

COVID: AN OPPORTUNITY TO TRANSITION TO A RESILIENT AND LOW CARBON NATION

Seniors Climate Action Network May/June 2020

Seniors Climate Action Network (SCAN) is a group of older men and women who network with other groups concerned about Climate Change. We recognize that

- the biosphere, of which humans are a part, is an interdependent whole.;
- our generation has used far more than our share of the Earth's resources;
- our generation has reduced the Earth's biodiversity;
- our generation has polluted the rivers lakes and oceans,
- our generation has increased the levels of CO₂ and other greenhouse gases, risking runaway climate change;
- our generation has created a society in New Zealand and mirrored round the world where the richest 10% own 60% of the wealth while the poorest 50% own 2%.

As a result of all this future generations, our grandchildren and great grandchildren, stand to inherit an Earth which may be beyond recovery.

Into this world came COVID-19 which has actually given us an opportunity to reset the parameters of our system, to give our generation a second chance to work towards a more resilient human system living in harmony with the natural world.

The Labour coalition government's handling of the COVID crisis has taken the people with it.

1. Leadership. The Prime Minister has shown wise leadership and her government, especially the Minister of Finance, has shown solidarity. She demonstrated trust in the medical advice she was receiving and the public experienced the leadership as a team. The call to show kindness has focused people on their neighbours and built a sense of community. The prime minister has been able to unify the country behind the plan developed in conjunction with the Ministry of Health.
2. Lockdown. By going into lockdown early transmission of the virus was interrupted. The purpose was well communicated by the leadership team. The public recognized the importance and there were few breaches. Coming out of lockdown has been more controversial as resumption of social interaction depended on good tracing. The message from the leadership lost its clarity, cafes and shops were faced with several different ways of recording their visitors, several apps, paper and pencil. It was not clear whether the recorded information was for individuals, businesses or the health system.
3. P.P.E., Testing and Tracing. It took a few weeks before the Ministry of Health and DHBs were able to get up to speed in this area. The decision only to test those showing symptoms was frustrating for those in lockdown, as they were told people who did not show symptoms might still be infectious. The communication between DHBs and MoH led to some mixed messaging for the public. Access to PPE for essential workers was a problem initially putting some front-line workers at risk. It now seems that this lack of preparedness was due in part to the underfunding of public health over the last 10 years and the division of responsibility between DHBs and MoH. Once all precautions and protocols were in place the pandemic peaked and numbers infected started to decrease.

4. Self isolation and Quarantine. The influx of New Zealand citizens returning from overseas was a major source of new infections. Cruise ships and airline staff were also seen as potential carriers. Many returning travelers in the early weeks reported that they were allowed to travel on internal flights or public transport before going in to self-isolation in their own homes. This caused concern to those in lockdown who were following the lockdown guidelines conscientiously. Eventually all travelers entering the country were required to be quarantined in hotels before returning home.
5. Essential workers. The commitment and dedication of workers in essential industries was remarkable and especially, if ironically, these were often in lower paid occupations. Export industries, mainly agricultural production proceeded as normal throughout the pandemic. The food producers and processors ensured the supermarkets were stocked, and transport carriers were the blood vessels of the body of society for getting essential goods round the country. Those working in hospitals and care-homes were at the forefront of the COVID war and there has been an outpouring of gratitude for all those working on the frontline.
6. Economic hardship. Financial support through the wage subsidy, initially for 3 months and then for a smaller number for a further 3 months, has ensured a safety net for workers and their families. The public have felt reassured that those financially affected by the virus are being looked after. Some banks and landlords also helped those struggling to pay bills when income practically stopped. However, there is ongoing concern that those on benefits do not have sufficient income to cover their expenses and have no choice but to rely on food banks, with many finishing up in poverty. This is a long-standing criticism. The Minister of Finance has had a challenging job and has been an excellent communicator presenting his decisions with confidence. He has provided considerable sums of money to keep the economy operating as well as it could but the numbers of people losing jobs is increasing and is expected to go on doing so. New Zealand has become over reliant on the tourism sector and it is hard to know if and when international travel will resume. The government has "borrowed \$50 billion via the Reserve Bank issuing bonds. Orthodox economics says this money must be paid back over time but other economists believe The Reserve Bank can issue money in difficult times and this need not be paid back. This issue is unresolved.
7. Education. The preparation of educational material and providing low-income families with laptops ensured children could work from home on-line.
8. Working at home. The ability for many workers to work on line from home ensured isolation and social distancing, enabled supervision of children and saved travel time. This is a trend that may be ongoing with benefits of reduced traffic and lower carbon emissions. Likewise, the use of Zoom for meetings of all sectors of society has reduced air, and road, transport, resulting in lower carbon emissions. Zoom meetings are now the used regularly.
9. Community networking. Many community organisations had to suspend their community activities but held their meetings on-line.
10. New Zealand has been lauded internationally for eliminating the virus although at the time of writing (22.7.20) over 30,000 NZ citizens have returned home and gone into 2 weeks quarantine in hotels in Auckland, Christchurch, Rotorua. There continue to be 1 or 2 new cases from these travelers most days and the return of citizens is expected to continue for the indefinite future.

