

Calling for an Economy of Life in a Time of Pandemic

A Joint Message from the WCC, WCRC, LWF, and CWM

The current Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted every aspect of our lives in a world already plagued with immense human suffering. In response, our organizations – the World Council of Churches (WCC), the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC), the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), and the Council for World Mission (CWM) – through the joint New International Financial and Economic Architecture (NIFEA) initiative convened an e-conference under the theme, “Economy of Life in a time of Pandemic”, on 17 and 24 April 2020.

A panel of experts who have been part of the NIFEA process contributed socio-economic analyses, theological-ethical reflections and practical recommendations with a view to systemic transformation as called for in the *Sao Paulo Statement: International Financial Transformation for an Economy of Life* which initiated the NIFEA process.¹

The crises of the Covid-19 pandemic are rooted in human and systemic sickness. They stem from oppressive and exploitative economic systems that are based on the logic of profit-making, socio-economic inequalities, ecological indifference, political self-interest, and colonial legacies. This joint message aims not only to voice our deep concern, but also to call upon the Christian community, governments, and international financial institutions to responsible action that addresses the root causes of the crises that are now exposed before the world.

The Covid-19 Pandemic Exposes Interconnected Economic and Ecological Crises

The Covid-19 pandemic is both the product of and the spur to the current economic catastrophe. The public health emergency is symptomatic of a deeper economic crisis that undergirds it. Decades of austerity – in the global South, as part of harsh debt conditionalities, and in the global North, as a consequence of the 2008 global financial crash – have rendered many countries utterly defenceless in the face of this threat. Moreover, ineffective and corrupt governance at national levels has exacerbated the inability of governments to support those who are most vulnerable to the pandemic.

The ecological crisis facing the world today – a direct consequence of extractive economic systems and where humanity behaves and believes as if the earth is an unlimited resource for relentless exploitation – is closely related to the Covid-19 pandemic. Scientists monitoring biodiversity and the health of our ecosystems remind us that “[r]ampant deforestation, uncontrolled expansion of agriculture, intensive farming, mining and infrastructure development, as well as the exploitation of wild species have created a ‘perfect storm’ for the spill over of diseases”. Furthermore, the exponential spread of the coronavirus due to urbanization and global air travel exposes “the human hand in

¹ <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/public-witness-addressing-power-affirming-peace/poverty-wealth-and-ecology/finance-speculation-debt/sao-paulo-statement-international-financial-transformation-for-the-economy-of-life>

pandemic emergence” in which “[Covid-19] may be only the beginning”.²

Unprecedented economic shutdowns and border closures to contain the spread of Covid-19 are prompting a sudden fall in climate change-causing emissions while simultaneously triggering a truly global economic crisis, leading in turn to spiralling unemployment and increasing inequality. Measures to address the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic have been merely palliative and have been mainly directed to bailing out corporations rather than people. In some places, economies are already being restarted at risk of mounting deaths, problematizing the perceived trade-off between rescuing the economy and saving lives.

As in many if not all crises, the already vulnerable, including low-wage and informal workers, the poor, women, people of colour, migrants and refugees are bearing the brunt in terms of loss of lives and livelihoods.

The present situation impacts human rights, emboldening authoritarianism. Covid-19 is being used to stir xenophobic and racist aggression, further endangering marginalized groups and human rights defenders. The lockdown has also meant many are unable to escape from domestic violence.

This crisis highlights the immense value of healthcare, the care economy, and women's intensified care work burden. While the care economy is now being valorised, care work in the current context of capitalism has often meant further oppression of women and migrant workers. The privatization of the health sector and the profit orientation of the pharmaceutical industry and patent system have exposed the inability of the present economic framework to take care of and uphold the dignity of people.

Even as capitalism supplants the impulses to love, care, and share with the urge to compete, the crisis has seen communities all over the world mobilizing deep reserves of compassion, kindness, and generosity, particularly where markets have failed. This underscores the potential of an economy based on care of the most vulnerable, each other and the earth.

Living through the Revelation of Covid-19 into a Renewed Creation

We are living in apocalyptic times and are reminded that the term ‘apocalypse’ means to unveil or uncover. In moments such as this, Covid-19 is not the great ‘leveller’; it is the great ‘revealer’. In its light we see anew and afresh the distorted realities and inequalities powerful interests have passed off as ‘normal’ and unquestionable. Covid-19 could become the great leveller if we harness its revelation for a transformation which raises up those who have been cast down by exploitive and supremacist systems. This is a call to conversion, where we are called to listen to the groaning of all creation and its hope of redemption (Romans 8: 22,23).

In the midst of harmful ideologies that distort reality and disempower the most vulnerable, we speak truthfully from theological-ethical perspectives committed to the following:

Realizing our hubris. Covid-19 offers humanity a new humility which could give us new commitment to living in ways which do not profit at the earth’s or others’ expense, nor inflict pain-fuelled systems which demand sacrifice from vulnerable people and communities. We are realizing anew and again the sin of economic systems governed by supremacist anthropocentrism.

² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/27/halt-destruction-nature-worse-pandemics-top-scientists>

Nurturing our communities. Loving, caring, and connectedness are key elements for resilience in the face of Covid-19. Physical distancing has needed to be counterbalanced by familial and social solidarity. As we nurture community, it is possible that new models and values for our economies could flourish rooted not in competition but in care for each other and the earth; that new conceptions of family beyond the restrictions of patriarchy and kinship relations and led by the visions of the most vulnerable would form the foundation of our communities; that borders would fall, racism be dismantled and xenophobia be replaced by radical hospitality.

Countering vested interest. Even in the deep crisis spurred by Covid-19, there are strong vested interests which profit from, or control how the crisis is managed and experienced. We are in the same storm, but we are not all in the same boat. The powers must still be confronted in this crisis and the death and debt from which they profit exposed.

Transforming systems. Covid-19 is overshadowing many with fear, overturning their security and even undermining their faith. In this moment of crisis, we need a liberative theology coupled with a redemptive economy. The human causes and systemic roots of this pandemic point to the exigency of systemic change if we are to be converted by the revelation Covid-19 is offering us, even as, like some latter day Shepherd David, it brings some of those giant systems to their knees. We must build back better, to ensure an Economy of Life that is founded on justice and dignity for all.

This is a prophetic moment. As churches we can see here a path towards the new creation. This struggle could bear the fruit of the earth's redemption from wanton exploitation. This is eschatological hope rooted not in the end of days, but in the fall of sinful systems. All shall be changed (1 Corinthians 15:51) if the truth is told, the old idolatries of empire and economy cast down, and the care of the Creator reflected in a creation not exploited endlessly but blessed deeply.

An Urgent Call to Action

Holding to the promise of a new creation, we make the following calls:

As a matter of urgency, in the immediate term:

- We renew our call for international banks and financial institutions to cancel the external debts of low- and middle-income countries (which were at damaging levels even before the pandemic). In the restorative and liberative spirit of Jubilee, countries, especially in the global South, need empowerment in confronting the challenges posed by the Covid-19 crisis, particularly in assuring funding for building the resilience and livelihoods of people and communities.
- We call upon governments to allocate the necessary resources towards public health and social protection for the hundreds of millions of people whose livelihoods have been decimated because of the lockdowns. This includes ensuring widespread testing, provision of protective and other equipment for healthcare, essential workers and hospitals; healthcare coverage for all and the vulnerable expressly; the search for an effective but also accessible and affordable vaccine or cure; basic income grants, unemployment assistance, and wage subsidy schemes; as well as support for small businesses.
- We reiterate our call for the implementation of the Zacchaeus Tax proposals: the initiation of a progressive wealth tax, financial transaction tax and carbon tax at national and global levels; the reintroduction of capital gains and inheritance taxes; measures to curb tax evasion and avoidance; and reparations for slavery and other social and ecological debts including through

debt cancellation. Furthermore, a Covid-19 surcharge must be levied on the super-wealthy, equity and hedge funds, and multinational, e-commerce and digital corporations that are reaping even greater returns from the current crisis to resource the critical response to the pandemic.

On a medium- and longer-term trajectory:

- We call upon governments to reclaim and safeguard public goods and the ecological commons from neoliberal processes of privatization and commodification; guarantee living wages for all; and privilege such life-affirming areas as health, education, water and sanitation, agro-ecology, and renewable energy in both Covid-19 recovery and longer-term plans. Our societies must foster and invest deeply in what the crisis has unveiled as essential: community-based systems of health, care and resilience as well as the protection and sustenance of ecosystems in which our economies are ultimately embedded in.
- We call upon the United Nations (UN) to convene an UN Economic, Social and Ecological Security Council (building on the 2009 Stiglitz Commission proposal for a Global Economic Coordination Council) to provide leadership in addressing interconnected economic, social and ecological crises that require coordinated international action. No country is an island. The current juncture and the burgeoning climate disaster demand coherence, collaboration, innovation, and transformation on a global scale.

Finally, we call upon our own Christian communities to recommit to pursuing a New International Financial and Economic Architecture (NIFEA), to model an Economy of Life in our work and lives, and to join with faith-rooted and social movements in amplifying advocacy for the aforementioned emergency measures and systemic changes.

Shared Commitment: Caring for Our Common Home Together

The Covid-19 pandemic has laid bare the fact that we live together in a common economic, social, and ecological home. Our response to this global health crisis and the more colossal, longer-standing economic and ecological emergency must recognize our intrinsic interdependence and hold together economic, social, and ecological objectives. This calls for cooperation and solidarity within and across countries embodied in networks of faith communities, civil society, and social movements as well as fresh systems of global governance rooted in justice, care, and sustainability. Through such action and in that spirit, ways can be found, if we are bold, to root our systems, powers and hearts not in the old order, but in the new creation.