

TURNING POINT



**The pandemic as
an opportunity
for change:**

a vision by
Nick Meynen

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Foreword

Anuna de Wever



The coronavirus caused the closing of borders and locked entire continents down. Competitions were cancelled and people prohibited from going to work. Planes remained grounded and vast parts of the economy were put on hold as the world focused on surviving the virus.

What a contrast with 2019, when thousands and thousands of young people walked with me in Brussels, to demand an ambitious climate policy! Yet, the stories of climate and corona are almost the same: they are both signs of a planet in distress. The coronavirus is the planet's SOS to humanity.

In a crisis, the most drastic measures are taken. The unthinkable becomes imaginable, because we are facing a virus that kills.

But where is our sense of urgency in the face of climate chaos? A heat wave can kill a healthy person in six hours. A hurricane can kill thousands of people. Forest fires can kill millions of animals. And what if half a billion people were forced to flee because of food and water shortages? Unfortunately, 'climate change' has a less deadly ring to it than 'pandemic'. And yet, COVID-19 is just a preview of our future, if we do not change course. The pandemic is a warning sign for a broader, global problem - one that we too often forget to mention.

My visit to the Amazon rainforest took me deep into the natural fabric of this planet. Although the web of life is still partly unaffected there, humanity is busy burning that precious biodiversity hotspot to the ground, giving a boost to both global warming and life-threatening viruses. The indigenous peoples taught me how nature can be all-giving, but that our greed destroys all of that.

This could be a make-or-break point in the fight for system change. Social inequality is once again blatantly exposed and deepened by the pandemic. But we have also seen solidarity and that is what we need to build on to fight for a more just world. We need to rebuild our economy into a sustainable, green and circular economy. An economy that cooperates with the Earth. This publication shows how Europe can take a leading role in this process. That Europe has a crucial responsibility in ensuring a sustainable rebuilding of our economy is the message I passed on to Ursula von der Leyen when we met. This is the message Greta Thunberg and I conveyed to Angela Merkel.

Publications like this one are fundamental to keep people informed about the state of the world and to launch bold new ideas. I insist that people need three things to take action:

1. They must be informed about the injustices that are taking place.
2. They must realise that they have a responsibility to fight against this at the micro or macro level.
3. They must realise that if they fight for change, they can really make a difference.

These are the reasons why I am an activist myself. And these are the reasons behind this publication: to activate people to join us on this mission to make the world a better place. Nature has rung its alarm bells - now is our last chance to 'get on with it' and make some much needed changes.

Introduction

We feel your pain. You, me, we all are so sick and tired of either corona itself or its impact on our lives. But are you and I not also tired of all the instability and insecurity more generally? A new virus and unpredictable lockdowns are just the latest in a series of things thrown at us, from financial crashes to hurricanes and heat waves. Maybe the real tragedy is not that these shocks to our existence exist, but that we actually have a fairly good idea of where they come from, who is largely responsible for them, what the alternatives are and yet, we fail to change course. The harder question is: What did we do, once we knew?

At the European Environmental Bureau (EEB) we want to contribute with answers, including ideas that go beyond the usual. We have been watchdogs of environmental policymaking in Europe for almost half a century. We are known as advocates for strong environmental protection across a vast array of policy areas, and many of our members, supporters and staff can also be found on the streets, demonstrating with the young people of Europe who shouted they wanted system change, not climate change. Systemic change is possible and needed. It is even fair to say that the time for reconstructing society has never been as good since 1945. It is now as though through crisis we can finally conceive of a new world order and understand that we can leap from fear to hope, that the great healing can begin. If we work together.

This publication goes beyond the day-to-day policy work we do. We just cannot stay silent on the more deep-seated causes of the various trends we experience in Europe: from climate chaos to a growing democratic deficit and from 'forever chemicals' everywhere to a self-defeating philosophy of eternal growth. We cannot even stay silent on the same old machos responsible for the corona mass graves and who are destroying so much of what we hold dear.

If we do not rise up to this bigger challenge, then humanity will fall

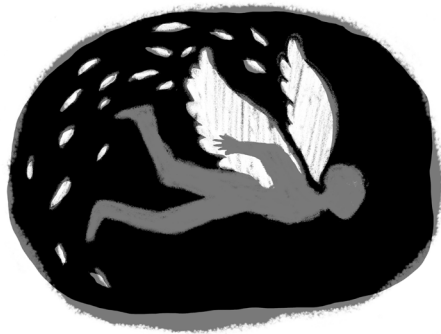
down harder than most of us dare to imagine. Still, many of us do not dare to imagine the systemic change needed, afraid that it is just too far above our heads to be realistic and actionable. Before we can re-wild nature, we need to re-wild our imagination. Only by thinking bigger can we get out of this mess.

We cannot return to 'normal', because the 'old normal' was broken. There is nothing 'normal' about infinite growth on a finite planet with finite resources. It is common sense for anyone who understands the basic functioning of the natural world that this Great Acceleration, as system scientists call it, is taking us right to the brink through an already unfolding climate catastrophe, the sixth mass extinction and quickly increasing conflicts over natural resources. But the neoliberal normal is not a law of nature. People and the planet can thrive together.

The response from governments to the corona crisis shows that political arrangements are not set in stone. They can change dramatically, in the blink of an eye. But top-down crisis control cannot replace a bottom-up process of systemic change. Change is not just about justice for the marginalised, as important as this is in itself. Change is also about ending the self-destruction of the human species. We need healthy ecosystems and healthy people to survive and thrive as humans, it is as simple as that.

Humanity now has a rare opportunity to reorganise the way in which we humans relate to the rest of the natural world - and with one another. The myriad of interactions and connections between cultures, economies, the living environment and how they evolve in time have been overlooked or downplayed for too long. Some academics think that we have a one in six chance of seeing the eradication of the human species this century. At this rate, the whole of humanity is now part of a game of Russian roulette. It is time to unload the gun pointed at us.

What follows is an opinion on how the pandemic unfolded and what post-pandemic progress could really look like, if we unchain our imagination. After following the journey of the virus in PART 1 of this book, in PART 2 we will continue our journey to some of the more radical solutions that can both reduce future risks of pandemics and help us heal.



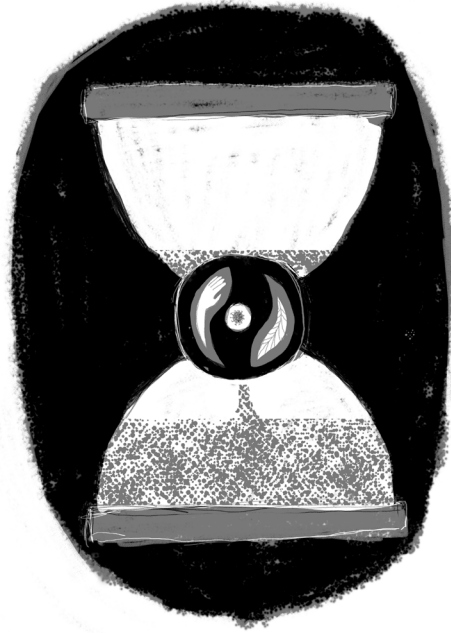
About this book

While many EEB staff and some EEB members were consulted, this text does not purport to reflect their opinions.

'Turning point' differs from the more traditional EEB publications as it is neither a report nor a position paper. Rather, it is a personal thought piece, a long op-ed, written in a more informal style, aiming to be thought-provoking and inspiring. The opinions expressed in this piece do not necessarily correspond to an official EEB position or that of its members and should be taken as exclusively belonging to the author, Nick Meynen.

Nick Meynen is the EEB's Senior Policy Officer for Economic Transition and has supported the work of EEB members on this topic since it was added to the EEB's portfolio of activities in 2018. Nick combines his work on systemic change with his activities as author, speaker, activist and pundit in Flanders, where he regularly publishes opinion pieces in various mainstream media. One of his four books was also translated to English and became a hit among young climate activists: Frontlines. Stories of Global Environmental Justice. The present book is an updated, expanded and restyled version of the Dutch original "De val van Icarus. Het virus als kantelpunt".

If you are holding a print copy: all the underlined words are hyperlinks to sources. You can access these links through the online version of the book.



PART 1

To prevent pandemics, protect nature

The story of Icarus can help us understand where we are in the course of history. In ancient Greek mythology, Icarus and his father used wings made from feathers and wax to escape from an island. The story goes that Icarus was warned to not fly too close to the sun as the heat would melt the wax. His hubris still made Icarus fly too high, and he crashed down. To this day, Icarus is depicted all over the world, in places like the Bankruptcy Court of Amsterdam's town hall, as the symbol of excessive self-confidence, over-ambition and carelessness that comes before a downfall. Some humans took the whole of humanity on a very similar journey to that of Icarus. We fell pretty hard, but the vast majority of us survived. Now, we can rise up.

It is tempting to call this pandemic 'bad karma' or 'Mother Nature taking revenge' - after all, this virus managed to cross over from animals to people to then treat humanity how humanity has generally treated animals and their homes: with violence and without mercy. But while tempting, that logic is flawed. Not everyone is equally harmful to animals or nature, very far from it. The consequences of the choices made by some humans shape this unfolding story far, far more than they will ever admit or will want to understand. There is no conspiracy theory needed to conclude that a small group of humans is disproportionately responsible for creating many of the conditions that resulted in the situation we are in, as well as for allowing this virus to thrive, knowingly or not. We need to talk about how all of this has happened, how we can avoid more misery, and how we can do so in a way that restores the broken bonds between humanity and the rest of the living world.

We first need to connect dots between the corona pandemic and the ongoing war on nature, which in turn is a direct side-effect of an economic system that benefits some at the increasing expense of an ever larger majority of humankind. The cost of *not* connecting the dots is that we are already now starting to subsidise the next pandemic with money doled out for the 'recovery' from the current one. So before we talk about systemic change, what are our system errors?



The war on wildlife

Tropical rainforests teeming with life have a perfect but delicate balance. The destruction of rainforests has impacts that reach far beyond their boundaries, wreaking climate havoc and killing living organisms. Perhaps ironically, along the way, potential cures for some of our ills are killed, too.

Yet, we will need cures, now that we know that the attacks on (the homes of) wildlife create perfect conditions for new viruses like SARS-CoV-2 to jump from animals to humans. This is just the latest case in a long line of transmissions, with SARS, HIV, Ebola and avian flu as notable predecessors. Scientists are convinced that pandemics whose origin lies in either wildlife consumption or humans' increasing proximity to wildlife due to habitat destruction, will become more frequent in the near future. They already noticed that the number and diversity of epidemics has risen over the past 30 years. The way we treat wildlife and their homes did not just create a black swan event, it propelled us straight into the pandemic era. The relationship between the war on wildlife and the resulting pandemics illustrates the urgency of prioritising the concept of planetary health. Planetary

health is an academic field that focuses on the human health impacts of human-caused disruptions of the earth's natural systems. Perhaps the most surprising thing about this concept is how long it has taken humanity to even consider it a relevant field of study.

Scientists show that by killing too many animals and by vandalising the homes of those that remain, biodiversity is declining rapidly. According to the latest Living Planet Report 2020 by WWF, animal population sizes tracked over 46 years (1970-2016) declined by 68% on average. The animals that have survived are quite literally stressed by our behaviour, which in turn is proven to increase the risk of viruses like SARS-CoV-2 jumping from distressed animals to humans. One study after the next states that if we want fewer animal-to-human virus transmissions, we had better leave the bats and civet cats of this world alone.

Hunting the hunters

Some say that we should just stop all illegal wildlife trade to prevent future outbreaks. This would also help reduce the global biodiversity loss so urgently needed - according to scientists we are already in the middle of a sixth mass extinction. Others argue for a ban on all live wildlife markets and the use of wildlife in traditional medicine. While such goals are worthwhile, one coalition warned of over-simplistic and indiscriminate restrictions on wet-markets, which could exacerbate poverty and inequality, most likely resulting in the death of even more wild animals. No simple solution exists.

It is undeniable that wildlife trafficking is a serious environmental crime recognised by the UN, the EU and the 183 national governments that ratified the CITES convention. Still, the EU is at least complicit in the growth of illegal wildlife trafficking.

From scapegoating to soul searching

It would have been convenient for us, Europeans, to simply blame the pandemic on those hunting and trading wildlife in other parts of the world. While the average person in Europe neither has to hunt animals in order to survive, nor is involved in the export or import of illegal wildlife, we all contribute, in varying degrees, to the loss of habitat worldwide. The systemic war on nature is in what we eat, what we buy, where we live and how we move. The data on the ecological footprints of lifestyles are very clear: the average European lives a life that is much more environmentally harmful than for example that of a gatherer-hunter in a traditional community. Having said that, this 'average' inevitably also includes the vast differences that exist between the lifestyles of different Europeans.

The war on nature is insidious: despite its limited visibility, it is systemic, invasive and happening on a large scale. It is becoming ever more evident that unsustainable farming, industrial tree plantations, urban sprawl, pollution and the climate crisis are not only threatening the species and habitats already protected by our nature laws - these practices are also threatening our own existence, i.e. that of the homo sapiens. We do not even need to look as far as tropical rainforests to find loss of habitat and biodiversity. It is happening right in front of our doors, right now.

