

**Learning and Relearning for Planetary Health: Early Lessons from a Pandemic<sup>1</sup>**

Araiza-Viramontes, P.; Sierra-Heredia, C. &amp; Takaro, T.

**Key Messages**

- Both the climate emergency and the COVID-19 pandemic are global crises that require recovery plans
- The fast mobilization response to tackle COVID-19 must also be used to address and mitigate climate change
- We need to bounce forward (and not back) into a new 'normal' in order to address these emergencies as well as our relationships with wildlife and our planet

**Introduction**

In most contexts, recovery means going back to normal, but COVID-19 has completely changed our understanding of “normal”. The current pandemic has been a once in a lifetime experience which has impacted our lives in an untold number of ways. These changes are likely to be persistent since the post-COVID reality will be so different. COVID-19 has provided us with an opportunity to pause and think about how we were living. We have been given a chance to choose a recovery that improves our world to be better than our previous normal: to “not bounce back but bounce forward” (Hancock, 2020) as we work towards our post-COVID future.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented event, it is not the only global emergency. While this pandemic has drastically changed our lives and has affected everyone in unique ways, the other global emergency remains: Climate Change. As we build back the economic and social recovery from COVID-19, we must also think about how we can do this with a synergy that contributes to climate change mitigation and adaptation, so that strategies to rebuild better will respond to these two emergencies and the next pandemic.

**Learning and Relearning for Planetary Health: Early Lessons from a Pandemic**

In order to share scientific knowledge around climate change, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the intention of informing and stimulating policy change, a group of experts organized the webinar series “Learning and Relearning for Planetary Health: Early Lessons from a Pandemic”. In the first session of the series, the focus was on introducing the webinars and its goals. Through eleven sessions, broadcasted from April through June 2020, the webinars

---

<sup>1</sup> On April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the introductory first session of the webinar series “*Learning and Relearning for Planetary Health*” was presented. It outlined the goals of the series and sessions on learning about the human response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the development of achievable action agendas for bouncing forward in our relationship with each other and the planet in a post-COVID-19 era. The presenters were Dr. Tim Takaro, the creator of this series who is a physician-scientist and professor in the Faculty of Health Sciences at SFU, Dr. Mira Ziolo, a PhD Candidate for the UBC Interdisciplinary Studies and Consulting Veterinarian at the Wildlife Rescue Association of BC, and Dr. Trevor Hancock, a retired Professor and Senior Scholar from the School of Public Health and Social Policy at the University of Victoria. All the recordings of this webinar series can be accessed here: <https://learningforplaneta.wixsite.com/website/past-webinars>

covered a range of topics regarding the relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic, planetary health, climate change and human health (Takaro, et al. 2020).

### **COVID-19 and Climate Change – The Similarities**

There is no time like the present to provide compelling and accessible changes and a vision for a better reality (Takaro, 2020a). If we were to compare the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change, we would see more similarities than differences, the main point in common is that both are global emergencies which have serious impacts on our health. In every media outlet, we have seen the devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic and also the lasting damage of disasters (such as wildfires, hurricanes and floods) around the world, worsened by the increase in the earth's temperature. Climate change severely impacts the most vulnerable found in populations of lower socioeconomic status, elderly, young children, those with pre-existing conditions contributing to existing inequities that have only been worsened by the pandemic.

Surprisingly, both crises have also been influenced by the choices we have made. For climate change, rising temperatures are due to our contribution of greenhouse gas emissions from fossil fuel burning due to our industrial way of life. This contributes to air pollution, which causes disease and hides our beautiful blue skies and vistas. If we continue to allow the temperature to increase, humans will not be the only ones to suffer, but habitats and animals will too. Similar to how our choices contribute to climate change, "COVID is a natural phenomenon perpetuated by a social disaster driven by our choices, therefore, we as humans have the power to change these choices and work towards a better post-COVID future" (Ziolo, 2020). Zoonotic infections are diseases transmitted from animals to humans, and over the past years these events have been increasing (Ziolo, 2020). Our actions of destroying habitats and ecological niches (to increase food production, build homes, and expand the fossil fuel economy) stress wildlife and lead to extinctions around the world, which increases the chances of zoonotic diseases spilling over to humans (Ziolo, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic is not an exception to this, as human encroachment led to stress on the bat population in which corona viruses are often endemic and pushed the species towards a bat-pangolin-human spill over event leading to COVID-19.