The polls show that a large majority of New Zealanders believe the government has handled the COVID-19 pandemic extremely well. While those with businesses to run are understandably keen to come out of Level 2 and get back to business as usual the general public only have to look at the numbers of cases and deaths in the UK and the US to

realise that the government and health professionals need to be cautious. Australia now has 400 new cases a day in Victoria.

The complete halt of overseas tourists has hit the hospitality and tourist businesses very hard with the loss of many jobs. Other industries are also experiencing a severe drop in business and unemployment is rising. The government job subsidy finishes in September with the expected loss of more jobs.

The Budget. There is widespread opinion that the budget, of necessity put together in a few weeks, has been fair and positive. The free, trades-training, the housing package, the money for environmental restoration, the retrofitting of cold damp homes, the new rail links, and the support for people and businesses facing economic recession all provide opportunity, but no guarantee, for moving the nation to a more resilient and sustainable future.

What lessons have we learned from the COVID crisis to enable us to deal with the crises that Climate Change, Social Inequality and Environmental collapse present?

Issue: New Zealand, along with the rest of the globe, faces a number of mounting crises which if not addressed could lead to the collapse of the Earth's ecosystems

While the world has known about these problems for over 50 years, wider society has been slow to recognize them as being crises, and the situation has now become urgent. The current narrative of growth, market forces, competitiveness, individual success, which has led to our current predicament, will no longer serve the community of nations as it seeks a way to live as part of Earth's biosphere. We face three major crises.

- **Climate Change:** carbon dioxide equivalent emissions from human activity continue to rise, causing global temperatures to increase, producing sea level rise and more extreme weather events, droughts, flooding, typhoons and vegetation fires. The global community has now accepted the Paris agreement to keep global temperature increase to 1.5degrees C although the targets adopted so far by nation states will overshoot 1.5 C rise. New Zealand has passed the Zero Carbon Act and has appointed a Climate Commission to monitor our progress and recommend further government action.
- **Inequality and poverty:** the last 30 years of neoliberal economics as part of an existing economic system based on debt and banks creating money, has resulted in a rise in incomes for those already wealthy while those on the lowest incomes have faced precarious employment with static incomes, increasing poverty, homelessness, and associated health and education problems. A significant aspect of inequality is a housing crisis (unaffordability, increasing rents, cold damp houses, control of market by developers, investors . . .) Apart from the injustice of a system which rewards the rich and punishes the poor the whole society is affected by growing inequality and the lack of cohesion pushes the whole society towards collapse.
- **Environmental collapse:** Planetary ecosystems and the biosphere are under severe attack from human lifestyles. Inadequate treatment of human sewage pollutes rivers and oceans, while much of agricultural practice has become dependent on large scale irrigation depleting river flows, while the addition of nitrogen and phosphate fertilisers, and pesticides, is severely damaging river ecosystems. Poor forestry management produces large amounts of sediments and soil erosion. When all these pollutants reach the sea, they damage

inshore fishing and fish nurseries while fishing practices are destroying ocean bottoms, and overfishing is reducing fish stocks and killing other species including marine mammals. Our waste management systems are totally inadequate to deal with the large amount of plastic and household and industrial waste. World-wide, ancient forests are being cut down, and the planet is under severe attack with the extinction of many species. The burning of fossil fuels at an ever-increasing rate is the main source of carbon dioxide, the major cause of climate change.

Response to the Crises - Living with uncertainty and urgency - Learnings from COVID

- **Listening to Nature** – human communities are dependent on the healthy functioning of Earth's ecosystems for their continued existence. The planet is constantly showing signs of extreme stress; the large-scale disruptions of Earth's systems (extreme weather events, rising temperatures, extinction of species, pandemics, etc.), are the result of human activities which fail to respect the Earth systems and the Earth's limits; we ignore the signals at our peril. Listening to Nature must be the foundation of the planning and functioning of all human systems from now on.