One of the EEB's biodiversity experts, Laura Hildt, cautions that we must address the destruction of nature if we are to effectively deal with pandemics: "The sorry state of Europe's habitats and species, where over 80% of protected habitats are in poor condition, may suddenly feel more tangible and real." She adds that biodiversity is not just about birds and bugs, it is also about the human species surviving.

The UN and WHO have unequivocally drawn a link between pandemics and human interference with nature's delicate balance. The world's leading biodiversity experts from the IPBES were even more blunt: "The coronavirus pandemic is likely to be followed by

even more deadly and destructive disease outbreaks, unless their root cause – the rampant destruction of the natural world – is rapidly halted”. They stress that “the underlying causes of pandemics are the same global environmental changes that drive biodiversity loss and climate change” and that “deforestation, uncontrolled expansion of agriculture, intensive farming, mining and infrastructure development, [...] have created a ‘perfect storm’ for the spillover of diseases.”

Other experts agree, saying that “deforestation helps deadly viruses jump from animals to humans”. That is where the story of the pandemic starts to be about us. When the system that would naturally protect us is sabotaged, the thriving of particular pathogens becomes normal. We need to get to grips with a very inconvenient truth: the path for this pandemic was paved by human interference with nature, and we are in for a repeat, unless we radically transform our political and economic systems to put planetary health first.

From Au (gold) to Zn (zinc) and from tree to soil, Frontlines: Stories of Global Environmental Justice delves into the intricacies of who takes what from the earth and how. In a nutshell, we take more than we need, more than we can afford and most often without the consent of those most affected by our actions. The amounts we take grow far faster than the population. But all this talk of ‘we’ hides much more complex and worrying class division trends, as well as an extreme imbalance between different world regions. It hides the violence that accompanies extraction, from underground chemical warfare to ‘above-ground warfare’ that extracts gas from the earth, paying no heed to those seeking to respect and preserve our natural resources, our earth defenders. Inequalities and injustices are simultaneously on the rise and ever more hidden from view. The first step of addressing a problem is to recognise that it exists. Let us therefore pause for a minute and reflect on who the ‘we’ in this story actually is.

In June 2020, an article in Nature drew attention to a thorny issue that few dare to talk about:

"For over half a century, worldwide growth in affluence has continuously increased resource use and pollutant emissions far more rapidly than these have been reduced through better technology. The affluent citizens of the world are responsible for most environmental impacts and are central to any future prospect of retreating to safer environmental conditions."

Humanity does not just have a problem with extreme poverty, it has a serious problem with extreme affluence too. It is in particular the impact of the extremely rich on the environment which explains the climate chaos that is in particular hurting the poorest in this world.

Perhaps political correctness dictates that extreme affluence and its consequences are too 'radical' a topic to be discussed candidly. Or perhaps it is simply considered a 'leftist' issue and bringing it into the environmental debate could prove counterproductive, endangering potential funding opportunities. But it is a real, measured and growing environmental problem. We need to get serious about it.

While a focus on the particularly rich is long overdue, it is key to also add that not everything is simply 'their' fault. Of course, the problem goes far beyond the lifestyle of the richest people and even the average consumer is often misled: Labels can lie, masking the reality of an unsustainable 'take-make-use-lose' global supply chain. Most of the pollution, extraction and production that goes hand-in-hand with meeting our material demands has been outsourced to countries where the health impacts and even deaths resulting from dirty digging and manufacturing cost these industries less. After all, as exemplified by an infamous World Bank memo, neoliberal logic seems to establish that "a given amount of health impairing pollution should be done in the country with the lowest cost, which will be the country with the lowest wages. The economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest wage country is impeccable." It has been a strategy and plan for decades to externalise, and as side effect hide, the harm to nature and people associated with economic activities. These activities generate immense profits for multinationals and companies, mostly from wealthy countries, and

owned by a small elite, that sell to consumers who like a 'bargain'.

Exporting pollution to what the same 1991 internal World Bank memo described as "under-polluted" countries and exploiting their resources on an unprecedented scale is the bedrock of the economic 'success' of the post-war era in powerful economies.

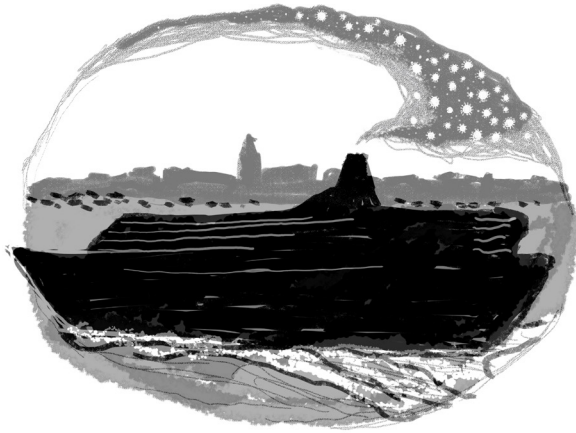
Hunter-gatherer communities in tropical rainforests make a convenient scapegoat, but it is not the indigenous people in India, Indonesia or other parts of the world who destroy the habitat of wildlife that might carry a virus that could kill us. The reality however is that there are vested interests at play with incredibly powerful economic actors and shareholders profiting from increasing the flow of resources and 'stuff' that make their way into every corner of the world. Policy-makers are talked into believing that subsidising the cutting of trees or fossil fuel projects is the right thing to do, thus pushing the planet closer to a dangerous tipping point. The world's leading biodiversity experts wrote that "It may be politically expedient to prop up intensive agriculture, airlines, and fossil-fuel energy, but doing so without requiring urgent and fundamental change, essentially subsidises the emergence of future pandemics."

Although decisions can be reversed and economic actors can be made to comply with more stringent social and environmental rules, when governments and companies fail to do the right thing, the consumer has the power to influence demand. Still, it will take a whole lot more than some of us buying sustainably green-washed bamboo shoots from some label that guarantees that no pandas were harmed in the production process.

Labels can lull us into a false sense of security, making us feel good about doing 'the right thing' for the planet. Every now and then, however, scandals erupt and we are left wondering how much of a positive contribution our choice of supposedly sustainably sourced products has really made. Still, can we really speak of sustainability when that toilet paper we buy comes from clear-felling ancient forests, as is the case in some of the Russian woodlands under

certified production? What about that certified sustainable palm oil, can we trust that the supply chain diligently complies with the environmental and ethical standards the certification supposedly sets? Consumers who rely on labels have a right to transparency and the truth and only certification based on robust, rigorous accreditation schemes that pursue best environmental practices should exist. Companies have an obligation to ensure that their supply chains respect the fragile balance of our planet. And governments have a duty to us all to ensure that the right policies are in place and that polluters are held to account. In some cases, it is just better to ban a product or practice rather than labelling it.

It is not conscious consumers but indigenous peoples who are the real unsung heroes here. Research based on 2,743 environmental conflicts all over the world was able to put figures to the fact that it is indigenous peoples who are most active on the frontlines of the war waged on nature by an economic system built on eternal expansion. While they employ largely non-violent means of defending natural systems from destruction, they are twice as likely to face criminalisation and violence, on top of standing to lose their homes and livelihoods. Indigenous peoples form our first line of defence in the ongoing war on wildlife. They are slaughtered on the frontlines of an economic system with the absurd goal of growing GDP in mind. Let the pandemic be a reminder of the importance of protecting the protectors.



Conquering the world on cruise control

Let us continue the journey that the SARS-CoV-2 virus made after jumping from an animal to a few human beings in China. While there are doubts about the exact origins of this particular coronavirus, there is no doubt about one particularly successful warm-up excursion the virus made just before its world tour. Corona went cruising.

Cruise ships are ideal incubators. Johns Hopkins University originally listed the Diamond Princess cruise ship for its COVID-19 cases alongside affected countries, due to the large number of infections on the ship (621). Cruise ships are notorious for spreading infectious diseases in general. It is a perfect environment for facilitating transmission, with buffets and big group activities in small areas. In Australia, the main worry for those trying to contain the latest coronavirus was the people stepping off cruise ships. The decision to keep everyone confined to these ships turned pleasure palaces into pandemic prisons. Corona's conquest of the world happened on cruise control.

Corona is merely the latest in a growing list of costs to society made by this leisure industry. It is also not the first time that cruise ships have come under serious scrutiny. From Venice and Kiel to Seattle and Antwerp, people have been taking direct action against cruise ships long before corona came to town. Let us reflect for a moment on what they represent.

Sea ships are in a league of their own not just in the size of boats but also in the size of environmental, social and pandemic problems. For starters, they can use unfiltered fuel. James Corbett of Delaware University, a world authority on ship emissions, estimates the worldwide death toll from ship emissions at 60,000 victims a year, of whom 27,000 are Europeans. In Europe, cruise ships alone emit ten times more sulphur dioxide than all of Europe's cars combined. Add to that the rising share of ships in greenhouse gas emissions and their complete lack of effective measures to regulate the climate impact of this sector. All climate conferences come with two major wildcards: one for planes and one for boats.

It is not just the emissions either. Dismantling ships is one of the most dangerous jobs on Earth, according to the International Labour Organisation. Some of the corona-hit cruise liners were sent to India where they were scrapped directly on a beach using flame cutters - with very little protection for workers and the environment. Working on a cruise ship is often a modern form of slave labour, too. Long after all passengers had left the corona-contaminated cruise ships, around 100.000 staff were still stuck on board, in many cases without pay and any means of communication.

Cruise ships are like plagues for the cities that receive them. From Antwerp to Venice, they unleash thousands at the same time into the narrow streets frustrating many local inhabitants who very rarely cash in on the cruise crowd as the business model of these ships has been designed to cover all the sleeping and much of the eating, drinking and shopping needs themselves. For most citizens it is all

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pain, no gain. In so many ways, this is a micro-level illustration of what the eternal growth economy does.

Cruise ship owners more often than not exploit people and beautiful bays, suck up subsidies, provide a perfect petri dish for pandemics and safely store their loot in tax havens such as Panama. One could say that the cruise ship industry is a microcosmos illustrating everything that is wrong with the capitalist system. Corona wiped the lipstick off this mud-covered pig.

What if for the non-cruising majority the pandemic is the catalyst that finally puts the whole cruise ship industry back in the dock? Put bluntly, are the combined costs to society of cruise-ship-related air pollution, water pollution, city-crowding, exploitation of workers and its role as a virus incubator *low enough* to justify the very existence of this pleasure industry for the benefits of the few who can afford it? If the answer is no, then the next question is: can the industry be reformed through strict regulation? Is there such a thing as a sustainable cruise ship? Do we need bold government intervention to regulate what is unnecessary and harmful?

These questions can and must be asked for far more economic activities. The problem is that we often omit these harder questions. The principle that for a zero pollution future, some industries (e.g. the coal industry) must be phased out is broadly accepted, along with the need to ensure a 'just transition' to save the working people in that industry – but should this approach be extended to other downstream industries that are manifestly unsustainable? In today's climate chaos and pandemic era, it would be a fitting antidote to the nonsensical, state-sponsored terrorist attack one country made in 1985 on a boat that was protecting the environment: the Rainbow Warrior.

Airborne - in more than one sense

Of course, it was not just the cruise ships that became virus transporters. In one study, researchers were able to trace 59 infections in Ireland back to one single mass infection event: a flight. They were able to prove what anyone can already sense by logic: in a closed environment with air conditioning, everyone is but a sitting duck.

Neither cruise ships, nor planes can be blamed for everything. But their respective roles in both spreading the virus and causing climate chaos are not to be taken lightly. A century ago, it took the Spanish flu around two months to hop from one continent (the US) to the next (Europe). It took another two months to spread overland to Asia. The Spanish flu travelled by boat and horse. By contrast, SARS-CoV-2 was airborne and criss-crossing continents, even before we knew it existed. It took us half a year to learn that the virus was actually already in France and Italy in December 2019. The skyrocketing number of flights taken by humans is like one big superspreader event. The freedom to fly comes with an undesirable side-effect: it has made the whole of humanity far more vulnerable to pandemics.

What happens in Wuhan does not stay in Wuhan. While virologists debated for months whether or not the latest corona virus is airborne or not, it was busy clocking up air miles, criss-crossing our skies. The North Italian textile and leather industry is largely in the hands of people of Chinese origins. An estimated 100,000 Chinese live in the region, and there are direct flights from Wuhan to Rome. All this reminds us of the old cliché that the world is a village. National borders are less and less helpful to understand the world we live in today. From pandemics to climate change, the challenges we face are of a global nature and require global collaboration. We need to start acting accordingly. Our collective political organisation has not been keeping up with the globalisation of the challenges faced by humanity, the human race. It is time to catch up.

