



50 OPPORTUNITIES FOR A BETTER WORLD

Covid-19 has turned the world on its head. There has been considerable suffering as a direct result of the epidemic, as well as due to the unprecedented measures taken in response. Nevertheless, as a global community we seem to have been successful in preventing the worst. Change is possible and we can make it happen: we have insight, resilience and tools to address the next crisis.

Written by: Alice Schmidt - AS Consulting

Covid-19 has come with a great range of social and environmental benefits. Some of these present excellent opportunities for creating a better world, a world that is more sustainable and more just, and thus better fit for the future than our 'old normal'. Here is an overview:

We now understand what really matters

1 As a society we are learning to value what really matters, **not just what has a (high) price**. This includes health, social contacts, a healthy environment, fresh food, reliable energy and data systems, among others.

2 The current crisis has made the global importance of public health drastically clear. The case for investing in health no longer has to be argued. Countries around the globe have **"learned the hard lesson that pandemics can destroy the global economy and cost trillions. Investing in health is investing in the economy."**

3 The experience of scarcity at the beginning of the lockdown – even if just perceived due to empty supermarket shelves that were quickly restocked – has been important to increase people's appreciation of everyday items such as food (or toilet paper). Such appreciation may go some way in more conscious consumption and reducing waste.

4 As households have gotten used to cooking more meals at home, they have started appreciating the taste of fresh food. Baking bread has become a **new favourite pastime** for many people locked indoors and without busy schedules. This, coupled with **increased attention to the origin and health impacts of foods** will likely contribute to healthier eating habits for some time to come.

5 While we have been called to respect "social" distancing, we have been doing the opposite. Social distancing is a misnomer: keeping a physical distance arguably has brought us closer than before.

We have understood that what matters most in times of crisis is social support through friends, families, networks or even strangers.

6 Importantly, we have realized that not consuming does not kill us. Many people have started questioning their fast fashion habits, for example, realizing that purchase decisions are rarely made out of necessity, and often simply out of boredom. A dent in consumerism and a move towards a circular economy is within reach.

7 Families have had more time for each other. For some, this has led to revelations about the relative importance of work vis-à-vis other aspects of life.

Social justice is back on scene

8 We have started to understand how much we depend on people in some of the most underpaid and previously under-appreciated professions, from garbage collectors to supermarket workers. If they went on strike or were unable to work, our world would quickly collapse (in contrast to many other professions, such as lobbyists, which we can easily do without – **see this article for an excellent analysis on why garbage collectors should earn more than bankers**).

9 Around the world, we have been **giving standing ovations to health workers** and others at the frontline for doing their job, allowing the rest of us to stay in the safe comfort of our homes. Let's keep saying 'thank you' as a habit.

10 The essential **contributions by those caring for the sick and elderly** start being recognised. In the midst of the crisis, **Austria's government flew in hundreds of care workers from Bulgaria and Romania** to prevent an additional crisis in health and care **before switching to a more sustainable night train scheme more recently**.

11 Tougher times for tax avoiders seem to be on the horizon. Tax avoidance by large multinationals means that societies miss out on billions of Euros. Denmark and Poland have taken a principled approach by refusing to bail out companies that are not paying fair tax. In the future, this could incentivise companies to pay a fair share back to society.

12 The Covid crisis has many gender aspects. On the opportunity side it has shown that **female leaders easily outperform their male peers when it comes to responding** quickly, effectively and with the bigger picture in mind. Female leaders can be trusted to help sort us out in future crises as well.

13 The Covid crisis has re-invigorated the discussion about a **universal basic income**, including **calls by over 500 political leaders and academics** to create a fairer society.

14 Stressed parents struggling to work from home while home schooling their children now appreciate the herculean task of educators.

A temporary drop in air pollution has heightened our senses

15 Much more than before, there is now widespread recognition that air pollution is bad for human health. Long before Covid, air pollution has been killing 20,000 people every day. We now know that **it also exacerbates Covid-19**: people living in areas with higher air pollution are also more likely to catch Covid and die from it.

