



# Take the Opportunity Afforded by the COVID-19 Experiences: Progressive Non-growth Policies for Sustainable Lifestyles

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The COVID-19 pandemic has led to significant restrictions on lifestyles and consumption everywhere. Many consumer practices have been disrupted due to the shutting down of economic and social activities, limiting of mobility in public places, closing of shopping centers and non-essential stores, and closing of borders. These restrictions have had a significant impact on climate emissions. Much public and scholarly attention has been given to the question of whether the pandemic also offers a window of opportunity for long-term sustainability transformation. The article elaborates on this issue by specifically discussing progressive non-growth policies for sustainable lifestyles and reduced consumption. What potential for long-term transformative change results from lifestyle changes like these? How can societies be restructured to take advantage of the experiences from the pandemic? Bottom-up drivers and possibilities for top-down enforcement are both important to consider. The article limits its focus to top-down policy measures with transformative potential related to sustainable lifestyles (reduced consumption) by summarizing and discussing some key policy lessons identified in recent COVID-19 literature. It considers the need to address likely rebound effects and the vested interests in bouncing practices back toward the previous unsustainable “normality.” The argument is generally inspired by post-growth and degrowth perspectives, as the dominant pro-growth, neo-liberal doctrines are seen as unable to transform societies and guide them onto sustainable paths.

**Keywords:** climate change, consumption, degrowth, transformation, transformative change, infrastructure, post-growth, sustainability

## INTRODUCTION

Everywhere around the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to significant restrictions on lifestyles and consumption. Many consumer practices have been disrupted due to the shutting down of economic and social activities, limiting of mobility in public places, closing of shopping centers and non-essential stores, and closing of borders. Given these unexpected circumstances, great public and scholarly attention has been given to the question of whether the pandemic also offers a window of opportunity for—and possibilities to enforce—sustainability transformation (e.g., Cohen, 2020; Lidskog et al., 2020; Perkins et al., 2021). This article specifically focuses on top-down policies for sustainable lifestyles and reduced consumption.

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The pandemic has certainly resulted in immediate lifestyle changes with clear impact on climate emissions. In any country of investigation, there has been an overall decline in consumption (Jo et al., 2021). For instance, oil and energy consumption have dropped (Bahmanyar et al., 2020; Iqbal et al., 2020; Aktar et al., 2021; Perkins et al., 2021), with an accelerated switch to renewables (Kanda and Kivimaa, 2020; Jiang et al., 2021). There is an overall decline in transport modes such as aviation (Gössling, 2020) and public transportation (De Haas et al., 2020; Eisenmann et al., 2021), a sharp decline in consumption related to tourism, and in consumption of commoditized leisure services (restaurants, accommodation, museums, amusement parks) related to the hospitality industry (Ehgartner and Boons, 2020; Jones and Comfort, 2020; Jo et al., 2021). There have been significantly fewer trips to supermarkets (Esposti et al., 2021) and a sharp decrease in consumption of clothing and shoes, although this trend is counteracted by increased online shopping (Jiang et al., 2021). The reduction of consumption further relates to a decline of income stemming from a significant drop in global working hours (Perkins et al., 2021). Financial stress and economic uncertainty can give rise to more conscious use of resources and frugality (Borsellino et al., 2020; Zwanka and Buff, 2020; Echegaray, 2021; Mont et al., 2021; Tchetchik et al., 2021). There are also examples of increased consumption and use, for instance regarding disposable plastics (da Costa, 2021).

What potential for long-term transformative change is gained from lifestyle changes like these? How can societies be restructured to take advantage of the experiences from the pandemic? Such questions must be explored from many angles, giving attention to both bottom-up drivers and top-down enforcement, as well as to their interaction. Many changes evolve from bottom-up processes led by the public and by for-profit and non-profit organizations through the development of new preferences, ideas, values, practices, social norms, technologies, and transformative learning (Boström et al., 2018). Such bottom-up creativity and pressure are essential and can demonstrate promising paths as well as indicate public legitimacy for progressive top-down politics and policy. However, top-down policy measures are needed to achieve structural change on a sufficient scale, uptake and permanence, as well as to counteract unsustainable structures and forces. The argument put forward here is that politicians and policymakers can and should take advantage of new pandemic-related experiences in everyday life, which may not only be of a negative kind. The focus of this article is limited to reflecting on top-down policy measures with transformative potential related to sustainable lifestyles (reduced consumption) by summarizing and discussing some key policy lessons identified in recent COVID-19 literature.

