

COVID-19 AND THE GREEN AGENDA

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It has been approximately a year since the devastating COVID-19 pandemic began. When the virus first took hold, many predicted that the “green agenda” would be set back due to the diversion and reallocation of funds for healthcare and consequent economic recovery. However, both during the various lockdowns and the subsequent months thereafter, there have been numerous developments in the green sphere – both negative and positive.

Emotive images and articles during the periods of the most draconian lockdowns suggested that there was some form of natural regeneration or decrease in anthropogenic impacts on Earth. For instance, there was a sharp drop in global carbon emissions, as well as decreased litter, better air quality and less noise pollution.

This said, a number of novel negative environmental impacts have stemmed from the pandemic, and sustainable development initiatives have also been significantly impacted on by the economic downturn. The proliferation of medical waste, including PPE, and the shutdown of recycling centres are examples of such.

Although these impacts may be considered to be “indirect” – the United Nations (UN) Environment Programme has found that there is a direct correlation between anthropogenic activities/impacts and the emergence of zoonotic diseases. Thus, human stressors on the environment are causally linked to our exposure to zoonotic diseases such as COVID-19.

Flowing from this, a number of international bodies such as the UN and the World Health Organization have called

for a “green recovery” – a sustainable recuperation that mobilises, among other things, green legislative and policy measures.

A more pessimistic onlooker may have predicted that the petition for a green recovery would have remained in the abstract. However it seems that the green recovery narrative has found resonance in the international community and may in fact be adopted by some nations.

Internationally there has been some indication that the green recovery has been

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accepted as one of the strategies necessary to overcome the various consequences of the pandemic. Recent developments such as China’s commitment to be carbon-neutral by 2060, US president-elect Joe Biden’s carbon plans, and the Nordic countries expressly declaring that they will adopt the green recovery approach, are all testament to this.

Initially South Africa’s response to the pandemic seemed to stall the green agenda. For instance, the directions regarding COVID-19 measures relating to national environmental management permits and licences resulted in severe delays in respect of development in the environmental sphere.

Despite this reprioritisation during the initial stages of the pandemic, President Cyril Ramaphosa has entrenched the green agenda into the South African Economic Reconstruction and Recovery Plan which expressly establishes the green economy as a key intervention. Notably, this plan states that: “South Africa’s economic reconstruction and recovery effort will include a significant green component.”

The president also published a notice detailing strategic integrated projects (GN 812 in GG 43547), many of which have a green focus or component. For example, a small IPP power purchase procurement programme; Phase 2A of the Mokolo Crocodile River (West) Augmentation Project: Limpopo; and the Olifants River Water Resource Development Project – Phase 2: Limpopo.

The latter two of these examples could have a significantly positive impact on water availability for both existing and proposed mines in the water-scarce Limpopo region. Further to this, government intends on substantially improving South Africa’s energy security through the deployment of new renewable energy projects (GN 753 in GG 43509 and GN 1015 in GG 43734). Hence the path to a green recovery has been laid by the South African government.

Although it is uncertain what the long-term impacts of COVID-19 on the green agenda will be, and whether governments will implement green recovery plans, the pandemic has undoubtedly shown our intrinsic connection to the natural world – something which has to be considered and acted on going forward. ■