Part 1 - Conquering the world on cruise control

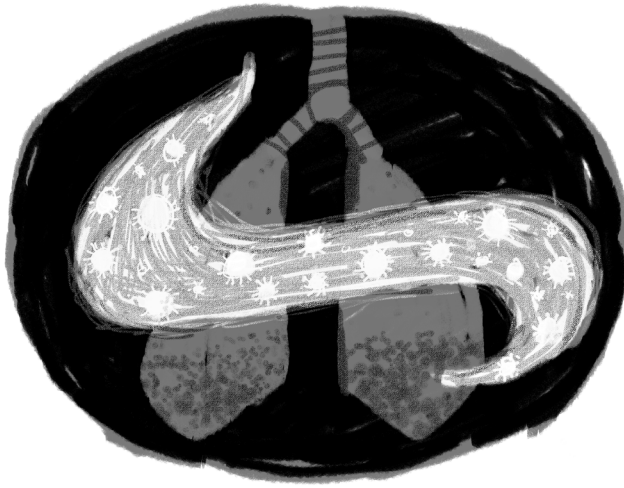
Time is much more than money. Time is life. Millions of lives can be saved if the speed at which a virus spreads can be reduced. Time is needed to produce and distribute equipment, develop a cure and vaccine. The exponential increase in the number of kilometers travelled by air in the past decades did something few of us ever considered - aside from giving us wings and the feeling of freedom, it has also made us more vulnerable.

The speed at which pandemics can now spread is unrivalled. And, like cruise ships, the pandemic is not the only problem on the horizon. The aviation industry benefits from billions in subsidies. Its tax evasion is sky-high, the exploitation of workers and both local and planetary environmental harm are massive and persistent. There are more than 1,200 airport infrastructure projects in the pipeline and a curated selection of the conflicts around them has been mapped by the Stay Grounded network. As with cruise ships, the carbon inequality is just stupefying: 1% of people cause half of global aviation emissions. Both the story of cruise ships and the story of aviation are good illustrations of what the authors of a peer reviewed publication in *Nature* meant when they published Scientists' warning on affluence.

Of course, the so-called 'free market' has given us dirt-cheap but extra-damaging short-haul flights available to all, not just the affluent. When asked, most Europeans seem to think that these should be banned. The 'free market' has given us more and better options to travel the globe as if it were flat, lunches were free and technology could solve all our problems. But there is no such thing as a free lunch. The coronavirus has grounded both planes and the very idea that geography, distances and externalities are a thing of the past. It might seem strange to those living in a digital world only, but there are still things like terrain, the energy needed to cross it and the carbon resources needed to do so. And why should some people be allowed to gobble up the carbon budget share of the vast majority?

Part 1 - Conquering the world on cruise control

Cruise ships can be dispensed of more easily than planes. But we can nonetheless make access to the air radically more fair. We will be sharing some ideas for solutions further on.



Lifelong lung-damage

The fact that COVID-19 is a disease that attacks our lungs led a group of scientists to better understand why the impacts of COVID-19 are so different, depending on where, geographically speaking, the data comes from. While looking to explain why the mortality rate had reached 12% in the northern part of Italy and only around 4.5% in the rest of the country, they found a possible correlation between high air pollution and high mortality in two of the worst affected regions in northern Italy. The same connection was suggested in the US, where coronavirus patients in areas with high levels of air pollution turned out to be more likely to die from the infection than patients in cleaner parts of the country. Similarly, scientists who analysed the Sars coronavirus outbreak in China in 2003 found that infected people who lived in areas with more air pollution were twice as likely to die than those in less polluted areas. In other words, people with healthy lungs stand a better chance of surviving the pandemic, it is as simple as that: long-term exposure to toxic air compromises our health and makes us more vulnerable to diseases, including COVID-19. It took only half a year for scientists

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to confirm this common sense idea with what they called compelling evidence of significant increases in COVID-19 infections, hospital admissions and deaths, in areas with high air pollution.

People living in the most air-polluted parts of the world are like wounded animals exposed to an army of new predators. In Belgium, a small country with only 11 million inhabitants, one person on average dies from air pollution every single hour. Our lungs were already damaged and therefore vulnerable, even before the coronavirus took aim at them.

But once again, the 'we' part of this story comes with nuances. Both in the US and the UK, it turned out that people with darker skin were more exposed to air pollution than white people. That may be one of several factors explaining why, for example, in the US far more black people die from COVID-19 than white people. We are all in the same boat, but clearly not all of us get to travel in the same class.

In a strange plot twist the swift and bold reactions from some governments could have caused less people to die overall, but not for the obvious coronavirus-related reasons we might be thinking of. Even though reliable data from China is hard to come by, one expert has affirmed that tens of thousands of premature deaths from air pollution may have been avoided by the cleaner air in China because of the lockdown. It is maybe worth mentioning here that deaths associated with long-term exposure to outdoor fine particulate matter is estimated to be around 8 million per year. Toxic air kills in many different ways, the pandemic is but one of them.

This is not an argument in favor of a permanent lockdown but it is true that during the strict lockdowns, many people suddenly experienced a breath of fresh air. And many do not want to go back to the pre-lockdown levels of air-pollution. Media reports from India talk about a mad scramble among villagers to take pictures of the majestic view of the Himalayas, that snow-capped mountain range

which they knew was out there but which they had never before seen, in all their lives. In Nepal's capital Kathmandu, people were amazed that they could even see Mount Everest, 200 km away. In Brussels, the government decided to turn additional parts of the city into pedestrian zones, killing two birds with one stone: pedestrians can keep greater distance from each other by walking on the roads, and air pollution will not go back up to pre-lockdown levels. Thus, anyone who breathes in Brussels is safer and more resistant to the next viral attack on their health.

Many people are ranking healthy air as a higher priority than ever before, a compelling argument in favour of reorganising the whole economy into one that pollutes a whole lot less, not just a little bit less. Yet, we need much better measures than what a stringent lockdown could possibly achieve. The pandemic must inspire us to clean up the air we breathe.



Chemicals & coronavirus: best friends forever?

One significant way in which we differ from our grandparents is that we all harbour several hundred unwanted guests inside us. Industrial chemicals are uninvited squatters, often acting like real hooligans in our bodies and sometimes even killing us. What is worse, many of these rowdies will outlive us to then attack our kids too. And their kids too.

It took Mark Ruffalo starring in the Hollywood movie Dark Waters to more broadly draw attention to the 'forever chemicals' or the mouthful Perfluoroalkyl and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances, aka PFAS. With its partners, the EEB brought the actor from The Hulk to the European Parliament to support our efforts to ban PFAS and landed a partial victory.

Still, these forever chemicals can be found everywhere, from textiles to cooking utensils to the water we drink. We are talking about a group of chemicals that, in high concentrations, can cause a host

of health problems. Belgians learned this the hard way in 2021 when a leak about secret industry settlements confirmed that these chemicals are indeed harmful and can be found everywhere. After a company admitted they used the chemical in 300 million food containers, a study showed that they are likely leaching into our food. PFAS reportedly damages our immune systems and causes cancer. At stake is also our ability to procreate: shorter penises and an earlier onset of the menopause are among the negative side effects that come with PFAS.

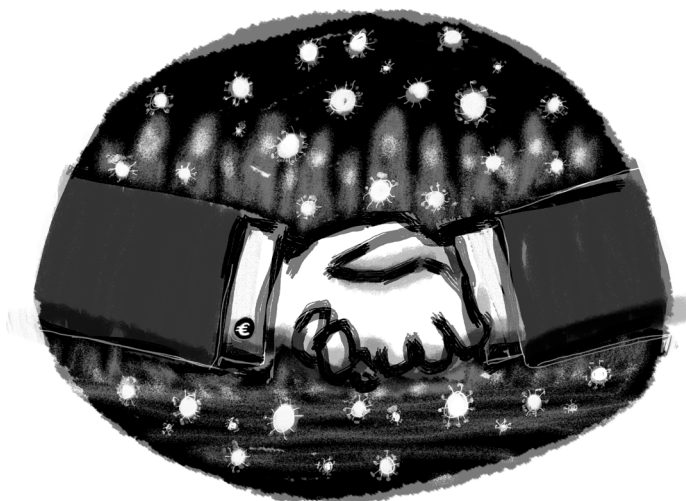
And these forever chemicals we all carry inside of us are not done with us: PFAS weaken our capacity to respond to vaccines and they also increase pathogen virulence. Perhaps the most alarming thing about PFAS is that their 'staying power' truly does their name of 'forever chemicals' justice: they accumulate and persist in our environment, some for over 1,000 years. PFAS pollution is nearly impossible to clean up once it enters the environment - and that includes our drinking water.

But it is not just the forever chemicals that can be linked to COVID-19. Thousands of scientific studies were carried out in 2020 and the picture that emerges is clear: When contracted, the severity of COVID-19 is dependent upon pre-existing health conditions. The most common pre-existing conditions associated with severe disease include chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, obesity, coronary artery disease, and diabetes - all of these are diseases that can be linked to the exposure to hazardous chemical substances, in particular those that interfere with the endocrine system.

If these unpleasant facts worry you, you are likely concerned about human health and would like to see increased humanity's resilience to diseases. For this we will need protective policies that ensure a toxic-free environment. When chemical companies, motivated by the need to mitigate global supply chain risks, try to reverse the drive to outsource production facilities to countries that offer cheap labour

and minimal regulatory constraints, would this not be the time to ask some tough questions? Is this maybe a good time in the history of humankind to exnovate innovations that have proven to be flawed? Could this be a good time to clean up soils and water, and make the polluters pay the bill? Has the right time finally come to make them pay for all costs related to pollution monitoring and the enforcement of chemicals laws?

It has been said many times the pandemic is both a crisis and an opportunity for positive change. We could not agree more - the time is now to turn words into action and address the threat of forever chemicals.



The nefarious 'neoliberal normal'

In the Netherlands, 170 scientists blame the scale of this pandemic on the 'neoliberal model', arguing that this model requires an ever-increasing circulation of goods and people, regardless of the myriad of ecological problems and the increasing inequality it causes. Their article went viral and debunked the myth that neoliberalism is the road to freedom.

But what exactly is neoliberalism?

Neoliberalism is a flawed ideology, a collection of ideas about how to manage the economy. It is a strategy to expand the economy faster, and it boils down to dismantling any obstacles to the expansion of the market economy. Enter privatisation, minimal government spending, deregulation and 'free trade'. To justify the dismantling of protections built into the welfare state, terms such as 'austerity', 'axing' or 'solving the structural deficit' are used. The result is that

we now live in a world in which €18 trillion can be 'sheltered' from taxation if you have enough money to pay for specialist bankers, but when ordinary people retire and have a pension or become ill, they are usually quoted as the cause of the budget deficit.

Where neoliberalism reigns, high-quality health care is mostly reserved for the rich. This is especially obvious in the US, but also in European countries where the neoliberal 'shock-doctors' imposed their demands when a suffering country needed a bail-out, such as in Greece, where health care expenditures declined 15% in the 2012-2018 period. As the European department of the World Health Organisation pointed out: "Government spending on prevention and public health services was cut by around 13% even though this sector was already underfinanced in Greece."

In the UK, the Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity managed to convincingly link the economic dependency on growth with predatory financial practices and a crisis in the adult social care sector. The number of nurses working in hospitals in, for example, the Netherlands declined dramatically, soon after the neoliberal government of Rutte started back in 2010. The idea that healthcare is just another business is causing a lot of preventable misery. Transnational corporations are also taking over elder care, cutting corners where they can and quite literally profiting from the old and dying. This is vulture capitalism at its best.

In Italy, health care was regionalised decades ago and in Lombardy, neoliberal politicians did not waste time in dismantling it: fewer hospital beds, fewer hospital departments dealing with infectious diseases because they are less profitable, fewer doctors being trained to deal with infectious diseases and so forth. When Lombardian doctors started notifying the regional health authorities of possible COVID-19 cases in January, they were dismissed and ignored. High-quality public health care was axed on the altar of the neoliberal god called GDP growth.

In a vast number of countries, the state has been in retreat since Reagan and Thatcher started implementing Milton Friedman's neoliberal ideas. Chandran Nair pointed out in The Sustainable State that the state is the social institution with the best combination of authority, accountability and legitimacy simply to 'get things done'. Whether the current leader of your state is a villain or an empathic and enlightened person does make a difference, but the state, as an institution itself, remains indispensable, whether we like it or not. The pandemic showcased this: In Spain, the state quickly placed private clinics in public hands. In the UK, the state stepped in to take over the railways again to make sure that trains kept running. When a crisis strikes, we need the state; and we need strong states that ensure equitable and high-quality public services at all times.

It is not fully clear what Prime Minister Boris Johnson meant when he said that "there really is such a thing as a society" after the NHS, the National Health System, saved his life. But he said it in the context of people pulling together, working hand in hand to fight the coronavirus from every part of the society, and to hear that from Johnson in that context was historic as Johnson pretty much claimed the Thatcher era over, the Conservative leader who brought neoliberalism from the US to Europe. Her most (in)famous quote was that "there is no such thing as society."

For decades now, neoliberals have played their role as modern day pirates. Behind closed doors, they keep looking for new ways to keep state coffers as empty as possible, one tax loophole at a time. Yet when a state coffer is eventually too empty, the solution put forward is to reduce the money going to care for the sick and old. In the EU, this double standard is well illustrated by the attitude of the Netherlands towards Greece. While the Netherlands is a massive tax haven for companies that should normally pay taxes in Greece but dodge that obligation with a Dutch blessing and a wink, the Netherlands nevertheless insisted on a reduction in health expenditures in Greece when the country went bankrupt.

