

# The future should be a relational economy

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The Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic has delivered behavioural changes across cultures and social profiles the world over. These changes include more frequent hand washing and physical distancing guidelines, as well as reduced frequency of travelling. In this consumerist era, citizens around the world are learning that most consumer goods are more wants than needs, and that unbridled consumption during ordinary times manifests a measure of greed. When the pandemic was gaining momentum and it was clear that ordinary lives would be disrupted for an extended period of time, most of those who could essentially emptied shelves of groceries. From tissue paper to hand sanitisers, the whole world joined the sort of irrational accumulation usually reserved for so-called doomsday preppers.

The planet has had the opportunity to breathe from its ever-demanding tenants who do little to replenish what they have used of the Earth's resources. The price of oil has collapsed due to low demand.

There has also been a drop in air pollution, with nitrogen dioxide levels in the atmosphere in regions such as Europe plummeting since countries started locking down. China's carbon emissions have fallen by 25% since January, when lockdown there was enforced. Also, a 50% reduction in nitrous oxide and carbon monoxide can be seen over China from space.

The point is, the decline in emissions has mainly resulted from shutting down heavy industries and factories, and the significant drop in vehicle, air and other means of travel.

The emergence of Covid-19 is visibly showing us the effects that we have on the environment, and the predatory nature of our consumption and production.

The poor and the working class the world over, including in South Africa, have always lived with limited consumer goods, for the most part purchasing goods that last for just a day or two. In this sense, the lockdown in South Africa has transformed consumer patterns of the elites more than it has the poor and working class.

From social to print media, the greatest frustration seems to emerge from the elite club, whom the lockdown restrains from fulfilling their consumerist aspirations. For the poor and the working class, Covid-19 is mainly a question of economic survival, while for the elite it is mainly a question of disrupted convenience and comfort.

## **HARD LESSON**

Although a hard lesson, the discovery that we can survive with little is not a negative one. In our country, we've seen political parties agreeing to work together and, contrary to expectations during ordinary times, some have agreed to salary cuts, which immediately makes more resources available for those who need them most. Multiple stakeholders who contest for opposing ideological spaces have given concessions as they adapt to new realities.

At household level, microlevel redistributive measures have been employed, only this time willingly and out of a moral incentive. For the first time in a generation, at least for now, the new economic behaviour is less obsessed with GDP and more committed to livelihoods. Even the highly criticised International Monetary Fund is providing relief support without the stringent conditions that have been linked to economic hardship in developing countries. Grappling with options for building a more equitable society, my PhD research sought to examine how relations between a local NGO and targeted beneficiaries shape economic sustainability among those beneficiaries.

The study found that relations between development agents and beneficiaries should be considered as more than a political statement.

I argued that moral commitment to people and livelihoods might just be a meaningful and sustainable alternative to an elite-based economy. If we can change our economic behaviour, we can pave the way towards building economies based on moral foundations. This is a faster route to addressing inequality.

My research further established that the sustainability of social and economic interventions should not so much be measured during ordinary times, but during moments of crisis. Interventions that have been strong enough to endure crises have a stronger moral base than pure economic transaction.

My study recommends that, if we are to build a more equal society, we will have to build a relational economy where the success in development is not determined solely by abstract statistics, but also by stronger relationships founded on moral imperatives.

In his address on the social economic response to Covid-19, President Cyril Ramaphosa spoke about the need to build the new economy through increased social spending along with investments in productive sectors.

Perhaps Covid-19 gives us the opportunity to consider how the new economy we can build could be a more generous, equal society; an economy less obsessed with profits at all costs and more concerned with the wellbeing of others.

## References

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