- **Leadership and communication** – In times of uncertainty and crisis, effective leadership requires the leaders across all disciplines (government, health, science, social science, etc.) to show: -
 - they are a team and trust the international consensus of research findings in relation to the crises' issues. However there needs to be a systems expert to give an overview of how the various crises interact.
 - there is a long-term plan to deal with the crises and they agree on the way forward. While there may be some differences of opinion there is a level of global consensus as to the steps we need to take. Nations can propose plans of action in the context of the wider global community's plans.
 - they have the present and future wellbeing of the people and planet at heart.
In a crisis people accept government has a strong role to play including ensuring that all citizens have sufficient income to ensure their whanau's wellbeing.
 - that individual rights are respected while emphasising we are a collective interdependent whole - he waka eke noa – we are all in this together.
 - the plan will only work if our behavior is based on kindness and caring for one another, especially the most vulnerable.

- **A New Narrative, a new vocabulary.** The nation is already becoming familiar with the narrative around climate change, environmental damage and social inequality but our old narrative still pushes consumerism and competition. Households and nations are trapped in a system of globalization, market forces, competition and the use of fossil fuels. It is not yet widely accepted that our current economic system with the lifestyle it dictates, perpetuates the growing crises. Yet transition to a more sustainable low carbon future is essential and urgent; a difficult message to get across. The new narrative must be about a resilient and sustainable future in harmony with the biosphere that will emerge from living with the crises. It is a story about living by Nature's principles.
 - **The new system will be self-**organising as natural systems are
 - **It has within it the seeds of its own success**

- It is creative - new ideas emerge/evolve
- Varied solutions suited to different locations
- Emphasis on small and local but connected to the city/nation/globe
- Individual action matters but collective action is the mover/agent

What is the long-term plan – globally/nationally/locally?

1. **International Agreements** As a member of the United Nations New Zealand is committed to working with the community of nations through many agreements and conventions including the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change
 - The Paris Agreement was reached at COP21 in 2015, Katowice. World leaders committed to making sure global warming stayed "well below" 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. They also agreed to pursue efforts to limit the temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius;
 - Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, The IPCC prepares comprehensive Assessment Reports about the state of scientific, technical and socioeconomic knowledge on climate change, its impacts and future risks, and options for reducing the rate at which climate change is taking place.
 - UN Sustainable Development Goals
 - **Consultation and democratic decision making.** New Zealand, and the world, cannot afford for this fundamental issue to become a political football. We need a wide dialogue at community level. We need to value wisdom and experience – Mātauranga Māori, the wisdom of Māori and the wisdom of older people who have lived through past crises like World War 2.

Perhaps the government could produce a discussion document setting out the issues. Existing groups and neighbourhood groups could be the venue for discussion. Another option would be citizen's assemblies as have been held in other countries to discuss major issues. The booklet could provide opportunity for feedback, it could also be on-line.

2. **Food.** Historically families often produced some food at home, grew vegetables, fruit trees and bushes, raised chickens for their eggs, preserved fruits and baked bread and cakes. Large scale food processing and globalization has replaced the local supplies of meat and vegetables, foods travel many kms to be processed, canned, frozen, packaged and turned into products with many additives which no longer resemble food. Fresh and processed food is imported often travelling thousands of kms while local growers disappear. Supermarkets have replaced small local specialist shops. The foods have lost a good deal of their nutritional value and freshness, products contain high levels of sugar, salt and fat. Obesity, diabetes, caries are examples of health problems caused by the increasing industrialisation of food and are most likely to affect families on low incomes. Food is now a public health issue, an equity issue, a cultural issue (loss of local foods and recipes), there is a loss of food security and food sovereignty. The packaging especially in plastic has increased the waste going to landfill. New Zealand has become a large-scale producer of food for export, meat, dairy produce, wine, fruit and vegetables. This has resulted in large processing plants, dairy factories, meat works. Legislation to ensure the export products meet hygiene standards has led to the loss of small-scale meat and milk processing and

increased bureaucracy for small producers. COVID has accelerated a return to the valuing of the small and local food retailers. In recent years there has been an increase in farmers markets, community gardens and home gardening. A National Food Strategy Network is springing up, increasing awareness that access to fresh, nutritional, healthy food is a public health issue, while encouraging local food production increases resilience, food security and food sovereignty and reduces carbon emissions and waste.

