The Climate Virus

Lessons from COVID-19 to Enhance Climate Action

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Introduction

Since the beginning of the spread of the coronavirus pandemic, the world has experienced a seemingly unprecedented acceleration of loss, fear and overall change. Although the scale of impact varies diversely across the globe, people have experienced loss of normal habits and interactions, loss of loved ones, loss of lifestyles, loss of connection, fear of infection, fear of spread, fear of touch, and fear of each other. Not even the normalized fast paced nature of contemporary technological advancements could have prepared us for the scope and breadth of the changes that were on the horizon nine months ago. The rapid speed and impact of these global changes, although referred to frequently as 'unprecedented' is perhaps not as foreign as we think. In the past 150 years, and most particularly in the last 50 years, humanity has had, and continues to have, an alarmingly destructive impact on the Earth's ecological balance and climate systems. Similar to COVID-19, the impacts of the climate change crisis affect the planet indiscriminately, and worsen with continued inaction. Although both of these simultaneous global crises call for intense, drastic, widespread change, only one has been successful. The coronavirus has been able to mobilize an unprecedented global, political and behavioral response, while decades of dedicated research into the impending disasters of the climate crisis has been embarrassingly slow and incremental.

The motivation for this project stems from a deep yearning to understand *why*. Perhaps more importantly and productively, *what* can the global response to COVID-19 teach us about adequately and justly addressing the climate crisis, the largest existential threat to the contemporary world. Recognizing the magnitude of such an endeavor, this project aims to answer the question: How can Canada's response to

COVID-19 inspire future actions towards climate justice? This time of intense changes and adaptations paves a unique opportunity for critically restructuring, reimaging and transforming the global approach to urgently achieve climate solutions.

Pitfalls of COVID-19 for Climate Change

COVID-19 presents three main challenges that act as barriers to achieving climate justice in both Canada, and the world.

COVID-19 is a Distraction

- The 2018 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report that measures and predicts the disastrous impacts associated with a 1.5 degree increase in global temperature estimates a 10-12 year window for drastic radical systemic changes to stay below this critical threshold (Global Warming of 1.5, 2018). Today, that leaves nine years, at best, for a large scale economic, political and social shift towards climate justice- the coronavirus pandemic can be positioned as a deviation from an already tight timeline for necessary change.

- The hypothesis of a finite pool of worry "states that when concern about one issue increases, concerns about other issues decrease because individuals only have a limited pool of emotional resources" (Botzen et al., 2020). As concerns for COVID-19 dominate the minds of individuals and leaders, the development of climate solutions risks being sidelined or temporarily forgotten despite the urgent attention it requires.

Illusion of a Silver Bullet

- The pursuit and development of a vaccine, although necessary and ideally globally helpful, may reinforce dominant rhetoric that idolize *silver bullet* solutions

and applaud humanity's ability to innovate and overcome problems with intelligent design.

- I am suggesting that the fast-response of the virus will create an expectation of silver bullet reactive post-crisis response which is not possible for the climate crisis.

- Relying on the comfort of a silver bullet techno-fix solution for climate crisis may delay further climate action rather than acknowledging the true scope of political, economic and social changes needed to stay below the 1.5 degree threshold (Global Warming of 1.5, 2018).

Culture of Disposability

- Research from the The International Solid Waste Association estimates that single use plastic waste has increased by 250-300% since the beginning of the pandemic (McGillivray, 2020).

- The ecological cost of the increased waste from disposable PPE and online shopping packaging during the coronavirus era represents a significant step in the wrong direction in the plastic reduction movement that was gaining momentum pre-pandemic.

Learning from COVID-19

Adaptability to a New Normal

- The current reality of a swift transition to online schooling, working from home and mandated mask-wearing, to name a few, seemed unimaginable a year ago. The eventual willingness and ability to change behaviors and practices nationally, and globally has exemplified that the potential future behavior changes required for achieving climate justice could be possible.

Mobilization of Media

- As COVID-19 dominated social networks, people's behaviour, decision making and perceptions about the pandemic began to shift and evolve leading to mass mobilization behind the cause and a collective push to 'flatten the curve'.

- Could this represent a unique success story that reinforces the importance of effective multimedia mass communication, and the power of human health risks as a motivator for action?

- If modeled after effective mobilization techniques of COVID-19, the climate movement has the potential to influence the attitudes and behaviours of individual lifestyles, and greater political agendas within Canada to prioritize actions centered around climate justice.

Focus on Racial Equity

- As a result of the dedication, organization, and strength of anti-racist movements, the widespread identification of these links, has exposed the intersectionality of race and public health, and the unequal impacts of the pandemic on racialized communities.

- The racialized impacts of COVID-19 that have infiltrated public discourse create a stronger foundation for understanding and exposing the relevance of race within the climate crisis. Anti-racist work therefore becomes intrinsic to climate action and justice creating a readiness and urgency within Canadian climate solutions to dismantle systemic racism in the best interest of not only public health, but also protection from climate disasters.

Human-Nature Harmony

- The globally debilitating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has forced humanity to face the realities of its fragility and powerless stance against nature shattering illusions of control and domination.

- As leading climate scientists project and predict the globally devastating potential of climate inaction, as outlined in the 2015 IPCC report, humanity can adopt more holistic approaches to better prepare for impending disasters and actively prioritize effective solutions that respect our dependence and reliance on the Earth to further limit its destruction.

- Perhaps adopting a similar 'flatten the *carbon* curve' approach will help the public draw parallels between COVID-19 and future risks of the climate crisis.

Economic Impact & Priority

- To date, Canada has spent an average of $381 billion dollars on coronavirus relief (Aiello, 2020). In comparison, Canada's budget for Environment and Climate Change has fallen from $1.80 billion dollars in 2019-2020, to $1.63 billion dollars in 2020-2021, with plans to decrease further to $1.46 billion dollars in 2021-22 (Departmental Plan, 2019). Although this statistical comparison is bleak, it highlights the massive economic cost of a reactive response, as well as the potential possibility and feasibility of urgent radical change when its prioritized, and potential risks are taken seriously.

- The climate crisis demands the same sense of urgency today, to decrease the impacts of the future. Although a $1.46 billion dollar budget is embarrassingly low as we approach a catastrophic threshold, the investment into COVID-19 relief

gives hope that change is possible in Canada and the world, to avoid spiraling

further into the wrong direction.

Conclusion

The immediate short term priority we have placed on COVID-19 to protect human

health must translate into a wider, long term strategy. Confronting the true cost of

climate inaction and acknowledging our collective, but differentiated responsibilities in

creating the problem, as well as our role in finding solutions with seriousness and

urgency is the way forward. The threat to human health and economic prosperity we

have felt during this pandemic pales in comparison to the scale of what we risk losing if

we choose the route of delaying climate action: the loss of entire species of plants and

animals, the loss of ecosystems and their services of which *all* life depends, and the

loss of total ecological balance that keeps all life in check. We have proven our ability to

mobilize behind the virus, and now we must do the same to protect the vitality of the

planet for the future prosperity of all.

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