It is critical to bear in mind that politics, policy and planning will need to address the likely rebound effects and the vested interests in bouncing practices back toward the previous “normality,” a normality which was profoundly unsustainable. Therefore, the article is generally inspired by non-growth theoretical perspectives, including those of post-growth (Jackson, 2017), degrowth (Kallis et al., 2018; Diesendorf, 2020), sufficiency (Princen, 2005), and economies of plenitude (Schor and Thompson, 2014), as I see the currently dominant

pro-growth, neo-liberal doctrine as fundamentally unable to transform societies and lead them onto sustainable paths.

The review takes the form of an integrative literature review (Snyder, 2019), which is more selective than a systematic literature review, and aims to synthesize literature on a research topic to allow new perspectives to emerge. I conducted a literature search and delimited the selection in two steps, first, COVID-19 literature on (un)sustainable consumption, lifestyle and everyday practices, and second, a subset of this sample which discussed policy-related implications. I also included some earlier studies to broaden the perspective.

## INCORPORATING THE (EXTREMELY LIKELY) RISK OF BACKLASH INTO POLICY

“The fear is that most of the changes seen in 2020 are expected to be transient because they do not reflect systematic long-term changes in the energy systems, transportation, or economics” (Aktar et al., 2021, p. 76). Aktar et al. (2021) address the risk of a rebound effect, arguing that it is extraordinarily difficult to address the triple problem of COVID-19, economic destruction and climate change. The rebound effect refers to the net effect when resource use increases despite improved resource efficiencies, which happens because growth in demand outstrips the effect of efficiency gain. Decreased demand for some products may also free up resources for increased demand for other products where resource consumption is less visible. Freire-Gonzalez and Vivanco, 2020 (see also Chen et al., 2020) discuss this possible risk in relation to ICT. The use of ICT has been accelerating in many areas, including teleworking, online shopping, remote social relationships, surveillance technology, and various forms of entertainment, particularly during the pandemic. Digitalization is generally thought of as environmentally beneficial, because it is expected to reduce transport, but the above authors’ review of previous studies suggests a need to modify this hope. People may seize the opportunities afforded by digitalization while nonetheless keeping their car for other purposes than commuting (e.g., vacationing). Alongside ICT, there might also be a material, water and energy rebound due to the need for more space because of more home-based work (Jiang et al., 2021). Hence, digitalization and home-based work will not be a panacea, and to prevent rebound from happening additional policy measures will be needed that set limits on consumption and resource use (Princen, 2005; Fuchs et al., 2021).

Moreover, there is the problem of pent-up demand (Sheth, 2020). Many consumer desires from pre-COVID-19, which have been difficult to satisfy during the pandemic, will remain and their fulfillment will be postponed. People may shift their demands, such as for a long-distance vacation, from now into the future, and feel justified in doing so (Cocolas et al., 2020). Additionally, even if people change preferences and perhaps even accept new values such as downsizing, the existing institutions and infrastructural factors may force people back into previous mass consumption habits. For example, existing transport infrastructures cannot just be wished away. Even if

people want to use their cars less, because of more home-based work, they may be still reliant on them.

At the same time, new experiences should not be disregarded. Adopting a social-practice perspective, Ehgartner and Boons (2020) discuss factors that could prevent activities from bouncing back. These include people having had sufficient time to learn new practices, lacking the resources to continue old practices, being able to utilize new infrastructures and facilities that support new practices, being prohibited by new regulations that eliminate some of their previous practices, and being assisted by a new cultural context (e.g., social norms). Even if policies ought to address the risk of backlash, they can build on opportunities gained from the changed practices, including the competencies, learning, and even quality of life experiences that people have gained.

Finally, and probably most importantly, there are vested interests contained in capitalist, industrialist structures, in the economic geographies of mass production, distribution and consumption, and in pro-growth dogmas, welfare policies and consumer culture (Boström, 2020). Because of these structures, there are and will be massive promotional efforts, from both business and politics, to return us to the “normality” of high-consumption, energy-intensive lifestyles (Cohen, 2020, Diesendorf, 2020). How can all this be counteracted?

## NON-GROWTH POLICIES FOR DOWNSIZED LIFESTYLES

### Public Legitimacy for Hard, Top-Down Intervention

A first but crucial point to consider is public legitimacy for hard, top-down intervention. The pandemic itself has demonstrated broad public acceptance of hard intervention and a strong role of the state. This is because the risk is considered immediate and serious, and everyone is thought to have the duty to comply with proper protective protocols. The question is whether (a sufficient portion of) the public has also become more accepting of interventions in other areas such as climate change. The problem is that climate change may continue to appear as a less immediate and more abstract threat (Lidskog et al., 2020), and people may be tired of being subjected to restrictions and desire a rapid return to “normality.” Nonetheless, the public perceives the need for significant and enduring top-down restrictions during the current public health crisis, and may accordingly have developed a greater propensity for accepting similar measures in the near future (De Haas et al., 2020), not least due to increasingly sharp messages from the IPCC about climate warming (2021). The key policy lesson is to take advantage of this collective experience. People could adapt (Kirk and Rifkin, 2020). People could take responsibility (Perkins et al., 2021).