We have barely touched on what neoliberal ideology entails and only briefly looked at how it shapes our economies in such a way that makes it easier for viruses like the latest corona strand to wreak havoc. But neoliberalism is not just about the old and sick or about tax havens, it shapes society in a far more fundamental way. According to Paul Verhaeghe, a widely respected author and psychologist, neoliberalism attracts people with the following characteristics: talkative, narcissistic, being an accomplished but remorseless liar, flexible, impulsive and, above all, a risk taker. These are also the six ways to recognize a psychopath. Verhaeghe established a clear connection between the advance of neoliberalism and the emergence of psychopath leaders. While around 1% of the population are psychopaths, the figure is said to rise to 20% at CEO level. Let us pause and let that sink in. Psychopaths couldn't care less about things like the loss of wildlife habitat, 500,000 preventable deaths, the overconcentration of wealth or how all of this will damage the vast majority of a population. They just cannot be moved to give a hoot about the environment, because they simply lack the ability to feel empathy. For the leaders of dirty industries who can fund political campaigns as much as they want in countries like the US, psychopaths make perfect leaders. For the rest of us, they are a disaster.

Now think of the scientists who study the earth and its systems. Some of them said that the massive economic recovery packages being rolled out by governments must be used to strengthen and enforce environmental protection: "It may be politically expedient to relax environmental standards and to prop up industries such as intensive agriculture, airlines, and fossil-fuel-dependent energy sectors, but doing so without requiring urgent and fundamental change essentially subsidises the emergence of future pandemics." As the airline bail-out tracker illustrates, that is unfortunately exactly what is happening right now.

The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) is an independent intergovernmental body established by States to strengthen the science-policy interface for biodiversity and ecosystem services for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, long-term human wellbeing and sustainable development. In short, the IPBES is for biodiversity what the IPCC is for climate: the sum of the best available science. Some of the top scientists working for IPBES wrote the following: “There is a single species that is responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic – us. As with the climate and biodiversity crises, recent pandemics are a direct consequence of human activity – particularly our global financial and economic systems, based on a limited paradigm that prizes economic growth at any cost.”

This is exactly why the EEB has been stepping up in recent years to change the economic growth narrative into a narrative that allows all of us to thrive not only now, but also in the future. We now work on positive post-growth policy-making and on creating a wellbeing economy in which economic growth is no longer a necessary evil in order for a small, parasitic minority to thrive. Over the last ten years, the momentum for this radical rethinking has grown: international degrowth conferences jumped from 150 to 3,000 participants; environmental NGOs have come out of their comfort zones; more and more governments are taking the leap, putting wellbeing above GDP. The 2020 crisis is making many people rethink their priorities in such a fundamental way that the momentum for change seems to have grown faster than in the ten years before. And that is a good thing because even before COVID-19 hit, the old paradigms were already terminally ill. To the astonishment of the establishment, a majority of millennials in the US now reject capitalism. In the UK, over 80% of people who answered a poll now want health and wellbeing to take priority before economic growth. The vast majority wants these changes to outlive the pandemic. The pandemic has dealt us an unexpected 'get out of jail card'. We need to firmly grab this opportunity to shape the future we want. Right here, right now.



A particularly *malevolent* virus

A specific subsection of humans stand out for causing great harm during the pandemic. For the sake of pitching a soundbite, one could call them the machos behind the mass graves, but that might offend the less malign machos out there. The more culturally neutral and correct term would probably be 'the hypermasculine males'. This is a thorny issue that can be nuanced up to the point of nihilism, but it is important to talk about it, both in the context of the pandemic, and, more widely, with regards to the relationship we have with nature and other human beings.

So who are such 'hypermasculine males'? A list will always be an imperfect selection, it will always have flaws, but the selection is not entirely random either. We have seen Bolsonaro saying that he is so fit that he will not contract the coronavirus. We all know the insane claims made by Trump, up to the point of pitching 'simple solutions' by recommending injecting bleach.

These guys are truly a virus' best friend and appear to have more in common than just acting like 'tough boys', in the process casually mishandling the pandemic. Is it not interesting that they and a longer list of 'hypermasculine leaders' are also right-wing populist politicians with little regard for democratic processes? When you extrapolate from some of the things they have said in the past, it seems that most of them suffer from delusions of grandeur. Simon Tisdall made a list of qualities that many of the 'hypermasculine leaders' seem to have in common: falsely claiming everything is under control, dodging responsibility, hiding from public view, exploiting the crisis for political gain, relying on misogyny and violence to boost their egos, mounting artificial distractions and blaming the media if things go south.

On the opposite side of the spectrum we also have examples of good governance in this crisis and the leading women of Iceland (Katrín Jakobsdóttir), Taiwan (Tsai Ing-wen), Finland (Sanna Marin) and New Zealand (Jacinda Ardern) showed us what a job well done looks like. Again, this is an imperfect selection and yes, managing an island in times of coronavirus will also offer obvious advantages. But it is hard to escape the idea that the pandemic is exposing more than just coincidences.

Another recently coined term is 'toxic masculinity'. As Arwa Mahdawi explained, "it should be obvious, but "toxic masculinity" does not mean that men are toxic or that masculinity is de facto toxic. Rather, it means that extreme forms of traits traditionally associated with masculinity, like aggression and stoicism, are toxic." These traits in the male leaders mentioned have arguably caused the pandemic to spiral out of control and contributed to unnecessarily blowing up the global death toll. Sadly, women were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic given that they are overrepresented in low-paid and service jobs. Women have also been at the forefront of the fight against the virus, as they are overrepresented in most of the so-called essential work and make up the majority of frontline workers.

Around 76% of health and social care workers and 86% of personal care workers are women. As these jobs are primarily close-contact jobs with limited possibilities for remote working, many experienced an increase in workload, health risks and difficulties in managing work-life balance.

The gender pattern in the (mis)handling of the pandemic hasn't gone unnoticed, but it has also not received the level of attention it deserves. The same can be said for the gender pattern in the mishandling of our environment where studies show that feminist values are directly linked with more environmentally friendly consumption patterns.

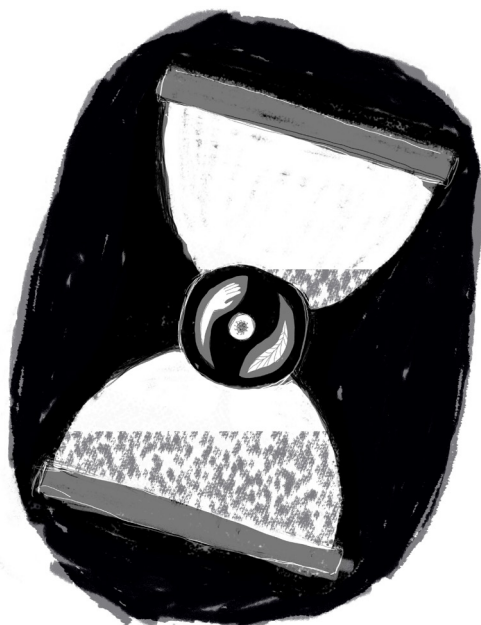
This is not just a problem of some bad leaders, of some rotten apples. A scientific survey showed that men are less likely to believe that they will be significantly impacted by COVID-19 and are also less likely to wear a mask. Meanwhile, the pattern of women on average being more responsible caretakers and better leaders repeats itself elsewhere, too. The first three countries that placed wellbeing above economic growth are all run by women: Iceland, Scotland and New Zealand. When Prime Minister Sanna Marin from Finland joined them it could have been an opportunity to brand this progressive-thinking group 'the wellbeing squad', but that would not have done justice to the male leader of Wales, Mark Drakeford, who also joined in. This again illustrates that it is not a black and white story, but rather that there simply are gender patterns that are too evident to be brushed aside as a mere coincidence.

We also have to look at the root causes of toxic masculinity. Our current economic system is based on past and perpetuated injustices, colonialism, a fixation and structural dependency on GDP growth, as well as on a system largely based on patriarchal values and gender injustices. Patriarchy is a system of oppression built around male privilege and toxic masculinity that perpetuates sexist and hierarchical power relationships. It legitimises discrimination against and the exclusion of women (and gender non-conforming people)

Part 1 - A particularly *malevolent* virus

through harmful social norms, policies and institutions. For example, our current system devalues the work of women such as unpaid domestic care work.

What is also often forgotten in the discussion is that patriarchy is bad for men too (sidenote: women versus men is not as binary as an old school light switch. Intersectionality is a reality.). Patriarchy expects men to fit in preconceived boxes, such as being strong, showing no emotion and personifying the toxic masculinity myth. The malevolent virus has laid bare many systemic errors in our society and the pandemic has reminded us that the price of patriarchy is high, both for women and men.



PART 2

Ten turning point proposals

SARS-CoV-19 thrives on the war on wildlife, on over-extraction and overconsumption, on frequent flyer schemes, toxic air, forever chemicals, neoliberalism and hypermasculinity. Fixing these issues will also come a long way to addressing our pressing environmental challenges.

The climate math is both simple and shocking: emissions need to fall by 7 to 8% from now until 2050, every single year. In 2020 this happened, which means it is still possible. But we need to treat this issue with the same urgency and seriousness as we treated corona, right now. We cannot expect that individual actions alone will be enough. Now that governments are activated and economic growth no longer dominates the agenda, it is a great time to start anew.

Today is a time for healing; healing of the wounds that the pandemic has inflicted on us, but also healing of the broken connection between us and the rest of the natural world. As doctors would agree, prevention is always better than the cure. This goes for human bodies, but it also goes for humanity as a whole. Now is the time to work on our collective immunity.

Let us start with a proposal of five guiding principles.

Principle 1: A solution for one major global crisis can also help solve other issues.

Can we afford to only use the strictly necessary (political) capital for silo-solutions and crisis management that seek to return us to the 'old normal'? Food production, mining, global supply chains, transport ... Does this not present us with a unique opportunity to both address the pandemic and the ongoing onslaught on the environment? And is this not all the more important if we consider how these two challenges actually go hand-in-hand? We believe it is.

Principle 2: There can be no 'back to normal', 'normal' was a historical aberration.

Solutions need to be holistic and be conducive to the shaping of a better future where people and nature thrive together, rather than trying to fix a broken system where people and the planet are pushed to burn-out. 'Normal' was not working, now we need to #BuildBackBetter.

Principle 3: Systemic change lies outside of our comfort zones. Resistance to change is natural - expect it, prepare for it.

We face very powerful vested interests with the necessary resources to financially and emotionally wear down their opponents. A series of small feel-good victories is nice, but does it change the path of self-destruction that we are on? Sugarcoating the challenges we face only slows down progress. We have to keep aiming high, remember why the frictions that exist are worth fighting for.

Principle 4: If a solution is not fair to the most vulnerable, it is not a solution.

When the fossil fuel fortress or the mega mining madhouse goes down, do we have to also look at solutions to secure a future for every worker from those industries? Of course. In France, for example, a proposal for a carbon tax that would have disproportionately hit low and middle-income families hardest gave birth to [the Yellow Vests resistance movement](#). The revolution will be fair, or it will not happen.

Principle 5: There is no silver bullet and no global conspiracy

Techno-optimism and conspiracy theories come in a simplistic package and pitch narratives of 'smart' solutions and scapegoats. They offer a false lifeline in complex and uncertain times when people try to come to terms with a new reality. But neither fairy tales nor darkness do justice to the hard and inconvenient truths we must face head on. We cannot allow ourselves to get distracted.



Still, there are reasons for hope. People have taken up new habits. They breathed clean city air and they liked it. Nearby nature was (re)discovered. We have a better understanding of and appreciation for those jobs that are truly essential. Worldviews have been tweaked, values and priorities have been reviewed. Some journalists questioned why we would go back to our old ways and ventured to conceive of an alternative reality where people could continue working less, buying less and making less - all while shifting away from a logic that prioritises raising the GDP at any cost.

Milton Friedman, the godfather of neoliberalism, is quoted as saying: "Only a crisis - actual or perceived - produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable."

Friedman was right on that point, but his economic ideas ran - or rather ruined - the world over the past decades. His time is up. This is our time and the ten turning point proposals that follow offer a glimpse of the bold steps that we could and should take right now.



FOOD SUPPLY

From vulnerability to new roots

Buying even basic things like bread or fruit increasingly involves stretched-out supply chains that depend on labour, shipping, packaging and energy that is simply too cheap. Too cheap, because the hidden cost of our addiction to bargains means that we end up paying in full, in pandemics, climate chaos, layoffs and planetary fragility. But there are food producers who have identified these system errors and who are rebuilding using localised solutions for a more stable, clean, fair and secure food supply that will be desperately needed when humanity has to face the next, inevitable planetary challenges, in whatever form they come.

On 15 September 2008, bankers from London called their wives in the middle of their working day with one message: “Rush to the supermarket to hoard food”. The Lehman Brothers bank had just gone belly up. They thought that the financial system would

collapse, ships and trucks would not be leaving port anymore, that ATMs would stop working and all hell would break loose. That tells you something about the level of stability and security our economic and financial system has, according to insiders who are neck-deep in it.