16 Due to the great pause in economic and social activity, air pollution has been dropping. For example, average concentration of **nitrogen oxide went down considerably around Northern Italy** following its lockdown. This shows what is possible once we care to change the system.

17 Delhi has seen blue skies **for the first time in decades**. Fewer cars on the road and dirty factories in operation have meant that we got to experience what cleaner air smells and tastes like. This has heightened our senses and increased our distaste for the usual levels of pollution.

18 Recognising the link between air pollution and Covid as well as health more broadly, some cities have started to re-invigorate efforts towards less polluting forms of transport. Milan, for example, a city gravely affected by the pandemic, now has **one of Europe's most ambitious schemes reallocating street space from cars to cycling and walking**, in response to the coronavirus crisis. Following the example of Milan and Berlin, the **city of Brussels has been giving priority to pedestrians and cyclists in inner city areas from early May onwards**, setting a 20 kilometer per hour speed limits for motor vehicles.

19 For lack of alternatives, many people who previously did not take much interest in that proverbial walk in the park have started running or walking in nature, discovering a new favourite pastime which is likely to last longer than the epidemic. This benefits both their physical and mental health, and it makes them appreciate the need for environmental protection just that bit more.

20 Those of us who have always enjoyed hikes through forests and mountains have been thrilled to be able to enjoy nature without the nasty background noise of planes. Noise pollution certainly will not be missed when plane travel picks up again, making calls for less noisy and more fuel efficient aviation technology louder and stronger.

21 Reduced noise pollution has been appreciated by birds as well, and we humans have been enjoying their song like never before.

22 Covid has been providing relief for **wild animals** – not just those that now do not get eaten (given that we have woken up to the link between animal and human disease). Reduced human activity and less noise, chemical and light pollution has been giving wild animals a welcome respite and us an opportunity to marvel at them.

23 Venice, a city infamous for unsustainable levels of tourism, had time to calm down and see its waterways clear, thus revealing its real beauty in an unprecedented manner. It is just one example of a city the beauty of which we have been able to appreciate more fully than before, even if from a distance.

Future-fit leaders link bailout and economic stimulus packages to forward looking (= green, socially just) policies

24 Enlightened political leaders are realising that they can **“walk and chew gum at the same time”**. In other words, the now understand that win-wins across the social, environmental and economic spheres can be created by imposing environmental conditions for bailouts, supporting the development of green jobs and, most importantly,

by ceasing to use taxpayer money to support the fossil fuel industry.

25 In Amsterdam, **the doughnut has been adopted** as a policy to re-build the economy in a post-Covid world, making it greener and fairer for society.

26 Many governments, including Austria, have tied airline bailouts to environmental conditions such as cutting the aviation industry's carbon footprint.

27 Taking a leadership role in Asia, South Korea is embracing a green deal for Covid recovery: a **recent election during the Covid crisis reconfirmed a government that has a green deal modelled on the EU**.

28 The European Parliament called on the European Commission to propose a recovery and reconstruction package that has the Green Deal at its core. The Commission agreed, stating that **“the European Green Deal is not a luxury, but a lifeline”** to get out of the corona crisis.

“Many governments, including Austria, have tied airline bailouts to environmental conditions such as cutting the aviation industry's carbon footprint..”

Alice Schmidt

29 The New York State government announced the passage of an **“Accelerated Renewable Energy Growth and Community Benefit Act”** to speed up clean energy projects to combat climate change and help jumpstart economic recovery from the Covid-19 crisis.

30 In contrast to the 2008 financial crisis, **investors today have plentiful options to invest in a green recovery**.

We now get the point of global solidarity: we are all in this together

31 It has dawned on most people that global crises cannot be solved by any country, government or nation state in isolation. This is true for Covid-19 as much as it is for the climate crisis.