### Integrate Health and Environment

The public has become sensitized to how health, environment, and equality are interrelated. The intersection of these areas could be more explicitly and forcefully utilized in public policy (Stegeman et al., 2020), with both relatively soft approaches

such as food diet recommendations (Détang-Dessendre et al., 2020) and more infrastructural issues such as promoting active transportation and clean air in urban areas (Severo et al., 2021).

## Facilitate Further Digitalization and Home-Based Work

Accelerated digitalization and the transition to home-based work offer a crucial opportunity to decrease car dependency. An obvious path for policy is to support the further establishment of digitalization infrastructure and also to counteract patterns and risks of digital divides (Bin et al., 2021; Jiang et al., 2021; Jo et al., 2021). Such infrastructures will facilitate self-governance among organizations to support home-based work and reduce office space and need for travel. However, because of the likely rebound effects discussed above, further top-down measures will be necessary (see following items).

## Support Sharing, Repairing, and Alternative Economies

COVID-19 has, at least in some places, contributed to an increase in biking and bike-sharing (Bergantino et al., 2021; Mont et al., 2021). Also, the number of platforms for car-sharing has increased (Eisenmann et al., 2021), while services related to accommodation (Airbnb) and transportation (Uber) have reported losses (Hossain, 2021, Mont et al., 2021). Studies stress the importance of facilitating community structures for promoting degrowth practices such as bike-sharing or repairing, also post-COVID (Bergantino et al., 2021). Some structures of this sort may also be supportive of the local economy (Ehgartner and Boons, 2020). Public policy could also further provide recognition, protective space, and material support to various civil society initiatives or alternative non-growth movements, including the transition town networks, alternative agri-food movements, eco-communities, cooperatives, time-banking networks, and convivialist movements, all of which construct innovative, alternative, non-growth economies including novel ways to foster social sustainability (Schor and Thompson, 2014; Kallis et al., 2018).

## Decrease Car Dependency

Because of rebound effects and existing traffic infrastructure, digitalization alone will not decrease car dependency. In particular, this is because the public has been forced or driven toward individual modes of transportation during the pandemic, which necessitates policies counteracting the expected increase in car dependency (Zhang et al., 2021). These should be coupled with promotional measures to support active transportation, such as bicycling (Bergantino et al., 2021). An interesting concept that may stimulate creativity and innovation in local policy and planning is the “15 min city”; that is, cities/areas where one can access most essential everyday services within 15 mins by foot or bike. Such a city would support a lifestyle less dependent on cars, and offer more road space for walking and cycling (Jiang et al., 2021). Nature-based solutions for parks (blue and green infrastructure), buildings (green roofs, green walls) and green streets (trees) would be prioritized. Centralized supplies would be replaced by more distributed ones. Green spaces offer people the

possibility to thrive and socialize together with joint walks and activities without resorting to practices of excessive consumerism and commoditized experience. New infrastructural solutions would include more space for community gardens, new means of food provisioning and delivery (Ben Hassen et al., 2020), and possibilities for shorter food supply chains (Butu et al., 2020).

### Restore Trust in Public Transportation

Apart from the many opportunities that the pandemic experience offers, there is also a risk of it permanently damaging previous environmentally benign practices and structures such as traveling by public transportation. Restoring trust in public transportation, such as commuter trains, is key. This might require both pull factors (creating safe individual spaces, adopting protective measures in the vehicles) and push factors (CO<sub>2</sub> taxes, subsidies) to compensate for lost trust in public transportation (Eisenmann et al., 2021).

### Restrict Domestic and International Travel by Air

Further restrictions on domestic and international travel ought to be tested (Hall et al., 2020), such as rationing and drastically higher and progressive taxes/prices for aviation. COVID-19 offers a unique opportunity to critically rethink aviation governance, because the aviation industry faces more problems than just climate impact, including small and even negative profit margins and heavy reliance on state aid (Gössling, 2020; Gössling and Humpe, 2020; Shamshiripour et al., 2020). Demand is induced by very low fares. The opportunity to explore an alternative business model could also be extended to a critical rethinking of the (un)sustainability of the hospitality industry (Jones and Comfort, 2020). There are many new promising ideas and values around “slow,” local, and small-scale tourism that parts of the tourism and transportation (e.g. railways) sector could connect with and public policy could support (Ateljevic, 2020; Benjamin et al., 2020; Hall et al., 2020; Wen et al., 2020).