Like the financial crisis of 2008, the pandemic also tested the global food supply chain. Countries announced they would halt or limit grain and rice export until further notice. A little known fact, almost 40% of all land that is used to satisfy the consumption of agricultural goods and services in Europe, is actually situated outside of Europe. And although a lot is also exported, Belgium's pork exports to South Korea, for example, cannot make up for the lack of beans, if Belgium were to stop importing them from Kenya. Sadly, import and export do not work like communicating vessels that are designed to always find a balance.

In Belgium, even the most basic food, bread, is more and more an import-export product. Shockingly, between 2017 and 2018, the value of bakery import and export rose by an astonishing 82.9% and 162.8% respectively. Belgian's daily bread now depends on open borders.

But bread is just an example. Around 80% of Belgium's fruit and vegetables come from abroad. Additionally, Western Europe depends on cheap labour from Eastern Europe and immigrants to harvest fruit and vegetables. In the hellish, locked down spring of 2020, with borders closed, producers suddenly had to lobby for exceptions to be made for migrant workers. It is no coincidence that to this day, the British government puts seasonal agricultural workers alongside nuclear emergency responders, aerospace engineers, medical staff, diplomats and others, in its list of jobs that qualify for COVID-19-related travel exemptions.

Our system so heavily relies on the exploitation of cheap labour that

a complete locking down of our borders would have had serious consequences, highlighting our inability to ensure our own food security.

Over the past decades our food supply chain has become increasingly longer, both in terms of the distances covered through transportation, as well as the number of people involved in the process.

The argument is that it is more efficient to produce / source in place A with wage B and then import it as cheaply as possible; or, that it is cheaper to send the product to another country for processing and then reimport it.

But the drive for (cost) efficiency has crossed the limits of sufficiency and scrapped any social and ecological boundaries a long time ago: More food miles mean more transport, which means more emissions, more deforestation and other environmental exploitation. Crossing more borders also means that we depend more on borders remaining open, which in turn means being more vulnerable to global shock events. In a nutshell, the *overglobalisation* of our food supply has made us more vulnerable. In Europe, the memories of food shortages seem distant and we take our food, good quality food, for granted. More often than not, people have no concept of what food deserts are and do not spare a thought to trying to understand where their food, so readily available, has come from and at what cost. We think (when we think) that we have got it all under control. But do we really? What is the price we are paying? And perhaps more importantly: can we reconnect with a more local food production?

Back in 1991, eight theatermakers, hippies and adventurers took this idea to an extreme, presenting a radical alternative to our dependence on world trade: They locked themselves up, in their own world. That is not a metaphor. Their conservatory was hermetically sealed off from the outside world, with only sunlight coming in. The experiment lasted two years, until the oxygen balance in their greenhouses got

so bad that they would have suffocated, had they persisted. In those two years, they took autarky and living independently to a world record and undoubtedly learnt a lot about the biochemical cycles that make life on earth possible. Many were surprised to see how far they were able to go. Note: Do not try this at home.

What those eight people effectively did was testing the boundaries of the full spectrum of food production and sufficiency, from local to global. Somehow, in the past decades in particular, our society moved to the other extreme end of that spectrum and the net result of that move could in the end suffocate not 8 but 8 billion people. The group decided to end their experiment after two years. We need to end the over-globalisation experiment now and start anew. Here are some suggestions on how.

Moving from hyperglobal to a more local food supply can be achieved in ways that are not mutually exclusive. So what can we do? Should we all be growing our own veggies in our gardens and on our balconies? Growing your own food is a great way to reconnect with the soil, enjoy the fruits of your labour and gain an appreciation for what it takes to put food on the table. For many of us, including me, growing our own food will likely not happen due to a lack of knowledge, skills, will or time. What's more, even if some plots can yield good amounts of produce, food grown in our backyard will likely remain a minor part of the food we, as a society, consume. Nice, but not enough.

The picture however changes if our efforts are collective and we join forces with a group of a few hundred people. Community supported agriculture (CSA) is a partnership between farmers and consumers in which the responsibilities, risks and rewards of farming are shared. This model, which can be farmer-led or community-led, allows communities to cut out middlemen and take control of their food supply, providing their members with a variety of local, often organically produced food from vegetables and meat, to milk, bread and honey.

In Flanders, Belgium, it took a decade to go from only one to 50 CSA farms which, per farm, produce a range of vegetables, fruit and herbs for hundreds of people and where any member can go at any time to harvest what they need.

The CSA farm 'The Farmers' Company', led by three farmers who supply some 500 consumers with fresh produce, created such an exemplary CSA farm that it attracted strong media attention. One of these farmers accompanied me to the European Parliament to debunk the myth that we need even more trade with countries such as faraway Amazon-burning Brazil in a conference on global trade deals. The appeal of this locally adapted community-based agricultural model is evident as it is spreading fast across the world. This model has the potential to provide a food supply solution for any city with fertile ground in or near to it.

CSA farms and other farms and food models established a direct connection from farm to fork by selling directly to the consumer. They have managed to find a way around the massive supermarkets that stand literally in between urban customers and the forgotten - out of sight, out of mind - rural backdrop of the city they live in. These supermarkets often sell items produced at the other end of the world, in social and environmental conditions that would be illegal in the EU, to maximise profits. In the worst case, these profits are siphoned off to tax havens, leaving behind impoverished city centres with bankrupt small commerce. Outside the city, cutthroat competition forces farmers to sell their produce at dumping prices.

But regardless of how much we criticise this system, most of us will still use such supermarkets, at least to some extent. They are so convenient - just like the short-haul flight to Barcelona is more convenient than the long train-ride. In both cases, a bigger, systemic change is more easily possible if it comes from the top down, rather than if it is only left up to 'consumer choice'.

Systemic errors need to be addressed. We need more bottom-up, citizen-owned alternatives to the big supermarkets, like the cooperative Content which sources locally and sells without packaging. We also need laws that make it harder for hypermarkets to come and draw resources out of a region without privileging short supply chains, i.e. buying locally. They are the power-players in a food system based on the over-extraction of the land, over-exploitation of small-scale farmers and workers, and an international trade regime that has managed to evade taxation while polluting air and water.

Pockets of supermarket activists pop up everywhere. In the Netherlands and Belgium, there is resistance coming from the bottom up, as with initiatives such as '40 days without supermarkets'. One day, I co-organised a stunt and found myself and a few others caged underneath an oversized supermarket trolley in the middle of the Groenplaats in Antwerp, a tourist hotspot. We were exposing the sale of orange juice made by slave labour in several of the big supermarkets.

If we want to consume products from other countries with our conscience at peace, we need systems of assurance. Not only do we need locally embedded and cooperative supermarkets, we need to know that when they sell products from far away, fair trade is the norm. After all, importing fair trade coffee, bananas, cocoa and the like still makes a lot of sense, but do we really need New Zealand kiwis sold in France when they grow equally well in France? And why is 'unfair trade' even allowed?

The EEB has been advocating for agro-ecological food systems with short supply chains to create better jobs in our countryside and cities, with more value being kept locally. Agro-ecology reconnects us to those who produce our food and thus restores the broken social link between urban and rural populations. So, aside from changing how our food reaches us, it is crucial to also produce it differently. The current mainstream food industry not only harms

everything from soil to water to air, it also harms us. The poor quality that this food system delivers to the majority leads to things like an obesity pandemic. And again, COVID-19 should be the wake-up call. Research showed that people who are overweight have a much higher chance of becoming severely ill when they contract COVID-19. The researchers also write that the obesity epidemic is directly linked to the increase of food environments in which it is hard to not ingest too many calories. And while we all bear individual responsibility for our decisions, can we speak of 'free choice' when the system is rigged to influence purchasing choices, overtly and subliminally? The pandemic is a reminder why we need to leap, not just move, towards a productive and (bio)diverse agro-ecological agriculture. Sustainable produce needs to reach vastly more people in a fair way. Research shows that thanks to the enormous diversity of soils in Europe, fully shifting to agro-ecological agriculture could feed the entire European population. An alternative food system is possible. We need to make that possibility our choice and fight the vested interests of those who put profit before people.



MEAT

From *cowrona* to closing circles

Rearing cows on an industrial scale for meat production has played such a significant role in the pandemic that one might as well call this the *cowrona* pandemic. That comes on top of their already long list of bovine destructive achievements: Air, water and soil pollution, as well as deforestation. Alright, alright, let us not get caught up in cow-shaming. To be fair, these problems extend beyond beef cattle alone and encompass all industrial-scale animal husbandry activities.

Changing consumer patterns to reduce meat consumption is necessary but alone will not fix the problem. Worldwide, we use about 77% of all agricultural land for animal production. In a small country like Belgium, with only 11 million people, the livestock industry kills 319 million animals a year. Degrowth of the sector seems like a necessity and governments could phase out the

industrial livestock sector in a fair way to the workers while helping farmers with just a dozen or so of 'circular cows' to thrive.

So, what is the hidden price tag of our meat consumption? Shockingly, half of all food grown in the world today does not go towards feeding humans. It goes to feeding animals and engines (biofuels). Health data show that people who live close to industrial livestock farms are more likely to get lung infections. The amount of nitrate leaking into nature is so significant that in the Netherlands the government is actually buying out a part of the sector in order to shut it down. Even the Chinese government has changed its strategy: it now promotes pork powerhouses abroad, for instance in Argentina, as a way of safeguarding most benefits for China but 'exporting' the environmental damage and risks of pandemics.

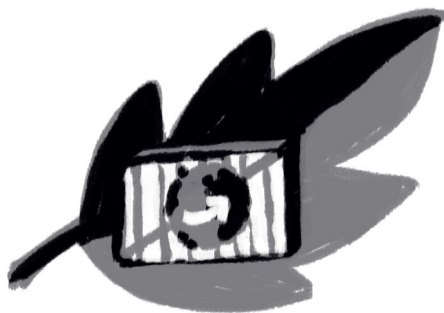
Industrial livestock increases the likelihood of pandemics like this one and workers in industrial meat production have been hit disproportionally hard by the virus. Concerns about jobs should not overrule concerns about lives. The socially sustainable thing to do is not to keep these dangerous jobs and really bad jobs, but to have government support to ensure that all workers can transition to more meaningful and healthy work in the food production model where we urgently need more workforce, such as CSA farms. We need to bail out the working people, not the meat industry.

Agro-ecological farms often have a number of cows and pigs roaming free, living a longer and better life, and feeding on local sources. If the right balance is maintained, livestock can contribute positively, helping to close the farm's nutrient circle. Their limited and healthy manure helps food grow better, eliminating the need for chemical fertilisers.

At the CSA farm where this author takes part in, the dozen cows and pigs result in the occasional 10kg delivery of meat. A few dozen of the 500 community members then buy a package of portions for

the freezer, with all parts of the animal in it, not just the specific parts that the consumer prefers. This system avoids food waste. This is where the consumer is no longer 'king'. In CSAs, it is a more holistic and closed cycle thinking that guides what is on offer. Here, the choices are edited by the system to ensure that nothing goes to waste, and it starts from a sufficiency angle: enough, but not more than needed. This system also confronts you with what you eat, as the animals kept on the farm, visible to all visitors, are also the animals you could end up eating. If you are not OK with that, then you should not be eating meat at all.

What if that would be the only meat that all the non-vegetarian people can eat? Would that not be vastly fairer, more ecological and circular than the meat industry system we have today?



TRADE

A transformation from free to fair

Exporting the most polluting, life-threatening and undignified parts of production while keeping the benefits of the consumption and then sending our waste back has been the trade strategy for decennia, at least for the West. The coronavirus, climate chaos and China woke us up from our unsustainable position of privilege. The focus can, has to and is already shifting from 'free' to 'fair' - but more needs to be done.

The food sector is just one example of the massive import-export dependence we have created in the last half century. Most of the mining and production that we still need to meet our sky-high consumption is exported, a conscious and deliberate decision (as detailed in the [leaked World Bank memo](#) mentioned earlier). An example is the mining of uranium for French and Belgian nuclear power plants. It used to be extracted from 200 uranium mines in France, but [now comes from countries such as Niger](#). The costs

(deaths, pollution) are shifted to another country, the benefits ('clean' nuclear energy) are pocketed by us.

The Achilles heel of this neoliberal strategy is that it depends on cheap, frictionless world trade. The exponential growth of trade encourages what has become increasingly violent mining and land-grabbing. But the so-called 'under-polluted' countries of the past are refusing to play along. When China no longer accepted plastic and other waste from Europe, it piled up in our ports. Other countries soon followed China's lead. Imports are also affected by the corona crisis. When trade flows are continuously disrupted for a long time and sh*t really hits the fan, there is no amount of toilet paper hoarding that can help us.

Let us be clear: this is not an argument against all cross-border trade, rather, it is an argument in favour of reducing our global trade dependency, while making the volume of global trade more proportional to the travel distance of the transaction and the externalised costs of it. Geography and the stretchability of the ecosystems have been neglected for too long. Ocean shipping (90% of world trade) wreaks havoc. It tallies up 64,000 deaths a year worldwide from air pollution, contributing to climate change, and offers one of the world's most dangerous jobs, dismantling shipwrecks on Asian beaches. These costs are small compared to the hidden, indirect costs of the total volume of all world trade today, a relentless accelerator of climate change.

