

Breaking away from the path dependency

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Switzerland's Bertrand Picard, the initiator and co-pilot of Solar Impulse, speaks beside model of the Solar Impulse plane at EU booth showing the achievements of EU cooperation funded by Horizon 2020 at Clean Energy Technology Exhibition in Beijing, China, 08 June 2017. [EPA/WU HONG]

Many of the structural causes of greenhouse gas emissions have not been affected by the lockdown measures imposed to fight the coronavirus, write Bertrand Picard, Claude Turmes, and several other authors who put forward 12 proposals for the post-crisis period.

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The International Energy Agency projects that greenhouse gas emissions will be down 8% in 2020, bringing us back to the level of ca. 2010. If one sees the glass as half full, this means that we will be, for the first time in recent history, on track to meet the most ambitious objectives of the Paris Agreement.

If one is to see the glass half empty, this also means that halting most transport and much of our economic activity across the world will only achieve a limited drop in greenhouse gas emissions. Many of the structural causes of GHG emissions have not been affected by the lockdown – most modes of transport are still dependent on oil, and deforestation has not stopped, to name just two notable examples.

We currently stand at a **bifurcation** – while much of the economic system is at a standstill, the crisis offers an opportunity to break away from our current path dependency. Recent announcements that the Green Deal will remain at the heart of Europe's recovery efforts is a strong indicator that the political will exists. Ensuring that activities that run counter to the environmental objectives will not be eligible to receive funding shows a coherence and decisiveness all too often lacking in such decisions.

The way forward is clear and in that spirit here below we propose twelve proposals that could be implemented in the aftermath of this crisis.

- **Transport**

1. We believe the crisis can be an opportunity for the airline industry to reinvent itself and become a **travel industry, not just an airline industry**. Short-haul flights could be replaced with high-speed trains, which could also bring passengers to major airports. This way, airlines would now operate both planes and trains, as is the case on a limited number of routes.

2. Rail transport across Europe remains difficult. High-speed lines are costly to develop, but though many already exist within the EU, they remain poorly connected. We believe **intra-European rail transport** must be considered as a matter of public service – tariffs need to be regulated, and one should be able to buy a single ticket to cover the whole journey.

3. Use of public transport for daily commutes is likely to change substantially after the crisis. While intra-urban commuters are likely to bike more, suburban commuters are likely to drive more, with devastating consequences on GHG emissions. **Bike lanes** must therefore be built for longer commutes from the suburbs to the inner cities.

- **Public investments**

4. Public subsidies for fossil fuel industries remain high across the EU – **€55 billion a year** according to van der Burg et al. They represent a considerable obstacle to the energy transition: the current crisis could be used to put a definitive end to these subsidies and instead they should be redirected to fund a massive R&D effort in renewable energies and energy savings.

5. On the other hand, oil prices have reached an all-time low. This will likely put an end to the non-conventional oil business, but it also reveals how little control we have on the price of energy commodities. Putting **a price on carbon** is an essential measure that could be a game-changer in the fight against climate change. We should use the low price of oil to set a **minimum and progressively increasing price for oil** that would also considerably limit the effects of financial speculation on energy supply.

6. The reboot plan should be primarily used to invest in a low-carbon economy rather than bailing-out ailing companies often dependent on fossil fuels. We do not advocate that they should go without support, but that support should be **conditional to their commitment** to meaningfully reduce their carbon footprint.

- **Food supply**

7. Many supply chains of essential food products need to become local again. **Investments in local, organic agriculture** need to benefit from reduced VAT rates, and municipalities should also be encouraged (through subsidies) to convert their agricultural land into plots for organic agriculture. EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) needs to be radically changed so that it can better support locally-grown, organic agriculture.

- **Employment**

8. Many workers in the 'brown jobs' – those linked to the fossil fuel industry – have been laid off during the crisis. If we want them to be filling tomorrow's 'green jobs', EU governments must invest in a major **training programme** which could serve to mitigate the unemployment crisis many European youth are suffering from.

- **Energy and housing**

9. **Solar and wind energy** need greater deployment in Europe. Solar panels can be installed on roofs and disaffected industrial sites. It is essential that energy supply is more resilient, and therefore less dependent on one single central provider. Municipalities must be encouraged to invest in renewable energies, solar energy in particular, and they should have micro-energy grids connected with one another.

10. Energy demand needs to be tackled as much as supply. If done so effectively, there remains huge potential for both energy and economic savings for industries, governments and citizens from **greater energy efficiency and sobriety**. Green jobs in housing renovation could be self-funded through these savings.

- **Governance**

11. International cooperation suffered badly through the crisis. This calls for at once more local production chains and more international cooperation. Articulating these **two levels of governance** will be a crucial challenge. We propose that the **production of energy, food and health supplies become more local** and less dependent upon international trade. At the same time, we call for renewed international cooperation to meet crucial challenges in the 21st century, starting with climate change. In that regard, **COP26** should be used as an opportunity to revive and shake up international cooperation, becoming the COP0 of a new cooperation model, rather than a COP 25+1.

12. Industrial lobbies have been active during this crisis, and many governments will be under pressure to allocate funding or deploy investments towards carbon-intensive economic sectors. We suggest **creating an independent observatory of such economic measures that would ensure their compliance with the objectives of the Paris Agreement.**

The current situation calls for economic transformation, but also for political transformation. These are the conditions for a profound reshuffling of the European Union that is about rebooting its economy as much as its political project.

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