3. Regenerative agriculture,

Regenerative Agriculture (regen ag) is a term that is used to describe a set of farming principles and practices that restore soil fertility, improve watersheds, enhance ecosystem services such as soil carbon and nitrogen sequestration, improve biodiversity, and promote farmer and livestock welfare. Within the farming community of New Zealand Regen Ag is receiving a lot of interest and has the potential to change agricultural practice in New Zealand.

4. Natural Climate Solutions - Restoring ecosystems

Natural climate solutions can help address climate change using natural ecosystem processes including protection, restoration, and improved management of natural and working lands, forests, grasslands, wetlands and agriculture.

5. Energy

The age of fossil fuels is coming to an end. Governments must phase out the use of fossil fuels, conserving some oil for essential manufacture of the infrastructure for renewable energy production, close coal mines, and end fossil fuel subsidies. The science is clear that fossil fuels must be kept in the ground.

Transition power generation to 100% renewable energy. New Zealand already has over 80% renewable power generation and has consents for more wind farms. Solar panels should be part of the building code on the roofs of new houses which could use smart meters to share electricity within communities. Restructure the energy companies to be more collaborative.

6. Local economies. As a result of COVID there is an increasing move to strengthen local economies. The beneficial effects are

- Productive and enterprising cities and regions
- Increased manufacture of a variety of goods (necessities) and services (maintenance)
- money circulates longer at the local level resulting in less inequality
- local currencies create more local employment
- vibrant suburbs, diversity of shops and small businesses
- increased connectedness,
- Better paid and more secure employment
More integrated and complex social networks
- Local food security and food sovereignty and resilience - fresher food
- fewer carbon emissions (reduced long distance transport)

- increased resilience – able to withstand shocks and stresses from outside

7. Work and Income

It is predicted that work will become more automated and people will have more leisure. New Zealand's benefit system is no longer fit for purpose. Those who are unable to work because of illness or disability, or caring for the young, old or sick, mental ill health, and other reasons, have to navigate a bureaucracy that is punitive, to qualify for benefits that are totally inadequate for their wellbeing.

A Universal Minimum Income would provide an adequate income with dignity. It would be similar to the current National Superannuation.

8. Expand public transport and phase out fossil fuel vehicles.

As we transition away from fossil fuels, we need a public transport system that is 100 percent decarbonized. Electric buses for cities and towns, and trains that can run the length of the country, also a coastal shipping service for heavy goods with fewer trucks on the roads. We also need to phase out ICE cars and make it easier to move to electric vehicles.

9. Housing. All citizens need to be in dry healthy housing. Warm, dry, healthy housing for all, at a fair price would go a long way to helping families manage their income better and provide security and stability of neighbourhood and education.

The tax system should ensure that houses are not treated as investment assets in the same way as shares and dividends. We need more state houses for those who have to rent, also houses that people can rent to buy. The provision of housing seems to be in the control of developers who buy up land waiting for it to go up in price and investors who see houses as an ever-increasing asset.

The existing housing stock needs to be retrofitted as soon as possible - ceiling and underfloor insulation, double glazing and solar panels on roofs. The building code needs to be improved to ensure new houses are more energy efficient.

Building materials should be low carbon footprint and the construction industry needs to be regulated to reduce the amount of waste that goes to landfill.

10. Circular Economy and waste management. Manufacturers must take responsibility for their packaging and the life of the product they make. Products need to be repairable and at the end of their life they must be able to be dismantled and the materials reused. Currently consumers and ratepayers and the environment pay the costs of products that cannot be reused, repaired and recycled.

Appendix

“One system that could work is a dual-price mechanism based on carbon rationing, as proposed by [Total Carbon Rationing](#). Currently, for other reasons, many Central Banks are exploring the concept of “[Central Bank Digital Currencies](#)” (CBDCs), which would give every resident in a country an account at the Central Bank. Rather than being a means to create and store the national currency, these accounts could be used to provide a “[Universal Carbon Credit](#)” (UCC)” to every resident of a country on an equal per capita basis per recipient—so that billionaires would receive the same annual UCC as paupers. To buy any commodity, a consumer would need to pay both its money price, as now, and its CO2 content as well, using UCCs. (This begs the question of whether they should be tradeable. – TEQs –David Fleming- Fleming Policy Centre)