To some extent, the Ursula von der Leyen Commission is warming up to the idea of changing the course of the trade tanker, away from an 'always more' logic. For example, they are looking into a carbon tax for certain products imported to the EU, although not (yet?) for agricultural products. The problem is that while positive steps are taken in the right direction, simultaneously others are taken that undermine any 'green efforts' made: New dirty trade deals with the likes of Bolsonaro do not bode well. Changing the course of the EU's

trade tanker will take time, but as the resistance within EU countries keeps growing, it might just be that the movement for change has started to bare fruit already. Just recently, the Dutch parliament voted against the EU's proposed trade deal with four countries from the Amazonian rainforest. Systemic change is not about tinkering with the details of deals that seek to increase our overall trade volume, it must be about shifting the focus from trade growth to quality of trade, and this includes the quality of the actual products, as well as the quality of the relationships we have with trade partners, workers and the environment. And that is something that this European Commission has to put more emphasis on.

'Insourcing' has become somewhat of a buzzword, especially for crucial and strategic sourcing, as COVID-19 made us acutely aware of the importance of self-reliance, independence and resilience. These are not green, leftist or altruistic concepts; in a crisis, they are intimately linked to people's ability to ensure their survival and wellbeing .

The corona crisis caused a 20% drop in global trade. Such a sudden, uncontrolled crash is of course a problem, but it is also an opportunity. Globalisation had pushed humanity's demand for ecological resources and services beyond what the planet can regenerate long before Wuhan went into lockdown. Scientists and concerned citizens who raised red flags were brushed off. However, ecological economists are clear: we are trading ourselves to death. Just like our bodies have a metabolism, so does the world economy. The metabolism of our world economy is too fast to be able to simply shift to a more sustainable, circular reality, without addressing the need for change holistically. Earth Overshoot Day marks the date when humanity's demand for ecological resources and services in a given year exceeds what Earth can regenerate in that year.

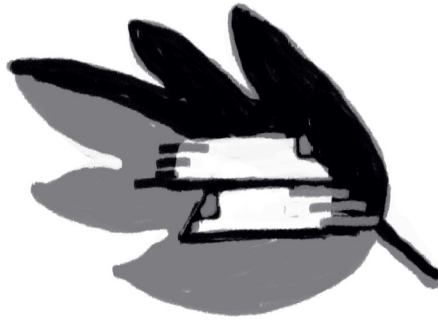
In Europe, the political struggle is often between (sometimes green-minded) globalists and (sometimes anti-European) nationalists. The

corona crisis has exposed this divide as a false dichotomy. Green-minded European-thinking de-globalists who make their case across all political parties is the positive legacy corona leaves behind. This thinking is still poorly represented politically, but a growing group of earth scientists and engaged citizens identify with this more conscious thinking.

A lower volume of higher-value trade could focus on food products that cannot be produced locally and are important for our wellbeing. Consumer habits should evolve to allow for a reduction in the production of meat, dairy products and eggs. On the export side, we need to stop pushing cheap animal-based products to least-developed countries where local farmers then have to face this unfair competition.

The economy is not a light switch that can only flip from casino capitalism to Soviet communism. Nor is it an open market or a closed market. There are at least 50 shades of control and flows of goods. There are crucial distinctions that need to be explained and unpacked, such as the difference between a degrowth / de-globalist vision and a nationalist vision. The first group sees friendships and collaborations between countries based on values instead of trade. Nationalists look at the world as one big competition, in which their team must come first, even if at the detriment of others.

More than ever, we need a new, more resilient and more meaningful economic system that ensures people's wellbeing within ecological boundaries and that rejects the compulsive neurosis to grow both world trade and gross national product. Let us start with what lies within our power: We can, ourselves, produce and share more, instead of buying new products, which directly or indirectly contributed to an increase in mining. Cities can support citizens' initiatives in this direction. Governments can intervene in strategic sectors like the meat industry, forcing the food system to become more locally rooted. We need to evolve from a 'free' market to a fair market that puts quality and fairness before quantity and profit.



MOBILITY

Stay grounded

Back on track

From virus-incubator cruise ships, over the tremendous growth of flight availability, to the ever-increasing distances we travel - all of these are factors that create the perfect preconditions for a virus to spread. At the same time, all of these factors happen to also be pretty bad for our climate. Fair and smart ways to reduce the number of air miles to maybe 10% of the current staggering number exist. It only took 27 years to go from 1 to 4 billion air transport passengers a year, but just 1% of those who fly the most frequently cause 50% of all the flight emissions. None of the fossil fuel alternatives available to power planes are even close to becoming a solution in the foreseeable future. Solutions require strong state intervention and a paradigm shift from travelling by plane to travelling by train (or sailboat) as the norm, even for long distances.

In his article, Christopher de Bellaigue asked whether we are indeed facing 'The end of tourism?' He notes that "Tourism relies on the

same human mobility that spreads disease, and will be subject to the most stringent and lasting restrictions, it is likely to suffer more than almost any other economic activity."

For the aviation industry, 9/11 was like a common cold, compared to the heart-attack that COVID-19 caused. In 2020, borders closed at just one day's notice, country lockdowns started, and a majority of planes were suddenly grounded - with no date for taking off again. All over the world, private companies in the aviation industry were telling governments to compensate them. Many consider themselves too big to fail, or strategically important, so they act with entitlement and usually do not offer a return on investment in the form of ownership. But that's exactly what governments should do now: own the whole sector. In Belgium, a large coalition of researchers and experts from various universities and think-tanks came forward with a similar demand, and this is happening in other countries too.

Just imagine what European governments that own both the airplane and the train companies could do: They could finally reorganise the whole mobility sector to ensure its carbon neutrality, in line with agreed upon environmental targets. They could invest vastly more in already available fast railways and night trains, and divest from air travel. They could then really help the workers in the aviation industry and invest in retraining for most people who now work in aviation. Catering staff, stewards, luggage handlers, technicians, cleaners all have transferable skills that could be used for jobs in rail.

And here is another absurd truth that governments in the cockpit could fix: ghost flights. Planes with zero passengers that fly because airlines have to keep operating no matter what, or lose flight slots. This climate-wrecking practice was paused due to corona-related lockdowns, but has come back already with empty planes criss-crossing our skies again. Still, we are told that the free market is the most efficient way of organising the economy. Reality is very different.

Ultimately, the climate emergency requires a downsizing of the aviation sector. The market-oriented approach would be to increase ticket prices, leaving the skies to the richest people only. But fairer ways of degrowing the sector exist. Why not introduce a carbon credit scheme for all citizens of the EU, to give one example? On the global level it would be even better but piloting this concept at the EU level would already be a major challenge. Each citizen could have a fixed amount of travel-related greenhouse gas emissions that could be used over an x number of years. If your quota is used up, you'll need to wait another x years before being able to fly again. This would make flying fairer, giving everyone an equal chance to occasionally fly somewhere, while ending an era of ignorance regarding the real costs of flying. Another debate could then still be had over whether or not to make these flight quotas tradeable, thus allowing the people who never fly to sell their flight quota (at potentially very hefty sums to the rich who cannot, or will not, adapt to this quota system). But it is of little use to debate controversial details if the core idea of a cap on flying and a fair distribution is still a non-starter in decision-making circles. It requires, to name just one hurdle, a pan-European collaboration of states that are willing to act strongly on a non-neoliberal idea.

At the time of writing, it looked far more likely that governments would bail out airlines with few or no strings attached and with the single aim of making the airlines get back to 'profitability'. If, or rather when, that happens, this crisis will have served to transfer tax payers' money to airlines' shareholders. At the time of writing, more than 123 billion \$ of taxpayer money had already gone to private airline companies.

The global countermovement will not go away anytime soon, on the contrary. It has been brewing over the last few years, and this crisis has actually brought some of their 'easier' proposals into mainstream debates. There is a lot that can be done to resist the expansion of the aviation industry, with movements like Stay Grounded,

whose objective is to #SavePeopleNotPlanes. Stay Grounded is a people-powered, science-based and action-oriented network that campaigns for a reduction of aviation and its negative impacts. We applaud what they stand for: a shift to other modes of transport, a just transition that is not at the expense of workers in the relevant sectors, an economy based on short distances, protection of the land and of the human rights of the millions living in areas the industry wants to expand to, etc. The map of conflicts around airports shows: this struggle is a hot topic all over the world. Fortunately, activists are managing to score victories. The construction of new airports threatening to destroy farmland in Nantes (France) and Aranmula Greenfield Airport (India) were stopped. New Mexico City Airport was halted after construction works destroyed a large swathe of wetlands. But in many cases, opposition to airport developments results in the project being stalled, rather than stopped, as has happened with the third runways at Heathrow Airport and Vienna Airport.

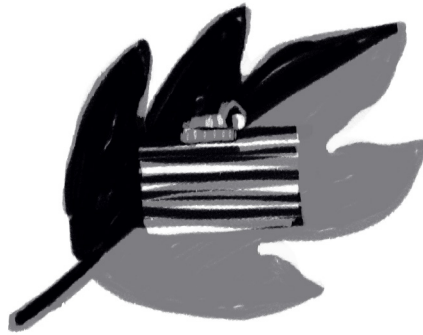
From dangerous demonstrations at airports, over public campaigns, to academic letters: changing the aviation sector is a struggle fought on many fronts. Now is the time for governments to take charge and do what is needed in order to be consistent and coherent.

It is crystal clear that in order for us to move towards governments bold enough to take matters in its own hands and use that intervention to radically transform the aviation and rail sectors - requires a mindset change. We need leaders who can think outside the box and if the current leaders cannot do that, then we need new leaders. We are not getting to where we have to be because we still fight the core beliefs that privatisation, deregulation and smaller governments are, in general, a good thing.

In Belgium, we have seen the effects of this neoliberal mantra in the aviation industry. First the national airline was privatised, then the infrastructure of the national airport followed the same course.

The result: profits were channelled to a tax haven, special tax conditions were negotiated to avoid tax payments, workers were either exploited or made redundant, without a plan to ensure their reintegration into the job market. When a crisis like the current one hits, it is employees who are pushed out like a dead-weight burden and without a parachute.

We might be getting back on track somewhat with mass public investment in the rail network. Some promising signs are bubbling up in Europe. 24 European countries agreed to work together on international rail transport and make it “an attractive alternative” over distances where it is currently not competitive. The European Commission named 2021 a ‘European Year of Rail’. But we have not seen them putting their money where their mouths are yet. As with so many other things, the potential and willingness for transformative change in the way we move around on this planet seems to be on the rise among so many citizens; still, the course of the vested interests’ mammoth ship will not be changed easily.



MINING

Keep it in the ground

One of the most polluting, deadly and destructive industries that exists on this planet also happens to be a pandemic hotspot and gateway towards infecting indigenous peoples: mining. Mine-workers live in densely populated camps and despite the number of infections and associated risks, governments do not close the mines - they are 'too important for the economy'.

The mining industry is profiting from the pandemic in many ways. In Brazil this goes as far as the environment minister telling the President that the pandemic is a great time to get rid of environmental protections because the media is distracted. This comes at a time when recent estimates show that mining activities are responsible for 10% of all deforestation in the Amazon rainforest. An analysis by the World Bank suggested that 44% of all operational mines lie in forests and have collectively driven 7% of deforestation around the world. A global civil society coalition is keeping track of the many cases of mining companies jumping on this crisis to label themselves

'essential' and eliminate all opposition and regulations made to protect us in the first place. The coalition writes in the report 'Voices from the Ground that "healthy communities, Indigenous peoples, workers, and social movements – not the profits of predatory mining corporations – are essential."

Metal extraction and production has doubled health and climate change impacts from 2000 to 2015 solely. The extraction of raw materials causes half of our climate problem, is behind the extinction of species and creates major pressure on our water supplies, according to the European Commission. The more we dig, the more we will have to face losses of habitat (which, as we already established, can cause pandemics), an increase of emissions that cause climate chaos, and conflicts with communities. More environmental defenders are killed for opposing mining than opposing any other industry: 50 of the 212 environmental defenders killed worldwide in 2019 were campaigning to stop mining projects. Mining is the start of the linear take-make-use-lose economy, the kind of economy we urgently need to phase out.

The opposite has happened in the recent past. While the global population has more than doubled between 1970 and 2020, the extraction of materials (including fossil fuels for energy) has tripled in the same time period. The global material footprint rose from 73.2 billion metric tons in 2010 to 85.9 billion metric tons in 2017, a 17.4% increase since 2010 and even a 66.5% increase from 2000. The EU in particular is taking a gruelling share of the total pie. The EU uses between 70% and 97% of the global environmentally 'safe operating space' related to resource extraction impacts. Crossing this boundary undermines the stable functioning of the earth's biophysical systems. The world's reliance on natural resources has continued to accelerate in the last two decades. Extraction is expected to increase to a disturbing 167 billion tons by 2060 under a business as usual scenario. That is just madness. The solution is simple: if you are in a hole, stop digging, or you will dig your own grave.

