

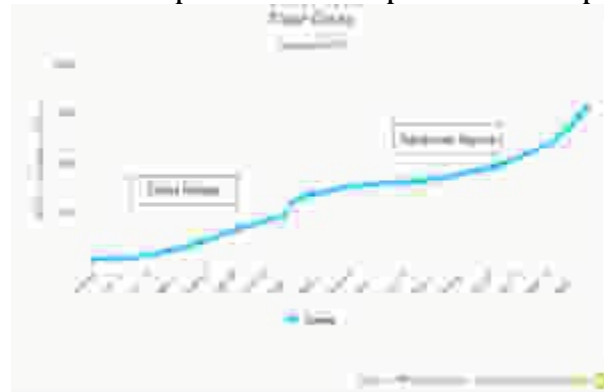
COVID 19 and Climate Change: Parallels between Crisis Situations

<https://www.klyme.online/post/coronavirus-a-klimawiessel-parallelen-zwesch-t-zwou-krise-1>

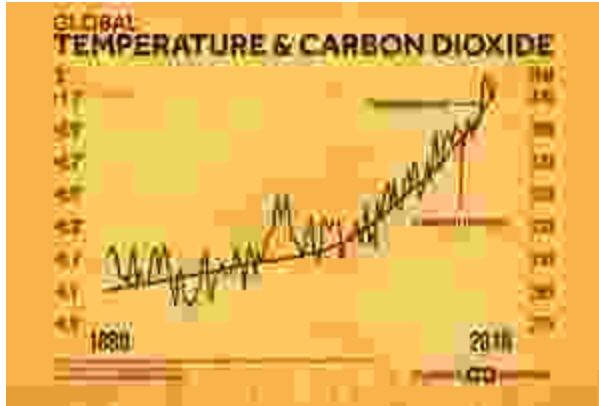
Updated: a day ago

This commentary draws parallels between COVID19 and the climate crisis and is thought to be a thought-provoking, philosophical piece. Of course, coronavirus and climate change are two completely different subjects, but it is worthwhile looking at the reactions of society in two different crisis situations.

Humanity is sick. With COVID19, a highly infectious virus has infected an estimated 160,000 people worldwide (location: 15/03) so far. More and more countries are imposing dramatic measures to limit the spread of the virus after it has developed from an epidemic to a pandemic.



As an analogy to the current situation with the coronavirus, the planet is infected with the "carbon virus", an allusion to climate change. Since the industrial revolution in the late 19th century, CO₂ has been accumulating in the atmosphere as a result of human activity. For several decades now, the planet has symptoms such as fever (rising temperatures; today +0.8-1.2°C), which have consequences such as heat waves, weather extremes or climbing sea levels. If the root cause of the symptoms is not solved soon, the planet will end up in a global crisis.



[Source: [Climate Central](#)]

In both cases, the goal is to fight the infection: the coronavirus should be contained until it no longer infects people (which would be the ideal case) or it should be slowed down, so that people get infected in the short term and will be immune in the long term ("herd immunity"). The objective of combating the climate crisis is to reduce CO₂ emissions to zero to stabilize global temperature rise. The coronavirus has already evolved into a global crisis, when the climate problem is only being smiled at by many.

Why is that the case? How serious is the climate crisis? And why do we have to act on time? A look at the parallels exist between COVID19 and the climate crisis.

Parallel 1: The most vulnerable populations are most at risk

Some people might think, "what's the panic about the coronavirus, I'm not going to be sick anyway" or "I don't care as I won't be dying". They want to show that they are not panicking and thus confront fear with determination. These are noble behaviors in situations like terrorism, where people should unite and look into the threat's eyes.