### **Why should we Bounce Forward and not back?**

In this recovery from the climate change and COVID-19 crises, "resilience means bouncing forward, not back to the way we were before" (Hancock, 2020). During our lockdown-induced pause in this pandemic, we have seen many improvements: The levels of CO<sub>2</sub> and NO<sub>2</sub> levels globally have decreased and our air quality is better than ever before (Hancock, 2020). A vision for our future would be to keep these positive changes.

As we move forward, we need to move from "EGO to ECO" and place ourselves on respectful equal footing with wildlife. As we recover, we need more equity between humans and animals and to pick recovery paths that avoid future spill-over events of zoonotic diseases (Ziolo, 2020).

Going back to "normal" would mean choosing to go back to actions which continue to pollute the air, endanger and stress wildlife. If we can change everything for one kind of emergency, why not do it for another? During the past months, we have seen global mobilization as nations, governments, and citizens have undertaken actions to fight the pandemic, as well as implementation of new mandates and extensive economic investment and resources which have gone into tackling COVID-19 (Hancock, 2020). Change is possible. We can choose to use the

FACULTY OF HEALTH SCIENCES – PLANETARY HEALTH RESEARCH GROUP

same effort towards COVID-19 to address and manage climate change. Moving towards a greener economy and leaving behind fossil fuels is possible, and the reductions from greenhouse emissions will benefit public health with reduction of many diseases and the deaths they cause as we keep the earth's temperature from rising (Takaro, 2020b).

**Conclusion**

As we live through this unusual time in our lives, we have had the opportunity to pause and reflect on the choices we have made that have shaped the reality around us. With what we have experienced and seen, the choices we make from here will allow us to build our society back better. Do we want to bounce forward into a better, equitable, and green future, or do we want to go back to the way things were?

We can make choices for the change we want and while it may take a lot of resources; with support and effort we will be able to do it in a way which will not only help solve the COVID-19 pandemic, but also manage climate change. How can we do this? Please stay tuned to future Op-Eds to hear of state-of-the-art resources and findings from expert researchers on how we can build back better.

## References

- Takaro TK, Gislason M, Ziolo M, Hogg R, Winters M, Parks J, Buse C, Hancock T, Klein K, Behn-Smith D, Bakunzi G, Singini D, Card K, Ebi K, Janes C, Neufeld V, Patz J, Teelucksingh C, Frank E...Waters S, (2020) Learning and Relearning For Planetary Health Lessons from a Pandemic, <https://www.meethere.org/conferences/learning-for-planetary-health>
- Takaro TK. (2020a). *What are these sessions hoping to accomplish?* Learning and Relearning for Planetary Health: Early Lessons from a Pandemic, Session 1, <https://www.meethere.org/conferences/learning-for-planetary-health>
- Takaro TK. (2020b). *What's climate change got to do with it?* Learning and Relearning for Planetary Health: Early Lessons from a Pandemic, Session 1, <https://www.meethere.org/conferences/learning-for-planetary-health>
- Ziolo M. (2020). *Karma: Mother Nature fights back with a zoonosis.* Learning and Relearning for Planetary Health: Early Lessons from a Pandemic, Session 1, <https://www.meethere.org/conferences/learning-for-planetary-health>
- Hancock T. (2020). *Be careful what you wish for: Bouncing back to a better place.* Learning and Relearning for Planetary Health: Early Lessons from a Pandemic, Session 1, <https://www.meethere.org/conferences/learning-for-planetary-health>