Pathways to a Green and Just Recovery from COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has served as a reminder that human health and wellbeing is closely tied to the health of the planet. The environment is a major underlying determinant of health, growing in significance as climate change and ecosystem degradation intensify various health risks, including those associated with novel infectious diseases and more frequent extreme weather events. COVID-19 has also demonstrated the fragility of our socio-economic systems and crisis response structures, highlighting the threats that sudden disruptions pose to our interconnected world.

COVID-19 will not be the last large-scale emergency facing the global community. Human activities are putting increasing pressure on planetary boundaries as well as social systems, with potentially catastrophic consequences for human health and wellbeing. 2021 has been a year of extreme weather events, with wildfires, droughts and devastating floods affecting communities across the globe. A return to 'business-as-usual' post-COVID would greatly amplify these and other threats.

Importantly, the risks associated with climate change, environmental degradation and other global crises are distributed highly unevenly across and within countries. In the case of COVID-19, the health-related and economic costs of the pandemic have fallen disproportionately on vulnerable and marginalised populations. In the UK, people living in deprived areas died at more than twice rate of those in more affluent areas, according to data from the Office of National Statistics (2021). They were also more likely to lose their job or experience significant income cuts as a result of the pandemic.

Therefore, a genuinely green recovery prioritises both environmental sustainability and human wellbeing, allowing societies to thrive within the limits of what natural systems can sustainably support. As such, it must respond to the urgent need to decarbonise the economy as well as address the social inequalities that COVID-19 has exposed and, in many cases, exacerbated. Thus, credible green recovery policies seek to "rapidly decarbonise economic activity, democratise decision-making, and fairly wind down the fossil fuel industry while simultaneously scaling up a post-carbon economy of shared prosperity" (McGaughey and Lawrence, 2020: 6). Recovery policies should also be aimed at enhancing preparedness for, and resilience to, future complex risks, including the possibility of another pandemic.

Navigating the transition will require not just significant resources and unprecedented multi-level cooperation but also paradigmatic shifts in thought, above all a greater appreciation of complex systems dynamics. While this presents a massive challenge, it also opens up opportunities to reform and innovate, inviting us to experiment with novel, more inclusive governance tools.

Key Areas for Reform and Innovation:

- **Investing in state capacity.** COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of state capacity when it comes to designing and implementing rapid and effective response strategies in times of crisis. In the UK, "the pandemic has pointed to the damage that managerial reforms in the public sector, such as outsourcing and financialization of the economy, have caused to the resilience of socio-economic systems" (Mazzucato and Kattel, 2020: 3). Countries such as South Korea, where trust in the mobilising capacity of the government was high, generally fared better in limiting the spread of the virus.

- **Enhancing relationships between local, regional and national branches of government.** Weak relationships between different branches of government had a negative impact on the effectiveness of the response to the pandemic in the UK. Better coordination and cooperation between local, regional and national branches of government is key to effective information sharing, timely decision-making and actual implementation of response strategies. Crucially, it ensures the incorporation of local input, thus increasing the likelihood that policies are perceived as just and appropriate to local context.

- **Strengthening participatory democracy.** Encouraging widespread public debate and participation is key to identifying opportunities for policy innovation as well as eliciting a sense of ownership and agency. Given the scale of the challenge the climate crisis poses and the collective effort necessary to overcome it, cognitive diversity will be critical to imagining more sustainable futures. Combining majority rule with meaningful and inclusive deliberation mechanisms enables governments to make smarter decisions that respond to on-the-ground realities and are more likely to be met with acceptance. Previous experiences with such mechanisms – such as IPPR citizens' juries on UK climate and nature policy – have highlighted the value of deliberative mechanisms that allow local communities to communicate their needs and perspectives.

- **Improving communication and early warning systems.** As we continue to transgress planetary boundaries, we are likely to face increasing risks in the future, from novel health emergencies to more frequent and intense extreme weather events. Transparent alert systems and crisis communication tools will be key to enhancing preparedness and resilience. Yet, COVID-19 has shown that such systems are severely underdeveloped around the world and often not adaptable enough to respond to rapid developments on multiple levels. In addition, public messaging during the pandemic has not always been transparent, coherent and clear, providing fertile breeding ground for mis- and disinformation. Rebuilding societal trust in an age of 'fake news' – and providing people with the knowledge and tools they need to make informed choices – will therefore be an important part of future risk preparedness strategies.

- **Transforming education.** We must equip current and future generations with the tools and frameworks they need to navigate and make sense of an uncertain future. Education is also key to the long-term success of the green transition. Current institutions remain steeped in an understanding of education as knowledge accumulation, focusing primarily on 'knowing-what' rather than

'knowing-how.' In the face of increasingly complex challenges, we need a more inclusive and transformative education agenda, inviting everyone to rethink legacy systems and institutions.

- **Encouraging complex systems thinking.** Understanding that problems such as climate change, environmental degradation or pandemics arise out of systems is vital to arriving at an adequate governmental response. Complexity thinking helps us understand the dynamic behaviour of human and natural systems and how they are interconnected, enabling us to make sense of uncertainty and non-linear change. As such, it can provide vital insights when it comes to designing more sustainable and resilient economic and governance systems following the COVID-19 pandemic.

This memo builds upon a workshop, convened on 1 June 2021 by Dr Tom Pegram (UCL Global Governance Institute) and Dr Carina Fearnley (UCL Department of Science and Technology Studies). The workshop was hosted virtually by the UCL Global Governance Institute and the UCL Warning Research Centre, with support from UCL Grand Challenges and the UCL Environment Domain.

For a more in-depth discussion, please refer to the full workshop report: "Pathways to a Green and Just Recovery from COVID-19: Promoting Systemic Change for Greater Sustainability and Resilience."