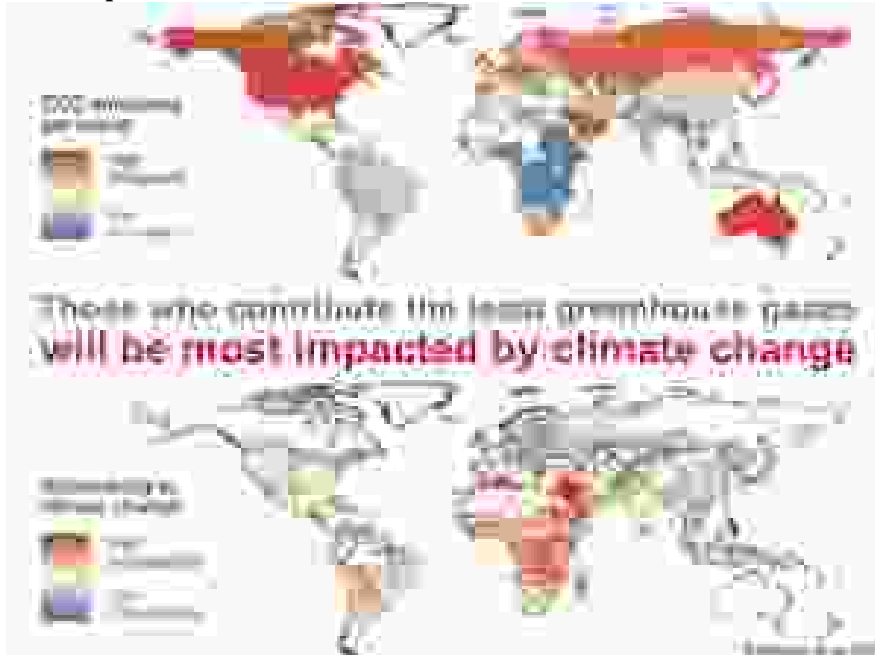
In the current COVID 19 situation however, this is a dangerous attitude: mortality is probably low among most groups, but there are particularly vulnerable groups of people that can be harmed by the negligence of many people. We are talking about elderly people or people with pre-existing conditions: for these groups, we must do everything we can so that they will not be infected with the virus. For instance, the virus can be transmitted in a seemingly "harmless" situation, such as through a visit to our parents or grandparents after having spent the evening

before in the restaurant. Measures such as social isolation and unnecessary exposure to need to be accepted. That has nothing to do with panic or anxiety.



[Source: [Information is Beautiful](#)]

In context of climate change, the situation is similar: the consequences of climate change will not hit western countries (i.e. "us") the hardest, but developing countries (i.e. "them"). According to estimates by the World Bank, there will be [150 million climate refugees](#) by 2050. [For reference, there are around [25 million refugees](#) worldwide today.] The risk group for climate change are the developing countries that do not have the necessary infrastructure and supply chains to cope with the threat. Countries that are historically responsible for CO2 emissions (so those that spread the "virus") are those that, in the end, are less likely to suffer the consequences.



[Source: [Samson et al. 2011](#)]

Impacts of climate change will not hit "our" population the most, but only the "other". So "we" can do what we want, it's not at our front door. But what

mitigation and assistance measures do “we” offer to these countries in the future if we are not even capable to deal with the current migration and development crisis? Solidarity before selfishness is required, in the current coronavirus situation as in climate change.

Parallel 1bis: infrastructure and organization are key

Countries with good infrastructure in health care better cope with the COVID 19 situation. For example, South Korea has a lower mortality rate than Italy at a similar infection rate, which has been attributed by many experts to the organization and the infrastructure in the healthcare system (critical are the number of hospital beds, important equipment and of course personnel).

Countries such as Singapore, Japan or Hong Kong have been more efficient : those countries were able to limit the spread of the virus compared to other countries, because the virus has been treated with the necessary seriousness from the first day and necessary measures were taken immediately. Better infrastructure, preparation and organization equates less suffered impacts.

Simply said, physical protections and innovation are as key for combating climate change than hospitals are key for fighting the virus. There is however a big gap between developed and developing countries in terms of infrastructure. Once climate impacts get bigger, Western countries will reorganize their supply chains and use new technologies to mitigate the consequences of climate change (for example, build water dams or relocate entire cities).

Unfortunately, the most vulnerable populations often do not have these options (yet), as their infrastructure is insufficient to cope with future threats. Agricultural areas and entire cities will be under water and other consequences like heat waves or weather extremes such as tropical storms or monsoons will increase in frequency and severity. These populations will face existential challenges that they will not be able to solve them on their own.