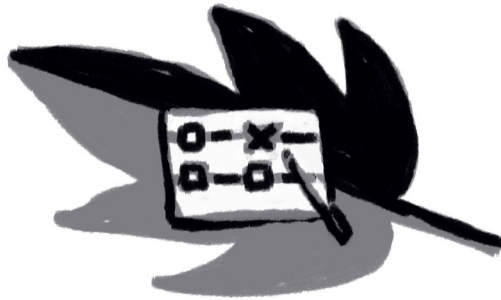
It is perfectly possible to set a headline target to halve the EU's material footprint by 2030, broken down into specific material sub-group targets and plans. A recent study by the German Environment Agency even mentions that we can drastically reduce our environmental footprint and pressures through a combination of measures that target energy efficiency, recycling, material substitution, the use of innovative materials, and sustainable lifestyles. We have already explained all this in great detail, discussing both why and how it can be done. It is even possible to do the same with many of the raw materials we use, as social movements around the world, often led by Indigenous peoples, have been asking governments for decades to do with fossil fuels: keep them in the ground. In fact, some countries and municipalities in Latin America, like El Salvador, Costa Rica, Cuenca in Ecuador have already reconsidered mining activities within their jurisdictions and banned this destructive industry due to environmental concerns.

Another future is possible. Seas at Risk, a member organisation of the EEB, published a backtracking report to talk about the steps we could take to phase out and break free from mining by 2050. It all makes perfect sense but between that common sense and implementation stands an army. An army of mining lobbyists and an army of powerful people believing that we need economic growth and thus also a growth of the unsustainable extraction of raw materials from the earth.

When it comes to mining projects, communities on the ground are continuously at a disadvantage. This is because with mining you do not just need physical engineering, you need social engineering to manufacture consent and to manage dissent. Business interests, pushed on and facilitated by governments with vested interests, create this battle of David versus Goliath. Social engineering can be seen through the sponsoring of local events, building of schools, sports or medical centers as a way to gain the good will of the local population or government leaders. In addition, perhaps

the most important piece of legislation for mining projects is the Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs). However, EIAs severely and systemically underestimate ecological and social harms. In the case of Swedish mining companies in Saami indigenous territory, the impact zone for reindeer herders was calculated 10 km around the site, compared to the company's calculation of 2 km. Mines are well-known to have direct and indirect effects on the environment, with possible impacts extending as far as 50 km (and sometimes more) from the mining site. Properly assessing these impacts is paramount to calculate whether a mining project is worth the ecological and social harms.

Whether it is the switch to agro-ecology, taking public transportation, banning cruise ships or setting absolute reduction targets and related regulations for resource use: deep-pocketed people protecting private interests will be out there, outnumbering and outspending us. This needs to end. And that is why we have to talk about our democracy and how it is sabotaged.



DEMOCRACY

Stop sabotaging, deepen democracy

If we are serious about what needs to happen now, we need to talk about the process by which policies are made. We tend to just call ourselves 'democracies', but that hides huge power imbalances. How flawed or deep democracies are is crucial to understand the work ahead of us.

Lobbyists for the German car industry are abusing the corona crisis to score subsidies for combustion engine cars and kill climate policies. Lobbyists from the airline industry take our leaders hostage with threats of cutting ties. Industrial 'farmers' are pushing to delay any action on making agriculture truly sustainable. The shipping, steel and cement lobbies all want to get to the honey pot of (hidden) subsidies while arguing to postpone environmental action. These are just some of the major lobbies that also call for deregulation, the central plank of an ideological project that puts the interests

of businesses above our democracy and the protections of people and the planet. The latest threat is a proposed, blunt and totally unnecessary 'one in, one out' regime for European regulations.

For the EU there is a great database from Lobbyfacts.eu that shows who has the money, the staff and the access. From that site one can for example deduce that since December 2014, European Commission (EC) top officials were four times more likely to talk to a lobbyist from either Google or Facebook than with the European Environmental Bureau, by far the largest civil society group lobbying the EC. At the time of writing, the biggest spenders were from the chemical lobby. These are the people that those in power meet all the time, day in, day out. And then sometimes they squeeze a meeting with civil society organisations into their agendas. That's when they get to talk to people like us.

Lobbying is not a fair fight. The names of lobbyists feature in the Transparency Register of the EU institutions. All lobby offices, websites and employees with names and surnames are publicly available in that register. The name 'Nick Meynen' is there too, but I work for a non-profit that works in the public interest, in the name of the more than 30 million Europeans who are members of an environmental organisation somewhere in Europe. I try to represent those of you who want systemic change, at the European level. But we need to do this work together, because it is only then that we can vastly outnumber those who resist any systemic change.

The resources available to those who lobby for private interests are vastly larger than those available to those who lobby for the public interest. Adding to this unfair advantage, the deep-pocketed corporate groups often do not shy away from using dirty tactics like spying and infiltrating environmental groups. It sure feels like we can only bring knives to what is essentially a gunfight. As a result, industry lobbyists usually succeed in getting the ears of the powers that be. And still we call all of this a 'democracy'. If it still qualifies as

such, it seems deeply flawed.

Looking at just some of the companies that have benefited from public money made available via the European Central Bank (ECB), as part of the recovery from the COVID-19 crisis, should then not surprise us: Airbus, Paris and Amsterdam airports, Shell, ...

Ruffling the feathers of these multinationals can be dangerous. SLAPP cases (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) are legal cases brought against activists who have the audacity to speak truth to power; they serve the purpose of silencing critics allowing corporations to flex their financial muscle, using expensive lawyers and dragging out lawsuits, thus wearing their opponents down by draining them of their limited financial resources.

While SLAPP cases want to discourage public participation, that is exactly what we need now. The lack of citizen participation in policymaking was the main reason for The Economist to downgrade Belgian's democracy to 'flawed', making Belgium the weakest democracy in Western Europe.

Belgium is a good case to make our point: Policy is mostly a compromise between a handful of party leaders. It is clear for everyone who is willing to watch that power must flow back to citizens, from both shareholders and party leaders. Innovative and good proposals exist, from some of the ideas in David van Reybroeck's Against Elections to the demands of the Extinction Rebellion movement. The experiments that encourage many citizens in German-speaking Belgium to come up with policy decisions would even receive the approval of Aristotle, writes The Economist. It is not that there are no alternatives - that is what those resisting change want us to believe. It is just that these alternatives will not become reality if there is no active pursuit of them. Cooperatives and cities have an important role to play. We need to move from a shareholder to a stakeholder economy if we want to stop the accumulation and

concentration of power and wealth process that has brought us to this point. There is no way around making decision-making more transparent and basing it on reason, science and truth. There needs to be a crackdown on corporate lobbying, which defends vested interests and routinely resorts to intimidation tactics.

In the second half of 2020, as it took office as EU President, it was Germany's turn to lead the meetings of EU countries. The influence of the car, gas, pesticide and big data lobby in Germany is notorious. The influence of these industries is perceptible in the recovery plans for the whole of the EU, with for example hydrogen being promoted as the new 'clean' fuel (although it is made from gas). The EEB published a position paper on hydrogen, 'The reality behind the hype'. But our report needs to compete with 100 pro-hydrogen reports by this multi-billion industry. Reason, science and truth are not always the top qualities found in politics, but engaged citizens, supported by experts, can turn these qualities into actual policies that help us, and the planet, heal. Informed citizens need to have a say in big decisions like nationalisations, how we trade globally, what, as a society, we wish to 'grow' (e.g. wellbeing instead of GDP) or how money is created. The big things. That requires deep changes to how our democracies function, which in turn probably requires some sort of revolution to get there.

It is clear from the multitude of examples we have that there is no equal or proper access to policymakers or to justice. That is a major issue of concern given that representative democracy can only work well when there is - surprise, surprise - equal representation. The fact that the EU is currently undergoing a process called the Conference on the Future of Europe can be seen as a recognition by EU leaders that there is a gap that needs to be closed. The EEB will make use of this opportunity to push for the wish of a vast majority of Europeans to be acted upon: a better future where people and nature thrive together. But it remains to be seen if the process will truly lead to a more systemic change in how decisions are taken in the EU.



MONEY, DEBT and WEALTH

Time to trash taboos

Crisis brings us back to the essence. Things like eating or growing healthy local food, having social contacts, caring for one another has become much more important. It seems that Europeans are already beyond GDP, focussing on new ways of progress and prosperity. And this progress should not be stopped by those who say that there's no money. There is.

In the summer of 2019, Belgium's news magazine Knack published a special issue with 100 ideas for a better world. Idea #1 was: 'print more money'. In the article, economics professor Stephanie Kelton introduced the Modern Monetary Theory. Take infrastructure: All over Europe and the US, there are rail lines, waterways, cycle lanes and hospitals in urgent need of expansions or upgrades. The European Court of Auditors had stated, even before the pandemic struck, that we need a minimum of €300 to 400 billion in additional investments every year to finance the ecological transition in Europe. Over 100 economists wrote a letter saying this money can be found,

it is a matter of choice and prioritisation. There are also millions of unemployed people who are willing and able to work. Then there are computers and money printing machines waiting for a button to be pushed. So, why do we not just push the damn button? A state like the US can print money with little more effort than typing a 0 behind a certain sum, on a computer. In the EU, it is more complex due to the euro but here too, there is no technical issue, only a political one. And pushing the button is not as dumb as it might sound.

As it turns out, the policymakers who say 'that's a nice idea, but we have no money', merely lack imagination and make false assumptions. It is a myth that government budgets work like household budgets and this thinking overlooks exactly how money is created, i.e. 97% of the money created is created by private banks. However, this has not always been the case. These banks decide not only how much money is created, but what purpose it should serve. When someone takes a loan from a bank, the bank will only approve the loan if its conditions are met. But what happens if the private bank's conditions and goals are not aligned with the public interest? Banks are not charities working for the common good. They make money where money can be made and caring about humanity is not part of their modus operandi. If money can be made from people taking out loans to build millions of houses that are actually neither necessary nor meaningful to build, then that is what will happen. Because banks sanctioned it.

The two biggest issues that have, until recently, stopped governments from printing more money, to invest in the economy, are called debt and inflation. After the 2008 economic crash, the default reaction of governments was to impose austerity to make up for debts that were spiralling out of control. The reason was simple: neoliberal economic theory was still the paradigm. In neoliberalism, the idea is to make the government as small as possible, so the go-to solution for rising debt is less government spending. In the EU, we now have fiscal rules that create these dynamics automatically. That is why the

EEB, together with the New Economics Foundation and a large civil society coalition are working harder than ever to change the flawed fiscal rules.

Fortunately, it is already clear that the reaction to the 2020 crisis is very different from the reaction to the 2008 crisis. The economist Paul de Grauwe applauded the actions from the European Central Bank (ECB) in the spring of 2020. In 2008 it took them 3 years to say they would do everything they could, this time it took just a few days. Doing everything they can means printing money and handing it to states so they can spend it how they want. EU countries used to have a similar relation with its national bank: in times of crisis they printed extra - until the euro made this printing at national level impossible. But today, the 'printing in times of crisis' mindset has finally arrived at the EU level. George Soros said that he hopes the ECB will make one trillion new euros, give it to EU member states and not ask for it to be reimbursed (only a minor annual interest fee). He calls it 'perpetual bonds'. The US and UK have done this in the 19th century in times of crisis and today is a make or break crisis for the EU.

The debt problem can be solved in different ways. Professor Thomas Piketty and over 100 leading economists argued that we need to cancel the debt owned by the ECB. Two other ways to deal with debts are inflation or raising exceptional taxes. After World War II, France and Germany had debts of over 200% of their GDP. Less than a decade later, it was down to 30%. Why? Because European leaders decided not to make the same mistake as after World War I, when Germany's war debt was left to ravage the country - something that in turn created the perfect conditions for National Socialism and its leader Adolf Hitler to thrive. No, after World War II, leaders used inflation, a tax on wealth gained during the war and major debt write-offs or 'haircuts'. This allowed all war-torn countries to invest in public and care infrastructure, education and everything our society so desperately needed. Everything we need now too. Piketty wrote that not writing debts off here in the EU is particularly

foolish because most European debts are internal, as they were in 1945. Instead of freeing ourselves to get on with the much needed rebuilding and transition, too many of us walk into the traps laid by populist media like *Elsevier Weekblad* when printing a stereotyping cover piece on how the hard-working Dutch should not be paying a cent to subsidise South Europeans' laziness. They were unphased by facts: the Greeks work on average 41.2 hours a week, the people in the Netherlands work 39 hours. Pitting Europeans against each other is what the Trumps, Putins and Xis of this world would applaud, but not what we Europeans should be doing, quite the contrary. Highly respected economists such as Piketty and de Grauwe are in favour of debt cancellation in the EU, but that would require a European mindset.

