



Markus Vogt

Resilience and Sustainability in the Corona Crisis

Abstract

The relentlessness of the corona pandemic has made it clear, like in a magnifying glass, how vulnerable our society is and how much it relies on knowledge-based and preventive strategies. Especially in times of crisis, sustainability with its claim of systemic thinking, resilience and proactive action is indispensable, so as not to aggravate tomorrow's problems with short-term solutions. For Christians, the crisis reveals whether their faith is an existential source of strength and sustainability, or whether it is already as empty as the churches during Easter 2020.



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Keywords

Resilience, Sustainability, Corona Crisis, Social Ethics, Globalization, Social Change

1 Conflicting goals

At the moment, all financial, political and social resources are being directed to fight corona. Due to the current risk of escalation, this is necessary and correct. At the same time, long-term goals and the standards of democracy, transparency and international solidarity should not be lost. With regard to the sealing off of borders in Europe, it will take a lot of effort to restore trust and openness. It will be difficult to cope with the massive economic over-indebtedness and the increased rate of unemployment. Many entrepreneurs are financially ruined despite government aid. The burden is unequally distributed: Homeless people are deprived of their last chance of existence; conflicts escalate in families with many children who are locked up in small suburban apartments; many countries do not have crisis-resistant health systems. The fear of losing control can also prevent the willingness to make economic and eco-social changes in the long term. It is foreseeable that there will be a lack of financial resources for investments in energy system transformation. The automotive industry is calling for climate protection requirements to be eased in order to survive the crisis. It will not be easy to achieve the same level of acceptance for public transport as before the crisis, as a lot of mistrust has arisen in the context of Corona against close contact in the public sphere. In crisis mode, issues such as climate protection and sustainability will appear to be of secondary importance.

Will the EU's Green Deal be revoked because the resources have been all consumed to cope with Corona?

2 Setting the course for the long term

Society will be different after Corona. It is not about returning to the previous condition, but finding an innovative perspective for the future. However, a number of complex conflicting goals have to be overcome. Corona crisis management should not be limited to defensive ad hoc measures, but rather point out perspectives on where society needs to develop in order to be more robust and resilient towards multiple crises in the future. Sustainability, i.e. the systemic integration of social, ecological and economic developments, can offer a decisive broadening of horizons for this. The long-term course is now being set. Reconstruction should be a renovation, not a striving to restore old patterns. In the financial crisis of 2008/2009 we largely failed to use the upheaval for systemic innovation. As a result, there is a risk of a crisis recurrence. Crisis shall be used as an opportunity for change. For what concerns sustainability and climate protection, it remains to be seen whether they will be perceived as a luxury discourse for better times or whether they will be discussed in a problem-oriented way as change management. The German EU Council Presidency in the second half of 2020 will be dominated by corona crisis management. The announced Green Deal will have to prove its worth by using the dynamics of change and promoting a less crisis-prone society.

3 The corona pandemic as a systemic problem

There are very direct thematic links between the corona crisis and sustainability or non-sustainability, for example in the area of (hyper-)globalization and dealing with borders, mobility and deceleration, consumption and the acceptance of restrictions, solidarity and the protection of the weak ones, and, last but not least, in the area of health. Corona has clearly shown how preventive measures are crucial in fighting crises. This has a lot to do with the concept of sustainability, insofar as it can be defined as a transition from aftercare to preventive problem treatment and from individual problem management to a systemic view.¹ Sustainability is the conceptual answer to the corona crisis and must be strategically developed even during the crisis. Learning experiences in the successful development of health care systems towards high elasticity and resilience can also be used for other areas and exchanged on an international basis. Crises often have a high mobilization potential for change. The corona pandemic is a time of radical change. It's all about moving back from *change by disaster* to *change by design*, which means goal-oriented planning. The corona crisis represents an endurance test for less idealistic sustainability concepts that can be advanced under economically precarious conditions. In order to do this we should first learn to assess problem hierarchies in complex systems and avoid positive feedback processes that allow problems to escalate with exponential curves. It is important to recognize system-relevant

¹ Cf. Vogt, Markus: Prinzip Nachhaltigkeit. Ein Entwurf aus theologisch-ethischer Perspektive, 3. Auflage, München 2013; Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary-General: Global Sustainable Development Report 2019: The Future is Now – Science for Achieving Sustainable Development, New York 2019.

factors and to act in time before control slips away. How will we deal with multiple crises in the future? There are many lessons for strengthening socio-economic, political and cultural immune systems that we can learn in the current pandemic.