Parallel 2: Solving the problem requires global coordination and sacrifices for the general interest

Fighting coronavirus requires massive global collaboration. After many countries have taken drastic measures against the coronavirus, we know what the next 3-6 weeks will look like for many: social distance, no events with a certain number of people, no unnecessary trips. Or, in short: we have to sacrifice a lot of what we love

doing. These bans are being imposed from above and people follow the instructions without much discussion because they recognize the urgency of the situation.

Similar sacrificing measures have been advocated by many climate activists for a long time already: one should fly less, eat less meat, consume less. Individual behavioral changes are an important part of reducing CO2 emissions. If the global community can do this for a virus, why not for fighting climate change? The framework has already been drawn with the Paris Agreement.



[Source: [Karen Arnold](#)]

In the case of the climate, the notion of sacrifice still raises many concerns: "The others do not sacrifice, why should I?". The main difference between the two cases is probably that the coronavirus is an acute threat: it is tangible, the consequences are already felt today, it waits at our front doors. The absolute number of infections and deaths are leaping from day to day and the sentiment that oneself can be infected is omnipresent. It can hit each of us personally, or a member of our families. Here in Luxembourg. In the next few days, or even in the next few hours.

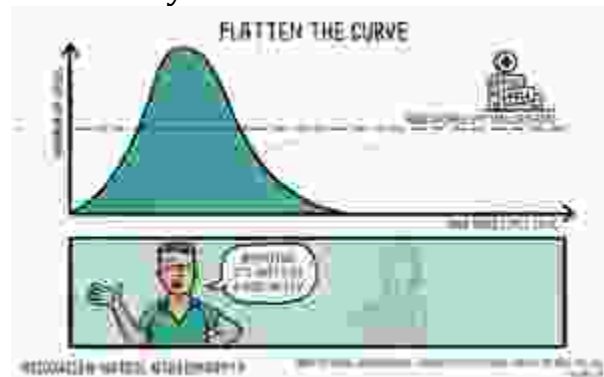
Precisely this sentiment is lacking in the climate crisis. One could argue that climate change is more of an existential threat to humanity than the coronavirus. But the public perception is fundamentally different, because the consequences of climate change are not happening today, but only in a few decades – while our behavior of today is critical to mitigate future consequences.

Parallel 3: Skeptics deny everything, but it's only a matter of time before they have to believe in science

"There is no pandemic", "I do not get the virus anyway", "It's only a flu", "It does not arrive in Europe" - statements about statements. Until recently, many people have been smiling at the global outbreak of coronavirus.

However, the crisis has taken on a whole new dimension: the coronavirus has been declared a pandemic and governments are imposing measures to slow down the spread, following the [#flattenthecurve](#) principle. All of Italy is under quarantine, many European countries have closed the borders and are close to lock-down. All this after a few days, if not even a few hours of consulting time.

If you have argued for a short time, it would not be so bad, you must recognize today: it is bad, really bad. Finally, politicians take the problem seriously and stand collectively behind the science.



[Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)]

Similar ignorant statements still exist today in for climate change: "climate change is a hoax", "it will never hit us in Europe" or "I will no longer live by then anyway". Unfortunately, for climate change, we are not yet at the stage where politicians unanimously believe in science and take it as a global problem.

The consequences, as predicted by scientists, often sound like intangible horror scenarios to many, as they are only beginning to materialize very recently (weather extremes, heat waves, sea levels) and as single events are difficult to attribute to climate change. The sentiment of panic as mentioned by Greta Thunberg again and again is not present in many heads: one must feel a certain panic when looking at the projections of science. People should act as if their house was "on fire".