In his groundbreaking book 'Debt, the first 5,000 years', the leading anthropologist David Graeber explains how debt has evolved from informal, community-building indebtedness that was written off now and then, to more formal debt, enforced through systematic state violence. In the Jewish and Christian traditions, a jubilee (trumpet) was blown every 50 years to signal that all personal debts were cancelled. In the Middle East, it was normal for new rulers to proclaim a debt amnesty upon taking the throne. This was not done for altruistic reasons, but to maintain social order and political stability – and protect the long-term sustainability of economic life. Debt cancellation has always been a collective survival strategy, not an act of altruism. Today we face a choice between a prolonged spiral of depression, dragging us down for decades, or a major and ideally global debt jubilee that kickstarts the transition to an economic system that can survive this century. Doing this at EU level only is less than ideal but also more doable.

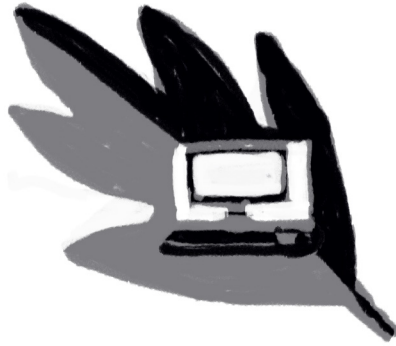
Aside from the state making new money plus a major debt relief jubilee, there is one other major and radical money-related taboo that we need to trash here and now: the distribution of the money in circulation today. In the US, around two-thirds of the population

support a wealth tax. The aim would be to tax the net worth of the taxpayer, the difference between assets such as property and financial securities and liabilities such as loans, as a way of reducing the accumulation of wealth. This would be a much bigger reshuffling than any income tax can ever achieve, as the problem is the vast inequality created in the last decades and that in some cases has become structural. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez put the finger on the wound when she said: “You do not earn a billion, you take a billion”. In other words: there is no good reason for the existence of billionaires, who are also shown to cause a disproportionately vast impact on the environment. States could simply take back what the extremely affluent have already taken.

We need a coordinated, multilateral effort and, given the current geopolitical context, it seems like the most multilateral this can currently get is at the EU level. We need EU leaders agreeing to tax some of those 18,000 billion that a privileged minority with their own wealth managers have stashed in tax paradises. The hoarding of money by people at the top of the money-making pyramid has got so out of control that some plutocrats are now even begging states to tax them. The initiative taken by the G7 for a minimum corporate tax is not even close to the level of redistribution that is needed, but it could be a small, encouraging sign that world leaders are slowly waking up to the notion that there is indeed ‘a bit of an issue’ with the overconcentration of wealth.

There is one thing that state printed money, a major debt relief jubilee and a major wealth tax have in common. These ideas were all first embraced by politicians who identify themselves as ‘economic lefties’ and they are all based on widely respected academic work (we cannot say “science-based” because economics is not science). Bernie Sanders hired Professor Kelton to help him elaborate on this printing money idea. Professor Piketty is allying with left-wing politicians all over Europe to argue for debt relief and a wealth tax. Varoufakis was both a respected professor and a Minister arguing

for debt cancellations. Regardless of the other stances such politicians take, it is worth pointing out that history is on the side of the economically left. Before the crisis, only economic left-wing politicians argued in favor of a wealth tax. Now, even the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Financial Times want a wealth tax. When Milton Friedman first aired his neoliberal ideas, he felt like a lone voice in the wilderness and yet, all of a sudden, his ideas went mainstream. For the sake of the environment and humanity as a whole, we can only hope that his era has come to an end.



WORK

Bail out working people

So, here we are today. Academics have debunked the myth that we can sufficiently decouple economic growth from environmental harm. Even the European Environment Agency affirmed that green growth is no longer going to be good enough. Among the many who wonder how a post-growth economy can still be a positive story, there is often one key question: what about jobs? After debunking the 'decoupling myth' between economic growth and environmental harm, we need to debunk the 'coupling myth' between economic growth and a good life for all workers. This too only requires a rewilding of our imagination.

We are told that 40 hours of paid work a week for everyone is the goal. That is a different goal to ensuring a dignified and manageable job for all who can work. A more serious question is: should the goal not be to increase the wellbeing of all citizens while restoring the living world on which that wellbeing also depends? And if we have re-found the value of caring for one another due to the pandemic, why is this reflected so poorly in the labour market?

The current system does not recognise care work which is still disproportionately taken up by women. Our economies are characterised by a separation of a productive sphere, which includes all market goods and services, and a reproductive sphere, which includes largely non-monetised, unpaid and unrecognised caring activities.

Historian Rutger Bregman wrote that working less is “the solution to just about everything”. Citing Marx, Mill, Keynes and Ford, he tracks down a history of reducing working hours for the greater benefit of everyone. A benign century-long trend reversed in the 1980s, thanks to the neoliberal ideologues who started sacrificing the wellbeing of workers and our planet alike on the altar of economic growth. A recent German study was clear about what would improve our wellbeing today: less work, less consumption, less economic growth. Bregman continues with unpacking a long list of things that working less would help to solve: stress and burnouts, climate change, accidents, unemployment, gender inequality, ageing, social inequalities. In short: working less does not address one single problem entirely, but it helps with solving nearly all major problems humanity currently faces.

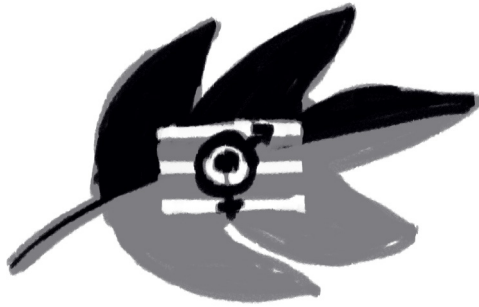
Revolutionising how we look at the wellbeing of all people, including workers, is extremely timely as we recover from the biggest recession in our lifetimes. The current system has led us to mass unemployment, vast insecurity and, frankly speaking, too much indifference to the plight of the workers. We've created a system that requires us to go faster and faster, in order to not break down.

We can step off the endless treadmill by decoupling work from livelihoods, from the standard 40-hours week, from standard forms of company ownership and from environmental degradation. The EEB worked with the Youth movement, with unions and with economy professor Tim Jackson on how such a reality could look in a report written for policymakers who want to #BuildBackBetter and

escape the growth and jobs treadmill.

What we need now is more care work, more artists, more teachers. Jobs that our current market does not sufficiently value, but that we, as a society, want and need. Workers need more security and autonomy, more time to spend with loved ones and on things they enjoy. All the things we were too busy to do during the week and too exhausted to do at the weekend. For our environment it would mean less pressure, less waste, and a real chance to decarbonise the economy. It would mean more energy being channelled into work that regenerates our ecosystems and less consumption that destroys it. It would mean a real chance for young people and future generations to inhabit a planet that is not wrecked by a relentless pursuit of 'more and more'.

Now, just try to imagine what would happen if the calculated optimum of a 21-hour work week were to be the new normal that most people, governments and companies would adopt. What a difference would that make for one of the great taboos of our times, a scourge on society, destroying people's productivity and crushing their joie de vivre: the burn-out epidemic. It really is time, here and now, to end an economic system that burns out people and the planet alike.



ECOFEMINISM

For the greater good of all

The toxic masculinity in the leaders that gave us the COVID-19 mass graves also gave us climate chaos and a total disrespect for the wellbeing of people and planet. So, what could be the way out of that mess?

Enter: gender transformative environmental policies. Just look at the leadership shown by the wellbeing economy governments, of which four in five are led by women. On average, women tend to make more sustainable choices, for example in mobility or farming practices. With 70% of all environment ministers in the EU being male, these choices are still poorly reflected in the largely gender-myopic European Green Deal. What is also missing is an explicit recognition of the centrality of the 'care economy' as a backbone for our societies. The pandemic has reminded us of the importance of care, both at home and at work. Recognition for the importance of 'care' continues to be absent and the burden of being a care provider to others remains highly unequal.

Here is what we should do, starting now. First, we should collect disaggregated data on sex and gender identity for a wide range of issues such as the recipients of money from the EU's largest honey pot: the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) – or on people experiencing energy poverty. The conclusions drawn from the collected data must then lead to measures that address the vast gender gaps in those areas: this in turn would lead to a more sustainable economy overall. Sad as this may be, given that it reduces gender mainstreaming to an act of self-interest instead of solidarity, it might convince more men of the need to address the gender gaps when it becomes clearer that a serious injection of ecofeminism into decision-making is in their own interest too. If ecofeminist values like solidarity, equity, non-discrimination, respect for difference and diversity were the norm in environmental and economic policy-making, the winners would be the vast majority of the population as well as nature. It is hard to imagine why anyone would not be on board with these values - surely they are a no-brainer. The wellbeing economy is about equity and creating a good life for people and nature, with particular attention to intersectionality. It is through that lens that we need to look at things like the European Green Deal, the EU economic governance, the 8th Environmental Action Programme (8EAP) etc and then see where they can be improved.

One place to work on is replacing GDP as an overall indicator for prosperity. We need to use better methods of measuring the wellbeing of people and nature. Another is prioritising the care economy, which is possible by transforming the current Stability and Growth Pact into a Sustainability and Wellbeing Pact. The EU can do this by drawing inspiration from New Zealand, which designed its entire budget based on wellbeing priorities, e.g. addressing child poverty, mental health, a green transition, and domestic violence. All its ministries are ordered to design policies to improve wellbeing.



JUSTICE for all is not altruism

From the food we eat to the air we breathe and from the sky-elite to the mining magnate's greed: we are not all equal under the same sun. Malevolent leaders of many countries and companies are real and when they thrive, we just try to survive. But they are few, we are many.

What most powers that be still fail to understand is that this vast and growing inequality is no longer just the problem of 'others', of folk they can ignore, look down upon or appease with some meagre handouts here and vague promises there. The 'bread and games' approach however no longer works when a critical mass of people is put under so much stress, continuously facing new onslaughts, that no football match can possibly serve as a decoy, distracting them from the real battles of today. The multitudes of injustices in our society bring us closer and closer to our breaking point. In ever more places, we are beyond our breaking point.

So who is this big 'we'? OECD research concluded that the impacts of environmental degradation tend to be concentrated among vulnerable groups and households. At the same, the benefits and costs of environmental policies are also likely to be unevenly distributed. The authors add that the COVID-19 crisis has amplified the urgency of addressing the dual challenges of inequality and environmental degradation together; the silo thinking that we Emerging forces outside of Europe already exploit our own internal differences and in part successfully drive their divide and rule agenda. To ensure balance we need powerful citizens' groups, governments with integrity that are brave enough to intervene in the economy, when needed, and a strong sense of European identity and unity. The day we manage to strike the right balance and learn to respect and value one another for the crucial role we all play in getting ourselves out of this mess, that is the day when the great transition can truly begin.

Next steps

1. Share this book

We do not need your petition signature. We do not need your donation. But we can use your help. Can you spread this narrative? Share the book with friends, colleagues and family. Digital is best for the environment but if you need a box of printed copies, we can get this done for you at a rate that just covers our costs to print and send them to you. [Just ask](#). If you're using social media, please use #FromFearToHope.

2. Talk to us

As pointed out from the start: this book is just an opinion. We do not claim to have a final opinion on everything and we constantly learn through exchanges with engaged citizens. If this book triggers thoughts that you want to share with us, please do [get in touch](#).

3. Stay tuned

Once a week we send a newsletter with short updates and links to articles and events on the multitude of environmental frontlines we work on. You can subscribe [here](#).

4. Keep reading

We merely scratched the surface of a few things that we can do radically better. If you wish to read more, here is some recommended reading. All hyperlinks are included in the online version, which you can access using the URL or QR code below.

General background reading

- The EEB publication *[Turning fear into hope](#)*.
- Together with Oxfam Germany and the Climate of Change coalition of NGOs, we published *[Towards a wellbeing economy that serves people and nature](#)*.
- *[Transformative responses to the crisis](#)*.

- Systemic change for a resilient Europe.
- A system change compass: Implementing the European Green Deal in a time of recovery.
- For a life-affirming economy.

Topic-specific reading

- Chemicals and the EEB's work to blacklist and ban all the uninvited chemical guests.
- Farms, food and bringing the farm closer to the fork.
- Livestock and what we can learn from a case in Romania.
- Trade deal traps that keep governments from doing what is necessary.
- Aviation and how to "Stay Grounded".
- Railways and how to get "Back on Track".
- Mining and the flaws in the EU's plans for a mining bonanza.
- Democratic innovation in Power for the people and at Extinction Rebellion.
- Money, debt and wealth in the EEB position paper Beyond Sustainable Growth.
- Work and on Escaping the growth and jobs treadmill
- Ecofeminism and why the European Green Deal needs more of it.
- A wellbeing economy that serves people and nature.
- Reprotecting Europe - The European Green Deal vs The War on Regulations.

5. Watch this

The short documentary The 25% revolution (By "Broederlijk Delen", with support of the EEB) is about the systemic changes in our economy that are both practiced on the ground and preached by experts. Available in 13 languages.

The 2 minutes book trailer - to share on social media.

eeb.org/turning-point



"As ancient ways of coexistence parted
The journey of a malevolent virus started
It is our never-ending growth spiral
That made it so easy for it to go viral
But it is also now that we can hack an economic system out of whack
To finally stay grounded and get back on track"

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A better future where people and nature thrive together