



ELGA Statement on an Ecologically Just Post-COVID Transition: From Tragedy to Transformation

Prepared by the Steering Committee of the Ecological Law and Governance Association

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STATEMENT

The Earth is a wondrous, interconnected system of life. The COVID-19 pandemic has put in stark relief the fragility of human and other life on our finite planet. The pandemic has presented the global community with a rare opportunity to embrace ecological law and governance that supports and enables a just, flourishing world where local and global governance systems protect the foundations of life. ELGA's Oslo Manifesto and the growing literature about how to implement ecological law provides vital inspiration and guidance for a healthy and just societal and economic recovery from the crisis.

The transition to ecological law that embeds respect for ecological limits in all aspects of law should be based on a new main objective, a new reference approach and a new core paradigm. First, the overriding objective should be to preserve, enhance and maintain the integrity of Earth's ecosystems, allowing human and other life to flourish. Second, ecological law supports holistic, human-inclusive ecocentric approaches, rather than anthropocentric approaches in which human interests always come first and prevail above and against the interests of other living and non-living entities. Third, ecological law calls for a paradigm of harmony with Nature in which humans engage only in economic and social activities that respect and protect the continuity of all forms of life on Earth.

With this framework in mind, the COVID-19 pandemic has sharpened the focus on a number of pre-existing interrelated social and ecological crises that must be addressed in ambitious new ways in the post-pandemic period. Along with the personal and collective grief, massive job losses and other devastating consequences of the pandemic comes an unprecedented opportunity to make big leaps forward toward an ecologically just, post-COVID transition. We join the many voices insisting that the recovery from this shared global experience must not be a return to the pre-COVID status quo.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We offer the following recommendations for ensuring that we make the most of this opportunity for transformational change.

- 1. Learn the right lessons about the interconnectedness of all life.**

The emergence of a dangerous new pathogen from the ecosystems in which humanity is embedded has long been anticipated as an inevitable consequence of unacceptable and cruel treatment of other species and ever deeper human incursion into the world's ecosystems. One lesson from the emergence of the coronavirus that causes COVID-19 stands out: humans have always been and will always be interconnected with the Earth's vast community of life and vulnerable to system changes that can never be entirely predicted or controlled. Moreover, these changes can be global, affecting people in every part of the world. We can live in greater harmony with Nature and still be productive, possibly more so—agroforestry is one tried and tested example of how. We must carry this lesson forward and give it central weight in a much more ambitious, more ecocentric and more eco-conscious global response to other global threats, most urgently the climate crisis.

2. Strengthen commitments to living within global ecological limits, taking an ecological approach to what we define as “essential”.

The pandemic has forced societies across the world to limit activities to those required to meet essential needs for shelter, food and health. While this has caused hardship, most tragically for those already vulnerable because of poverty and various forms of injustice, many people in industrialised nations have also come to appreciate that a simpler, slower paced lifestyle, with less air and road travel and less consumption and pollution, has been more acceptable than previously thought. Many indicators have also demonstrated that the global slow-down has been beneficial to Earth's life systems, including a short term reduction in carbon emissions that harm the climate system. Thus, the pandemic has made the connection between social and ecological crises clearer. We must use this opportunity to continue to ensure we develop and adopt culturally appropriate ways to provide for social well-being while staying within Earth's ecological limits.

3. Focus on protecting the most vulnerable people and other living beings.

The people and other living beings least responsible for the climate crisis and other inter-linked social and ecological crises are almost always the most vulnerable to the day-to-day disruptions and deprivations that those crises cause. This is proving true with COVID-19, which is affecting minority, poor and Indigenous people most severely. World leaders could learn from listening to the Rev. Dr. William Barber II, Vandana Shiva, Jacinda Ardern and like-minded thought leaders as they develop policies and governance approaches to respond to the crisis. They also need to turn their attention urgently to the climate and other crises that still loom large on our collective horizon. Key ideas like work sharing, rapid transition to a low-carbon economy and Universal Basic Income should be given top priority in considering how to provide employment or support for basic needs of people in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis. Progressive taxation, financial transaction taxes and wealth taxes also should receive a fresh look as a short-term means for securing finances that will ensure that the most vulnerable people are able to meet their basic needs.

4. Resist environmental backsliding and look to alternative economic models

As economic activity resumes, laws protecting ecosystems and the environment should be vigilantly respected, enforced and strengthened, not waived or weakened, in order to protect essential ecosystems and the life that they support—including human life. The world is currently following a destructive, growth-driven international development agenda, which has helped to create the climate and other crises and increased the risks of pandemics. We urgently need an economic agenda such as that of the Degrowth movement, which prioritizes social and ecological well-being instead of corporate profits, over-production and excessive consumption, with the aim of transforming societies to ensure environmental justice and an Earth-friendly standard of living for all within planetary boundaries.

5. Understand and address the ethical issues that the COVID-19 pandemic raises.

Ethics is about right and wrong behavior, and when responsibility attaches. COVID-19 spread to human communities because of human development, habitat destruction, and lack of care for non-human species and the inter-relatedness of all life—in short, because of the wrong relationships with nature. This is a crisis of ethics and governance. The COVID-19 pandemic worsens the social and ecosystem harms of the corruption, hyper-competition, capitalism, neo-liberalism, hyper-individualism and nationalism, power imbalances, authoritarianism and systemic racism that pervade governance systems around the world. In responding to the pandemic, we need to hold to account the governance systems that enable societal choices that lead to wrong relationships among people and between people and nature, and to reform them. Ethical reform of governance requires identifying and embracing the best practices of ethical action that exist in the many communities of care around us.