

The world rebooted?

What hope for a greener, fairer future, asks **Rich Gower**

In 50 years' time, how will the history books describe the 2020s? This is the question I've found myself reflecting on in recent weeks.

We may know the answer sooner than we think. I suspect that the trajectory for the rest of this decade is likely to be set by how individuals, communities and countries act over the next 18 months. The coronavirus crisis has upended the social contract (society's implicit beliefs about the role of government and others), and where it settles will determine the policies and practices that are prioritised in subsequent years.

What began as a health crisis now touches every area of life. In fact the coronavirus crisis has had (at least) three types of impact:

- **Direct effects** on people's health, jobs and living situations, around the world.
- **A revelatory effect:** it has held up a mirror to society, and revealed some of the problems that were already there, but too often ignored.
- **A "values impact"**, causing us to question what is truly important, and who we want to be as individuals and society.

The way society responds to the third of these, will likely determine the space for responding to the previous two.

Direct effects

As I write this, the global death toll from Covid-19 has just passed half a million, and is rising fast. However, its effects go far beyond direct mortality. Since 1990, the proportion of the world's



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population living in extreme poverty has more than halved, but 2020 may well be the first year in 30 when it increases¹. Similarly, the World Food Programme suggests that the pandemic could double the number of people suffering from acute hunger in 2020.

Across the world, sectors such as tourism, transport, and clothes manufacturing have collapsed. Many developing countries were already dealing with high levels of debt before the pandemic, and currency devaluations coupled with falling tax revenues have made this situation worse.²

At a household level, those already struggling to provide for their families on daily or weekly wages are now in an even more precarious position.

Revelatory effects: brokenness and beauty.

This crisis has revealed the brokenness of our current world, and exposed elements of injustice that before were frequently ignored. As many have said, "we're all in the same storm, but we're not all in the same boat." In the words of Dr Vinoth Ramachandra, a senior leader in the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES), "just as a receding tide exposes the debris that we would rather not see, the virus has

exposed the deep health and economic inequalities within rich nations, as well as between nations. Poor economies are on the brink of collapse. And it is the poor and vulnerable communities within the rich nations that have been disproportionately affected.”³

Similarly, coronavirus has put the current environmental crisis back in the spotlight. Environmental destruction makes it more likely for viruses to jump species and get into humans. Deforestation, mining, the bushmeat trade, animal trafficking and unsustainable agricultural practices are all likely factors at play.⁴

Nevertheless, at the same time as revealing our brokenness, the early weeks and months of lockdown provided glimpses of beauty. For the first time in 30 years, the Himalayas were visible from Northern India, 125 miles away, because of the lack of air pollution. People heard birdsong louder than before; they breathed cleaner air.

The crisis has revealed just how much our well-being is bound up with everyone else’s, and with the natural world. This recognition of our interconnectedness resonates with the deep wisdom of “shalom”. This transcends our modern notion of peace to include ideas of wholeness, balance and tranquility: everything in its place, everyone in harmonious relationships.

Perhaps as a result, this has also been a time of spiritual renewal for many. I was particularly touched by the first story on the *Your Desert Island Discs* lockdown special.⁵ Listening to a group of NHS workers singing *Amazing Grace* in their team meeting, before returning to the wards, I could sense the presence of the Spirit with them.

A values impact

So often, times of spiritual awakening go

hand in hand with social renewal. As people wrestle with these revelations and with the direct impact of the crisis, many have been asking life’s big questions: “what is important in life?” and “who do I want to be?” Of course we all ask these questions from time to time, but it is rare for so many to be wrestling with them at the same time.

As a society, our values are in a state of flux: the immediate response to the crisis saw communities pull together, and make huge sacrifices in order to save lives. Lockdown prompted many to re-evaluate the importance of the natural world. Now, we are deciding how much of this we hold on to, as shops re-open and a semblance of normal life returns.

The way we answer these questions, as a society, will determine how we respond to both the direct impacts of the crisis, and the injustices that have been revealed to us.

Signposts to the future

As coronavirus took hold, Churches adapted quickly to serve their communities with online services, food distribution networks, phone banks for the isolated and much more. Now, we have a role in speaking prophetically to our society, casting a vision for a way forward. The Church can demonstrate that a different way of living is not only possible, but a better option for everyone. And together we can call on governments and businesses to reflect this in the ways that they reboot our economy and society.

In relation to the greatest threat that humanity currently faces – climate change – I find myself cautiously hopeful. Recent research commissioned by The Climate Coalition found that seven in 10 (70%) people want the government to undertake stronger climate action and almost three quarters (72%) believe we have a once in a

lifetime opportunity to tackle climate change and protect the environment; a third (36%) said they were actively looking for ways to virtually attend protests and lobby politicians during lockdown.

However, an ambitious green recovery package is far from a done deal, and (as of early August) recent government announcements have not been especially encouraging. What can we do as Christians in the UK, to move the needle on this? With the UK government hosting the G7 and COP26 in 2021, there is a clear opportunity. Back in May, Tearfund launched our Reboot Campaign, calling on the Prime Minister to reboot the economy in a way that prioritises the poorest, tackles the climate emergency and builds a better world for everyone. The Reboot pages of the Tearfund website have a template and guide to help you write your own letter to Boris.

When the historians look back on 2020, they might perhaps say that this was the time when we changed direction. At the moment, it hangs in the balance.



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Tearfund has produced a set of resources for Churches and communities to help them consider how we can “build back better”, accessible at www.tearfund.org/reboot ■

References:

- 1 Sumner, Hoy and Ortiz-Juarez (2020), *Estimates of the Impact of COVID-19 on Global Poverty*, WIDER Working Paper 2020/43, UN University
- 2 Tearfund (2020), *Coronavirus Crisis: Restoring Societies* www.learn.tearfund.org
- 3 www.vinothramachandra.wordpress.com/2020/04/27/who-will-learn-from-covid-19/
- 4 www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/story/science-points-causes-covid-19
- 5 www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m000jpf4