Admittedly, current policy focuses almost exclusively on the economic recovery of the existing aviation industry rather than its reduction and transformation (Hall et al., 2020). Likewise, Jones and Comfort (2020) argue that there are not enough stakeholders in the tourism and hospitality industry “that question the sustainability of success defined by growth in visitor numbers or increases in material consumption to expect transformational change driven from within.” (p. 591) This harsh reality does not make it less true that a fundamental transformation within the sector is necessary in the long run.

### Accelerate the Transition to Renewable Energy

Even from a degrowth perspective, some sectors will have to grow. There are great possibilities for shifting toward renewable energy, which has already happened during the pandemic. However, further public policy support is needed (Iqbal et al., 2020), such as subsidies for solar panel investment and large-scale divestment in fossil fuel energy. The public sector could use hard intervention to regulate the banking systems, as well to

ensure full scale divestment of the fossil economy in the public pension system.

### Facilitate a Transition to Low Carbon Jobs With Progressive Fiscal Policy

Modern Monetary Theory—which has been applied during the pandemic (Diesendorf, 2020), though sometimes with very dubious goals such as saving the aviation industry—could be utilized for a return to more low-carbon jobs. Diesendorf makes the argument that this utilization of MMT during the pandemic provides an opening for governments to set aside neoliberal economic ideologies and austerity policies. Before the pandemic, Jackson (2017) argued that the post-growth society will be a society based on services such as care, craft and culture, rather than one reliant on material possessions. Other job-related measures that can have an impact on work-life balance, contribute to a reduction of consumption and promote more sustainable lifestyles are facilitating home-based work and workweek reduction. Particularly the latter is a core degrowth policy, which in addition to reducing production and consumption (by lowering income) can reduce stress and time-poverty, free up time for cultivating alternative practices (repairing, gardening, etc.) and enhance quality of life (Schor and Thompson, 2014; Kallis et al., 2018). Measures like these require progressive taxes and a return to progressive fiscal policy.

### Combat Social Inequality

Highly unequal abilities to cope with COVID-19 have been revealed among the population (De Groot and Lemanski, 2020). Social stratification, including the digital divide, is a critical issue for many reasons. One is to ensure legitimacy for hard interventions targeting overconsumption. Inclusion and equality are essential to consider in policy, otherwise there will be yellow vests and gasoline rebellions. According to Stegeman et al. (2020) there is a need for policies that simultaneously address environment, health and equity related to such topics as urban spaces, mobility and consumption. Ashford et al. (2020) argue that policy intervention is needed to achieve economic recovery and social (in)equalities that do not reproduce unsustainable pre-pandemic patterns. They identify 30 policy interventions focused on addressing inequality, some of which concern sustainable consumption. These include policy interventions such as universal basic income schemes, reducing the working week, shifting focus from products to product services (e.g., from car ownership to mobility services), discouraging excessive consumption with taxes such as luxury taxes, educating workers/consumers for a slower-growing economy, and regulating advertisement (Ashford et al., 2020). Thus, changing patterns of demand and intentionally slowing down growth must go hand in hand with measures to combat inequality.

## DISCUSSION

To many, measures like those described in the previous section may sound naive and impossible to realize. To me, the belief that we can avoid measures like these and still reach the 1.5 C



Paris agreement sounds naive and impossible. The list of policy measures is not exhaustive, and such ideas existed before the pandemic. However, the disruption of many consumer practices is what may have made them more imaginable, and there is potential for broader public acceptance of harder interventions. The chances for a more radical growth-critical perspective to take root in societies, also on the political level, are only likely to be realized if dominant public discourses accept that we are living in a time of crisis. Indeed, the structural weakness of the growth imperative is revealed by the COVID-19 crisis (Spash, 2020). Protecting the economy has been the core priority. The environment will have to wait. The pandemic exposed the structure of the global supply chains and their fragility.

The hope, says Spash (2020), is “that the experience of a devastating global crisis will put the necessity of systems change high on the public agenda and create general awareness that “the economy” cannot be allowed to go on as before, creating social division and gross inequalities while leaving humanity at the mercy of corporations, billionaires, speculators and “profiteers”” (p. 14).

In the long run, completely new ways to organize societies and economies will have to emerge. It is hard to see how pro-growth capitalist/industrialist structures can be sustained. In the short and medium term it might however be necessary to utilize existing capitalist structures to facilitate a rapid transition to new technologies and innovations, such as those within renewable energy, while also rapidly counteracting the fossil fuel industry and downsizing the aviation and other high-climate-impact sectors. Meanwhile, alternative economic models and non-growth communities and practices must be developed,

with public sector support, and scaled up. We can foresee backlashes, but nonetheless a collective memory will remain that reminds us of how altered lifestyles and practices were possible during the pandemic. New hard intervention and infrastructural measures—even if they are piecemeal and fragmentary, and not easily framed within the spirit of a degrowth paradigm—can form stepping-stones for further measures and structural change.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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