

## IIASA-ISC Consultative Science Platform

### Bouncing Forward Sustainably: Pathways to a post-COVID World

As the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) spreads from country to country around the world, the natural instinct has been to shut down borders and to first and foremost shore up capacities to deal with the medical emergencies arising within our boundaries. Given the unexpected scale and impact of COVID-19, the speed of its transmission and, in stark visibility, our lack of capacity to deal with this novel threat, despite years of warnings, this is an obvious and understandable response.

However, it is also obvious that both within countries and across countries, actions would soon need to be taken, hopefully, in a more coordinated manner if we are to mitigate the socio-economic impacts of this pandemic. Moreover, countries that successfully controlled the rapid spread of the virus, are now struggling to ensure that they do not start importing the virus from abroad again. In essence, the rate of return to normalcy at a global level will be dictated by the responsiveness of that region that represents the tail end of the pandemic. This highlights the need for global science-based concerted actions that must be taken to limit the impacts as well as the easing of controls over time. Of particular importance across national boundaries are issues around travel, migration, trade, international trade, investment, tourism, education, etc. Within national boundaries there is also a need for scientific inputs that would engage with national governments in sustainably addressing issues around domestic economic growth, unemployment, welfare, insolvency, indebtedness, education, equity etc. There will also be a need to address the socio-psychological, bordering on post-traumatic stress disorder, needs across different segments of society, and a need to rebuild trust in governments, societies, systems requiring the building of a new social order. Consequently, now every country, and the world, has an opportunity to develop plans for bouncing forward (mitigating or avoiding altogether unsustainable and inequitable development) and for a global taskforce to define a roadmap and suggest guidelines for the same.

As countries start to believe that they have COVID-19 under control, there will be a race to re-create jobs and different economic sectors will start clamoring for support/incentives and subsidies. The manufacturing sector would be raring to go and we run the risk of re-starting on a similar or even worse trajectory in terms of sustainability than the one we left behind. How do we ensure that the different actors in society do not forget the avoided environmental impacts of their production and consumption actions that the lock-down has inadvertently provided a peek into?

The recorded socioenvironmental benefits of COVID-19 span from the visible reductions in air pollution, tangible reductions in noise pollution, reductions in waste generation, lower levels of conspicuous consumption, new low-carbon business models, better work-life balances, e-commerce meetings, reduced flying and many more. So how can we sustain economic activity levels and productive societal engagements without once again losing what we have seen to be possible or even gained? How do we press a reset button on the nature of the economy and society – what governance changes are required? What policies and incentives should be designed? How should societal and global values be re-constructed towards building a more equitable and sustainable society? It is important to engage inter- and trans-disciplinary researchers and thinkers to lay out the possibilities for decision makers to consider and map out the realm of possibility.

IIASA and the International Science Council (ISC), recognizing the importance of systemic approaches to designing a post-COVID world and their own mandate to address the same, would like to propose the organization of a series of online consultative meetings, in collaboration with representatives of other scientific communities, business organizations such as WBCSD, NGOs and other stakeholders to quickly start and further build intensive open and targeted deliberations on what worked and what did not in terms of responses to COVID-19 and why. How can this understanding help us define a pathway to build-back better as the world grapples with the question of how to re-start a stalled economy, rebuild societies, avoid stressing our environment again, bring 'normalcy' to our lives and enhance resilience to future threats of various nature. These issues have not been addressed in any major global initiatives thus far. We have identified a set of themes to use as entry points for these deliberations but recognize that each of these have very strong inter-linkages that should *all* be addressed for effective responses:

- **Governance for Sustainability:** COVID-19 brought into the spotlight once again the role of Governments, and the cooperation/coordination between them, in effectively and rapidly addressing extreme events and in catalyzing transformative changes through decisive actions aimed to support the common good, even if at some cost. However, it also highlighted significant gaps in the science-policy interface, in the prevalence of institutional mechanisms to deal with crises, in the preparedness of global and national science communities and government systems, in the access to reliable, verifiable data to better inform decision making, among others. The existential challenges that humanity is facing requires us to cooperate and collaborate as never before. However, COVID-19 has resulted in widening the existing geo-political divides. We need to address the new set of fears and uncertainties that arise from this extreme event in order to be prepared for others that may follow.

COVID-19 is but one example in a string of health disasters that the world has faced with increasing frequency in the recent past. It will not be the last. Nor will all disasters be about health. Climate scientists have been warning us about known tipping points as also the unknowns which essentially demand an ability to take robust, nimble,

yet evidence-based responses. How can we ensure governments function more effectively under crises? Why should we be only responding to crises? What are the win-win strategies that would alleviate the probability and the misery of crises? The set of consultative meetings around Governance for Sustainability would draw upon the COVID-19 and other relevant recent experiences (such as the financial crisis of 2008) to identify effective policy tools and mechanisms that would also give due credence to issues of poverty alleviation, justice, inequalities, the environment while suggesting pathways for more robust and responsive governance systems for an uncertain future.

