A key ethical and methodological challenge centers stems from the fact that this initiative takes as its point of departure the notion that the COVID-19 provides an opportunity for socio-technical reinvention and transformation. Especially at the beginning of the pandemic, we encountered some public resistance that our approach was insensitive to prevalent anxieties and concerns. The response criticized us for callousness in the face of tragedy. For instance, in a blog posting written in early March, we were actively encouraged by colleagues to add a caveat explaining our perspective and acknowledging the scale of the tragedy. It is not uncommon for social scientists involved in disaster-related studies to encounter such resistance so there is no shortage of experience among members of the research community, but perhaps the current episode is unique because of our tendency to couple the pandemic with opportunities for sustainable modes of societal renewal.

A second methodological insight is that in the virtual events (including the virtual mini-conference) that we organized there was more participation by colleagues from the global South than would have ordinarily have been the case for a face-to-face conference. We deemed this to be an important and positive development that we attributed to the fact that the cost for engaging in these sessions was zero and hence was able to attract a more internationally representative range of people. It will be critical to retain this outcome during the eventual post-COVID period while at the same time ensuring that access does not become bifurcated with participants from countries in the global South joining only on a virtual basis.

Finally, this initiative pointed up the continuing challenges of working on a truly global level and across a full span of time zones. This is not necessarily a solvable problem, but it does highlight the need to be extremely cognizant of the need to schedule events at times that are convenient for people in a wide arc of the planet to join.

Other Frameworks, Considerations for Collaboration, and/or Resources:

1. Background on the COVID-19 and Sustainability Transitions Initiative

- Future Earth Blog Posting, *COVID-19 Can Help Wealthier Nations Prepare for a Sustainability Transition*, March 13, 2020 (<https://futureearth.org/2020/03/13/covid-19-can-help-wealthier-nations-prepare-for-a-sustainability-transition/>)
- *Online Open Forum on COVID-19 Can Help Wealthier Nations Prepare for a Sustainability Transition*, March 26, 2020 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch>) (accompanying press release (<https://news.njit.edu/njit-faculty-joins-intl-forum-future-sustainability-post-covid-19>))
- Future Earth Blog Posting, *COVID-19 and Sustainability Transitions: A Real-Time Report from the Systems of Sustainable Consumption and Production Knowledge-Action Network*, May 7, 2020 (<https://futureearth.org/2020/05/07/covid-19-and-sustainability-transitions-a-real-time-report-from-the-systems-of-sustainable-consumption-and-production-knowledge-action-network/>) (republished by the International Science Council)

2. General Mini-Conference Materials (including Plenary Presentation)

- Agenda from mini-conference held on May 27, 2020, and information on speakers (<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1fopzvtvzJmRpeGsAm8qf9A9ensAkuW5mJbGwrXdf-Ww/edit>)
- Presentation slides from mini-conference (<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1W6JTI5xeEjVVBAoagsbZpAXYA-y9zzT4-u9IcSVYv9g/present>)
- Recorded video of mini-conference (<https://www.youtube.com/watch>)

3. Publications to Date

- Bodenheimer, M. and J. Leidenberger. 2020. COVID-19 as a window of opportunity for sustainability transitions? Narratives and communication strategies beyond the pandemic. *Sustainability: Science, Practice, and Policy*, 16(1):61-66 (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15487733.2020.1766318>).
- Cohen, M., J. Sarkis, P. Schröder, M. Bengtsson, S. McGreevy, and P. Dewick. 2020. COVID-19 can help wealthier nations prepare for a sustainability transition. *Future Earth Blog*, March 13 (<https://futureearth.org/2020/03/13/covid-19-can-help-wealthier-nations-prepare-for-a-sustainability-transition/>).
- Cohen, M. 2020. Sharing, mutual aid, and sustainability transitions. *Shareable*, June 10 (<https://www.shareable.net/sharing-mutual-aid-and-sustainability-transitions/>).
- Cohen, M. 2020. Does the COVID-19 outbreak mark the onset of a sustainable consumption transition? *Sustainability: Science, Practice, and Policy* 16(1):1-3 (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15487733.2020.1740472>).
- Goffman, E. 2020. In the wake of COVID-19, is glocalization our sustainability future? *Sustainability: Science, Practice, and Policy* 16(1):48-52 (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15487733.2020.1765678>).
- Markard, J. and D. Rosenbloom. 2020. A tale of two crises: COVID-19 and climate. *Sustainability: Science, Practice, and Policy*, 16(1):53-60 (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15487733.2020.1765679>).
- Power, K. 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the care burden on women and families. *Sustainability: Science, Practice, and Policy* 16(1):67-73 (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15487733.2020.1776561>).
- Sarkis, J., M. Cohen, P. Dewick, and P. Schröder. 2020. A brave new world: lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic for transition to sustainable supply and production. *Resources, Conservation, and Recycling* 159, Article No. 104894 (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0921344920302123>).
- Wells, P., W. Abouarghoub, S. Pettit, and A. Beresford. 2020. A socio-technical transitions perspective for assessing future sustainability following COVID-19. *Sustainability: Science, Practice, and Policy* 16(1):29-36 (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15487733.2020.1763002>).

Contributors:

Magnus Bengtsson, Independent Researcher (Japan)

Amy Burnett, Development in Transition (United Kingdom)

Ashley Colby, Rizoma Field School (Uruguay)

Maurie Cohen, Humanities Department, New Jersey Institute of Technology (USA)

Paul Dewick, Keele Business School, University of Keele (United Kingdom)

Felix Donkor, College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences, University of South Africa (South Africa)

Steven McGreevy, Research Institute for Humanity and Nature (Japan)

Claudia Santos, Climate Change and Sustainable Development Policies, University of Lisbon (Portugal)

Nediana Sarrasanti, Department of Urban and Regional Planning Engineering, Diponegoro University (Indonesia)

Marula Tsagkari, Department of Economics and Business Organization, University of Barcelona (Spain)

Emmanuelle Vital, Pure Inspirations (USA)

Chadia Wannous, United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (Switzerland)

Peter Wells, Cardiff Business School, Cardiff University (United Kingdom)

Esthi Zipori, Urban Systems Program, New Jersey Institute of Technology (USA)

This COVID-19 Working Group effort was supported by the National Science Foundation-funded Social Science Extreme Events Research (SSEER) network and the CONVERGE facility at the Natural Hazards Center at the University of Colorado Boulder (NSF Award #1841338). Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the NSF, SSEER, or CONVERGE.