

BLOG POST April 22nd 2020

Under what conditions can the Covid-19 pandemic be a catalyst towards more sustainable lifestyles?

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🕒 Reading time: 5 min



The measures taken to fight the Covid-19 pandemic are changing our daily lives. Many see this as an opportunity to initiate more sustainable behaviours, and even hope that this experience of imposed sobriety will be transformed into a real awareness in favour of more virtuous lifestyles for the environment. However, this hope must be put into perspective: our lifestyles are determined by a set of factors, many of which have not been erased by health measures, which explains why certain aspects of these measures are experienced as a constraint. The long-term impact of the current health and socio-economic crisis thus depends on how the framework that structures our lifestyles will evolve. Public action has a key role to play in this process, which needs to be re-examined.

Changing lifestyles means changing the reference framework

A lifestyle can be seen as a frame of reference for social life, within which there is a latitude of choice for individuals, who deploy a particular lifestyle, according to their habits, values, budget, etc. Lifestyle is therefore the result of a set of determinants that are the responsibility of the individual (his/her own tastes or budgetary constraints, for example), and above all of his/her economic, social and material environment (social norms, regulations or infrastructures, for example). These collective determinants strongly condition our behaviour. Thus, barrier measures such as not shaking hands or not kissing were difficult to implement at the beginning of the pandemic, as they ran counter to well-established social practices. Similarly, applying social distancing or containment measures was impossible for workers without an adjustment of their working conditions (adaptation of premises, prescription of teleworking, etc.) and/or the implementation of measures to compensate for the loss of income related to the cessation of activity.

Changing lifestyles requires changing the architecture of the determinants of choices, and thus changing the environment in which individuals live. The more unfavourable the environment is for the adoption of a behaviour, the more constraint will be needed to make people adopt that behaviour, at a high political cost. It is indeed by gradually changing the frameworks that the constraint on behaviour will be lessened. In a different register of crisis, the Yellow Vests movement has shown that in a context where there are no real alternatives to cars for getting around in many territories, increasing the price of fuel induces a strong budgetary constraint for households, difficult to justify politically and not very effective. The possibility that the current pandemic will transform our lifestyles in a sustainable way must therefore be considered cautiously and will depend on how it will change the architecture of our lifestyle choices: what will be the impact on our collective representations of the common good and our collective preferences? On the choice of our living space? Which economic sectors and therefore which jobs will remain? Will it trigger a consumption frenzy after confinement, in the sense of the rebound effect predicted by some?

What role for the public authorities?

In the name of health protection, governments have taken measures that have a significant impact on our lifestyles (freedom of movement, consumption, work). This broadening of the scope of action of the public authorities gives rise to a debate on the question of respect for individual freedom and calls for vigilance. It also raises the question of what constitutes legitimate and acceptable public action: under what conditions can it be legitimate and according to what modalities? In the name of what values and imperatives? The measures taken in the name of the health crisis have been so far relatively well tolerated by the population, since they are temporary. Nevertheless, in the context of climate change and ecological transition, the measures to be taken and the transformations to be implemented, which will of course be different in nature and scope, will be long term. Would it not be better to debate them today in order to choose them democratically rather than have them imposed on us in the urgency of the next crises?

This reflection on the role of public authorities must take into account all the actors in social life. Indeed, while public authorities are an important actor in defining the framework of our lifestyles, they are not alone. Lifestyles are in fact driven by a heterogeneous set of actors (companies, media—including social networks—, citizen movements, artists, financial actors, etc.), of which the public authority is only one of the protagonists. In the medium term, the main challenge for the public authorities will be to organise the debate between these different actors in order to build the transition towards sustainable lifestyles. And while we generally find it difficult to debate this rapidly conflicting and divisive subject, the crisis may provide an opportunity to do so more calmly.

Democratic debate with citizens is also necessary. On the one hand, because the definition of a sustainable way of life is a political choice, made up of trade-offs between different societal aspirations. Indeed, there is no one sustainable way of life, but various sustainable lifestyles, depending on which dimension of sustainability is favoured.

Some of these dimensions reveal incompatibilities and require trade-offs in terms of priorities (for example, the nutritional recommendation to increase fish consumption is in contradiction with the environmental objective of preserving fish stocks), as well as trade-offs between different objectives (for example, between that of better rewarding farmers and that of controlling the increase in household food budgets). On the other hand, beyond an average vision, there is in fact a diversity of real lifestyles, depending on individual preferences and specific constraints. The transition to more sustainable lifestyles can therefore have very different meanings depending on one's situation. These reflections cannot be carried out at the individual level alone (changing my consumption, my lifestyle): as we wrote in a [previous blog post](#), reinventing our consumption in the direction of greater sustainability and prosperity requires a new pact, including lifestyle change, democratic renewal and reflection on the quality of the jobs created by our economies. This reflection, initiated by thinkers such as [Tim Jackson](#) in the midst of the 2009 crisis, is more topical than ever, and the work of the Citizens' Climate Convention is an excellent illustration of one way of carrying

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