32 After initial hick-ups and competition for supplies, countries started supporting each other in important ways. For example, Covid-19 patients who could not get a bed in overcrowded hospitals in France or Italy were treated in Germany. Several other countries, such as Luxembourg, also chipped in.

33 In some cases, poorer countries were supporting their richer peers. For example, **Cuban doctors** flew in to support the Italian healthcare system when the latter was in dire need.

34 Europe, who sent scientists to help fight the virus in China earlier this year, consequently received the **same kind of support in return**.

Some corporates demonstrate real social responsibility through free services and innovation

35 While some companies have used the epidemic to greenwash (and social-wash) their actions, others have demonstrated that they mean business when talking about corporate social responsibility.

36 For example, companies such as Uber have committed to giving back to society by **offering their services for free** to health workers, first responders and local businesses in need.

37 And then there were those that shifted from production of arguably less socially desirable goods, such as fast fashion or perfumes, to **production of the stuff that really matters** in a health epidemic, such as disinfectant, masks or other protective equipment, lead the way.

38 Various restaurants have been providing free meals to health and other frontline workers. Many restaurants, for example in the UK, have been offering **significant discounts for staff working in the national health service**.

39 In the US, fast food chains have been giving away **free food to frontline workers**.

40 We keep hearing about fascinating innovations, such as **3D-printing of respirators**. It is these companies - going back to basics and trying to serve people what they really need - that will be fit for the future.

41 In France, innovation has meant that **high-speed trains** have been used to transport Covid patients from areas where hospital beds were limited to places with more capacity. For both patients and medical staff this experience has been less stressful than transport via helicopters or planes.

There is a promise for a better work-life balance

42 Covid has helped societies leapfrog into a more digital state of being. Many who previously struggled to adopt digital tools had no choice but to do so, and they have learned to appreciate the many possibilities on offer, from



conducting business meetings to hanging out with loved ones.

43 Following the Covid experience, companies have little excuse for not granting any flexibility and work from home to their employees. More flexible work schedules and work from home can be a big relief for stressed parents and others juggling multiple responsibilities.

44 The crisis has shown us that we can do without the excessive amounts of business travel we had gotten used to. While face-to-face meetings can be great sometimes, they are usually not necessary. This will benefit our carbon footprint as much as our work-life balance.

Communities have passed the crisis test

45 Covid has been a test for community resilience – and many communities have passed it with flying colours. Communities that demonstrate resilience to one crisis will likely be resilient to other crisis in the future. Often resilience is a function of information management and cooperation. Both have worked well in many communities.

46 In many communities, younger community members have been running errands for the elderly and other people at high risk.

47 In neighbourhoods **across countries** people have been singing and making music together from their balconies in order to help each other through hard times.

48 People have also been showing solidarity with small local enterprises by giving them advances and buying vouchers.

49 Many local shops managed to set up online sales services within just days of lockdown, thus being able to continue catering to their communities and reducing the risk of cannibalization from large online retailers.

50 Limiting our ability to travel far, Covid has made us appreciate the small wonders close to home. We are discovering alleys, parks and towns not far from where we live, wondering why we have not been there before.

We can do it

This is just the beginning. People are getting more and more interested in sustainable lifestyles. A great way to measure this is googling practice: it turns out, over the past few months, search interest in “How to live a sustainable lifestyle” has **increased by more than 4,550%**.

The point is not to diminish the suffering and inconvenience the epidemic has caused but to

understand what it can teach us. Let's not waste this crisis, let's harness its lessons and use the opportunities it has brought to address other important societal challenges, such as the global climate and social equity crises. We have no time to lose.

Which opportunities have I missed? Please share them here – we can easily extend the list to 100 opportunities.

PS: one of the added bonuses has been that actually seeing a plane becomes as exciting as it has been many decades ago. Planes will come back, that's for sure, let's hope that they will be cleaner and less noisy than their pre-Covid versions.

ALICE SCHMIDT CONSULTING

✉ office@aliceschmidt.at
🌐 www.aliceschmidt.at
in www.linkedin.com/in/aliceschmidt