- **Strengthening Science Systems:** The UNSG in his foreword to the Global Sustainable Development Report 2019 emphasized both the need to act now for a better future as well as the role of science in achieving the SDGs. However, neither the GSDR, nor any other process, challenged the scientists or the science systems to test their own readiness to respond constructively and in a robust manner when faced with either extreme events or the different unknowns they have been warning the world about. Both science and scientific establishments have been found wanting once again in the response to this crisis. One obvious part of science related to the issues around management of the virus and its effects. But other parts related to everything from demographics to economics to management to vulnerability assessments etc. In many countries, scientists were noticeably absent in helping governments define socially sensitive response measures. Was this reflective of the erosion of trust in science to some extent? How can we re-build this trust and confidence? Scientists have also possibly been a bit slow in exploiting the opportunities that the response measures created to generate valuable sustainability related data and insights that can and must feed into recovery. How could science have been better prepared to provide robust policy advice? How did science perform in past crises – around natural, economic, social and environmental events – to sensitize decision-makers on the importance of systemic approaches? What are the barriers beyond the availability of finance? Did open science and data work? How should science organize itself for the new future?
- **Resilient Food Systems:** The food sector representing rural economy and the plight of farmers provides a good case in point for study. Food supplies are likely to be massively disrupted, nationally and globally, due to measures put in place to control the spread of COVID-19. The number of people suffering from chronic hunger – estimated at well over 800 million before the crisis – could jump dramatically. Governments, businesses, civil society and international agencies need to take urgent, coordinated action to prevent the COVID-19 pandemic turning into a global food and humanitarian crisis. How did the world deal with disruptions in food supply due to global and national lockdowns? How did those farmers with no social security systems in place cope with these disruptions? Given the time-sensitivity of agricultural operations, how does one factor the needs of this sector in exigencies?

How long will the agricultural sector take to bounce back given that they may lose an entire season or more? How do we ensure that we build back in a more just manner and do not forget the poor and marginalized populations all over again?

- **Sustainable Energy:** World oil consumption has gone down by nearly 20 million barrels a day according to OPEC. Electricity consumption levels too have gone down significantly by 25-30% in several countries. New models for delivering on work commitments while minimizing travel loads are becoming increasingly popular. All of this is leading to significant environmental benefits although the job and income losses are tremendous. Most energy producing sectors and energy intensive consuming sectors – such as airlines and the automobile sectors – are clamoring for stimulus packages. How can we steer the energy economy on a different direction given the urgency of return to ‘normalcy’ in a short time frame of three to six months? Are there more job opportunities in decentralized and renewable energy generation that can offset the job losses associated with the fossil industry? How can the clean environment, healthy life argument be measured against possible economic and social costs? Which sectors should be provided stimulus support? Can a stimulus to the automobile sector steer us away from gasoline or diesel consumption? Can the end-results be systemically more positive with a different stimulus focus?

### Program delivery:

The consultative meetings would be organized as online consultations by a team of experts from IIASA and ISC. Each topic would have a unique set of experts playing the key role of design, delivery and outcome documents preparation and dissemination. The first task of each team would be to prepare a background document that would capture the key challenges in relation to the theme, its handling during the crisis, interlinkages, lessons learned and a sustainable recovery pathway outline.

### Inviting Partners:

IIASA and ISC would like to invite partners – institutional and individual -- interested in contributing to this initiative. Institutional Partners will be expected to actively participate in the design and preparation of outcome documentation and will be acknowledged as Partners on all communications materials. Individuals would be acknowledged as participants in the discussions or more substantially depending on the role they play.

## Expected Outcomes

- To engage the science communities in systemic discussions involving critical thinking in the aftermath of COVID-19 to enhance preparedness
- To brainstorm with the science and other stakeholder communities on the shape of a post-COVID world that would ensure life and livelihoods while protecting the climate and environment
- To catalyze multiple trans-disciplinary deliberations at various sectoral and geographical scales so as to maximize evidence-based decision making with the intent to re-imagine global and national futures – futures that are better aligned with the objectives of the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development goals.

## Timelines:

Identification of teams and introductions:	Third week of May, 2020
Preparation of Background documents:	Last week of May, 2020
First consultative science platform on each theme:	10-19 June 2020
First Advisory Board meeting:	02 July 2020
Second consultative science platform on each theme:	20-27 July 2020
Third consultative science platform on each theme:	3rd week of August
Second Advisory Board meeting:	First week of September
Draft Pathways/Synthesis document:	Mid September 2020
Pathways/Synthesis Review by leadership teams:	Mid September 2020
Final report completed/published:	Early October 2020