



Commentary

European Green Deal as social vaccine to overcome COVID-19 health & economic crisis

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The COVID-19 emergency questions preparedness of European countries towards pandemics [1]. It has been argued that this crisis results from the merging of an infectious epidemic and a number of underlying conditions including non-communicable diseases and frailties that recognize socio-economic inequalities as crucial predisposing or even prognostic factors [2]. Moreover, COVID-19 is probably originating from endemic zoonosis and might be regarded in the light of ecosystems' disequilibrium according to a comprehensive "One Health Approach" [3]. Environmental pollution has been questioned to worsen COVID-19 epidemic outbreaks, as those areas experiencing the highest levels of air pollution seem to have suffered from the worst consequences of the pandemic [4–7].

In this perspective, Richard Horton has argued on the Lancet how "we need to go beyond a biomedical vision for solving this syndemic" [2], highlighting that Fran Baum and Sharon Fiel pointed out the need for a "social vaccine" in addition to the biological one – tackling economic, environmental and social determinants of health – to overcome the current global crisis [2]. This means that a new vision has to inspire policymakers and public opinion. According to Horton, there are also some reasons for hope, as in the middle of the COVID-19 crisis, the UK's National Health Service (NHS) has committed itself to becoming the world's first carbon net zero health system by 2040, so that "health is leading the way to a greener, safer planet" [8].

A new horizon of hope was opened in 2020 with the European Union Green Deal aimed at reaching climate neutrality by 2050, and reduce emissions by 2030 to at least 50% of 1990s levels. European Union recognizes climate change and environmental pollution as an existential

threat, and it is committed to become a modern, sustainable and competitive economy. The European Green Deal is also aimed at turning climate and environmental challenges into opportunities to address the issues of equality and diversity by "making the transition just and inclusive for all", where no person and no place is left behind. This political commitment towards zero emissions will involve all economic sectors, supported by a comprehensive investment plan (mobilizing up to € 1 trillion of investments in the next 10 years), aimed at moving to a clean circular economy, restore biodiversity and reduce pollution.

However, to be successful, the EU Green Deal must learn some lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic, that highlighted the strict connections linking environment, health and economy. What we need is a new paradigm aimed at reducing the exposure of economic value creation to environmental, pandemic and social risks. This is possible if we give priority to activities where "creation" of economic value has positive effect on environmental sustainability, health and job opportunities, progressively adopting reintegration measures to address inequalities worsened by the pandemic. COVID-19 highlighted a vicious circle: unsustainable development, environmental degradation, new pandemics threats, lockdown, economic slowdown and job losses.

We need to replace it with a virtuous circle based on sustainable development with the creation of economic value in an environmental-friendly way, involving also citizens in a bottom-up participation process (crucial to maximize the success of the Green Deal), able to improve economic conditions and at the same time their health and sense of life. The only strategy that can allow us to reach this goal is the adoption of a new sustainable economic model based on "generativity", which is defined as the capacity of one's own life to impact positively on lives of other people [9]. The recent literature has shown that generativity is a crucial driver of life sense (the so called "eudaimonic wellbeing") and life satisfaction, in the same way that poor eudaimonic wellbeing represents a risk factor for mortality outcomes [10].

Therefore, generativity represents a perspective that can be used to evaluate the quality of projects to be funded within the European Green Deal and Recovery Fund: our investments should take into account the generative potential along with economic value and jobs created, as well as the ability to protect us from environmental threats impacting on human health. Generativity is a measurable indicator of individual

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and social commitment: we can measure how generative is the economy of EU by looking at “vitality” of economic activities based on sustainability indicators, but also at the “biodiversity” of social organizations and volunteers; we can also measure generativity across generations by focusing on active and healthy ageing as well as by fighting the NEET phenomenon (young people who neither work nor study). In the frame of European Green Deal, a “generative approach” to economy can represent the “social vaccine” we are looking for to reinforce antibodies of our communities against inequalities originating the current and future pandemics.

Contributors

Leonardo Becchetti, Prisco Piscitelli, Alessandro Distante, Alessandro Miani and Antonio Felice Uricchio equally contributed to conceive, design, write, revise and approve the manuscript

Declaration of Competing Interest

Leonardo Becchetti, Prisco Piscitelli, Alessandro Distante, Alessandro Miani and Antonio Felice Uricchio declare no conflict of interests.

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