4 Resilience: growing with crises

Catastrophic social conditions do not necessarily have to lead to desolate development. There are always people and societies that grow on crises. Key elements are social and cultural resources of communication, networks of solidarity, but also skills of creative processing of adverse experiences (e.g. the balcony singing of Italians). The concept of resilience looks for factors that enable systems, individuals or societies to survive radical upheavals or even grow from them.² Resilience research deals with psychological, social or biological "immune systems": Just as an immune system only gets stronger when confronted with viruses, bacteria and dirt, social systems also need disruptions in order to mature and grow. However, such maturation is not a self-runner, but arises from confrontation and does not always succeed. There are quite a few people and societies that have experienced a severe crisis and have developed increased empathy for the needs and worries of their neighbors. The spatial metaphor of social distancing would be misunderstood if interpreted in terms of social isolation and compartmentalization. This is a latent danger in dealing with the elderly of our society. Communication and closeness are also among the "foods" necessary for existence. Solidarity is one of the most

² Schaffer, Axel u.a. (Hg.): Systeme in der Krise im Fokus von Resilienz und Nachhaltigkeit, Marburg 2014.

important resources for a resilient society. Here, cultural and religious traditions can help to determine the basic attitudes and patterns of meaning that are needed to seek solutions with a perspective of solidarity and to mature in crises.

5 The theological challenge of the crisis

For Christians, the crisis reveals whether their faith is an existential source of strength, or whether it is already as empty as the churches during Easter for the first time in centuries.³ It will become clear whether they are already completely dependent on clerical personnel in the execution of their faith, or whether they are able to make the joy of Easter palpable in the families and house communities spiritually, theologically and creatively, despite all restrictions and needs. Easter in the Corona crisis is a test for the future of the increasingly priestless Church. Perhaps for the first time in (post)Christian societies has the Lenten season taken on an existential dimension. In any case, it was a time of pausing and becoming aware that the apparent guarantees of our world can suddenly break off. What guidance and encouragement beyond theologically silly interpretations as God's punishment can religions give in such a situation? Is the Church as a "field hospital" (Pope Francis) for those who are most abandoned? Easter is the feast which is able to discover traces of the new beginning life in the greatest imaginable crisis (Good Friday). But this remains unavailable. Christian hope is "thwarted hope": confidence in the face of the abysses of existence, because God is also there.

³ Halík, Thomás: Auf dem Weg in die Tiefe, in: Christ & Welt vom 1.4.2020; <https://www.zeit.de/2020/15/kirche-gottesdienste-coronavirus-gott>.

One of the oldest definitions of faith in Isaiah is "to cling to what exists". This is not far away from what resilience means. It does not aim at the preservation of possessions, but on the contrary, it always assumes conversion and transformation. The corona pandemic challenges us to reflect on what change it takes in order to stay and grow in the crisis.

6 Potential for social change

Dealing with the Corona crisis shows how a radical transformation of society is possible in an amazingly short time. Such a drastic reduction in consumption and in the international movement of goods and people was long considered impossible. The crisis is a testing ground for coping strategies in dealing with a phase shift in everyday and economic life. Many people are discovering digital cultural techniques for conferences, internet teaching and personal communication. In the middle of the crisis, a culture of leisure, accessibility, "stabilitas loci" and family closeness has also grown. The drastic reduction of CO₂ emissions makes it possible to achieve climate protection goals. The enormous determination to implement economic stimulus packages to prevent the economy and society from disintegrating in the crisis is raising hopes: Why should this not also be possible for a restructuring of society so that it becomes more resilient, climate-compatible and robust in the future? It is a question of will.

The positive and negative experiences of change management should be used for transformation research.⁴ Crisis

⁴ For the broad field of transformation research cf. Vogt, Markus: *Wandel als Chance oder Katastrophe*, München 2018.

management requires a great deal of cohesion in society, which in some cases has developed very positively and creatively, for example with neighborhood help and an enormous commitment from the nursing staff that goes far beyond the extent of their duties. The discovery that these are systemically relevant should in future be reflected in better pay for care professions. The high quality of the medical system in Germany has generated trust. The rapid and radical digitalization of teaching in schools and universities was and is a considerable social achievement. The virtualization of conferences has saved a lot of travel time. The broad approval of crisis management by politicians is a positive experience in difficult times. The willingness of the population to accept hard cuts was and is very high. Good media coverage is an expression and the motor of a living democracy. Internationally, this has been demonstrated: The attempts to oust populist politics were quickly exposed. In Corona times lies have short legs.

The corona pandemic has created a new thoughtfulness about lifestyles. It is a social experiment in radical deceleration. There is great potential for sustainability and social cohesion in this. Digitalization has advanced rapidly. It is now important to distinguish which structural changes should be sensibly maintained or further developed beyond the crisis. Economic sustainability beyond the gigantic debt must be relearned. In doing so, we know that we are only seeing at the beginning of the crisis. Society will be different. There is much that we can learn in order to strengthen the social immune systems against future crises in the long term. The theological virtues of faith,

hope/confidence and love are forces of resilience and of such a social immune system in times of a crisis.⁵

⁵ Vogt, Markus/Schneider, Martin: Glaube, Hoffnung, Liebe als Resilienz-faktoren. *Theologisch-ethische Erkundungen*, in: *MThZ* 3 (2016), pp. 195-208.