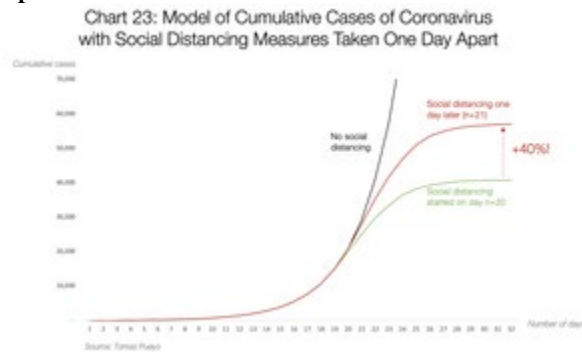
It is hopefully only a matter of time until politicians unite behind science in the same way and become aware of the urgency. The question remains whether, until

then, it will not be too late to prevent the worst effects of climate change - in the case of the coronavirus, the measure will probably seize.

Parallel 4: Time is important, and it is time to act now

Another important factor is time: the time of the exponential spread of the coronavirus has lasted for a few weeks now. The rate of exponential growth of CO2 emissions has lasted for several decades now. So, when we talk about a relatively short period of time for the coronavirus (with big decisions within days or hours), climate change is a generational conflict (with big decisions over years or months).

Time is critical when preventing further infections with measures such as "social distancing". In his [viral contribution on the Medium platform, Tomas Pueyo](#) has simulated how critical it is to act in time. A delay in decision-making may contribute to the increase in the number of infections in the tens of thousands. Every day with social distance is therefore important so that the virus does not spread further.



Rapid action is also important for climate change. If we continue to emit CO2 at today's rhythm, humanity will have heated the planet by 1.5°C and will thus have reached the limit of the Paris Agreement by 2028, after which emissions should go down to zero. A utopian goal, considering that globally, only 20% is running on renewable energy and the entire world economic system still depends largely on fossil energy.

The goal of climate neutrality is set for 2050. By 2050, then, negative emission technologies will need to "suck the CO2 out of the air" that we emitted too much after 2028. This is technically possible, but it's like saying for coronavirus: let the infection spread for a few months because we will find a vaccine that will cure us all. In addition, many critical ecosystems will have suffered irreversible damage that cannot be repaired with technology.

The next months will be of critical importance in decision-making for fighting climate change, similar as the last few days have been critical for decision-making in the coronavirus situation. Renewable energy, electrification and behavioral changes are critical for fighting climate change, like social isolation is critical for the coronavirus. Due to the amplitude of required change, we cannot wait several more years before we act.

Parallel 5: Public welfare is probably more important than financial profits when it comes to survival

The coronavirus is the origin of the current crisis on the financial markets. Due to the slowdown in China and the global measures that will lead to less consumption, the financial markets have strongly collapsed. In a society that is obsessed with consumption and productivity, in which we are on our feet for 16 hours per day not knowing what weekday it is, this universal slowdown comes like a crash.

This nourishes the fear of many people: will anyone ever buy something again? Who pays the bills? When will the economy recover? Certainly existential questions for many, but there will be a time after the crisis if adequate aids are being provided.

A parallel to the world economy also exists in climate change. Many business men fear that measures such as carbon taxes or global emission markets will have a negative impact on the world economy: the economy would be unnecessarily slowed down and could fall into a crisis. Therefore, perhaps at the expense of humanity, essential measures that will be needed in the coming years to save the global climate are not taken today. For the climate, too, it would be vital to go through an economic transition phase (which is not necessarily equivalent to slowing growth), after which the economy would grow again sustainably, with decarbonized technologies.

So what?

Climate change is one of the most important global issues of our time and will require global action and coordination in the coming decades. Unfortunately, politicians often disagree on the seriousness of the problem and on the necessary measures where science agrees. Many people do not recognize climate change as a threat and are reluctant to behavioral changes.

We need a similar level of global mobilization as in the current coronavirus situation to combat the existential dangers of climate change. Perhaps the coronavirus outbreak is, after all, the wake up call that the world needed so that humanity realizes how to deal with a crisis properly.

*Edit: I want to share a concluding metaphor that has been brought to my attention by one of my readers. The **boiling frog fable**, which some of you might know, tells the following: if a frog is put suddenly into boiling water, it will jump out, but if the frog is put in tepid water which is then brought to a boil slowly, it will not perceive the danger and will be cooked to death. This metaphor is often used to describe the inability or unwillingness of people to react to or to be aware of sinister threats that arise gradually rather than suddenly.*