

“While interactions between human health and the environment are at the heart of post-COVID-19 concerns, better traceability and management of flows and pollution could also contribute to the development of the circular economy at all scales, another field to develop partnerships for sustainable growth and the 2030 Agenda.”

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Image Source: In a salty, heavy metal polluted desert in the former seabed of the evaporated Aral Sea, Republic of Karakalpakstan, Uzbekistan, October 2019.
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Partnerships for the 2030 Agenda

The Covid-19 crisis is the second global major crisis in only a decade, following the financial crisis of 2008. It could prove a more substantial and durable game changer provided Europe steps up to champion multilateralism and environmental innovation.

As it accelerates the digitization in the industry, services and finance, the pandemic questions the economic organization and governance of a rapidly changing world. Asia, especially South-East Asia and China, or Africa, where endogenous growth factors are increasingly important, have not been as brutally and directly impacted by the pandemic as Europe or North America. What might trigger long term geopolitical changes also reinforces the relevance of a coordinated European recovery plan.

From the spring of 2020, voices were raised like that of Joseph Stiglitz pleading that the recovery plans do not serve

as an addition of shock absorbers to the crisis but drive future investments that would be as 'green' as possible. Whereas growth forecasts are quite different among economic sectors, with air transport or tourism much more impacted than other key infrastructure and digital services, global growth is made of interdependence and the Covid-19 crisis highlights the needs for cooperation and coordinated investments of an unprecedented magnitude. Monetary policies that support an abundance of liquidity and low lending rates can help but it will be up to the stimulus plans to strengthen strategic investments in the long run.

Private sector players' ability to work in partnership with regions and cities will be another factor of sustainable growth. Meeting the CO2 reduction imperative depends not only on the adoption and strengthening of environmental criteria in banking and finance. The role of local governments, in particular in large-scale metropolitan regions, will be key to build innovative forms of sustainable public procurements, while also including citizens in change processes.

Moving towards zero carbon mobility and public transportation, improving outdoor but also indoor air quality, are among major local and global public health priorities. In Europe, the crisis has pushed towards more fiscal and economic convergence among the EU members, reflected by the German presidency of the EU in the second half of 2020. As multilateral institutions have been challenged by the

crisis, whereas the 2030 Agenda, the negotiations around the COPs on climate and biodiversity or the G20 remain of tantamount importance. After essentially virtual meetings in 2020, we can only hope that the Italian presidency of the G20, that of the G7 by the United Kingdom, as well as the co-presidency by the United Kingdom and Italy of the COP26 on climate, design a new consensus around shared environmental and socio-economic objectives. The work and reflections of the multiple bodies that coexist within the G20, such as think-tanks, cities, or the private sector, will need to be streamlined around shared priorities to deepen and connect those groups' cross-sectoral proposals with ministers and leaders.

We are at a pivotal moment when the reconciliation between the macroeconomic objectives of the G20 and the regional recovery strategies can leverage environmental investments at unprecedented scale, an opportunity that Europe must seize.

The European Commission Green Deal has defined climate transition as a cornerstone for the Union, but China has also announced its commitment to carbon neutrality by 2060, on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the United Nations in September 2020. The new administration of President Joe Biden has confirmed the United-States would return to the Paris Agreement. Meanwhile, fifteen countries in the Asia Pacific region have signed a regional trade agreement covering a market of 2.2 billion people and more

than 30% of the world total GDP, making it the designated 'largest trade agreement in the world.' While Asia, the world's leading industrial and exporting region, emerges rather strengthened from the Covid-19 crisis, environmental stakes are economically and politically huge.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) appear all the more relevant a policy framework as they are well acknowledged not only by national governments, but also by the private sector, local governments, the civil society, research and academia. The way to achieve the SDGs will probably have to be reframed in light of the crisis and multiple finance gaps such as in sustainable infrastructure. Yet, we do need harmonized multilateral drivers should we want to fully overcome the crisis and change growth trajectories.

Profiling recovery plans through climate, biodiversity, social and corporate responsibility priorities can shape sustainable responses to the crisis of Covid-19 and we argue Europe should value its unique assets in the many global negotiations yet to come. As compared to the United States or China, the EU may be lagging behind in fields such as artificial intelligence, IT or biotechnologies, but it does have a competitive advantage in anticipating ecological transition, be it about regulation, norms and standards, industrial and technological innovation, notwithstanding the integration of local governments and the civil society in decision processes.

We should value the potential for cooperation between Europe and the countries of the Asia Pacific zone, including Central Asia, within the G20, bringing together global and national green recovery policies and enhancing the role of European countries in responding to global environment and development challenges. Europe is the cradle of environmental services companies which have become world leaders in key markets of the future. They have in-depth and proven know-how and expertise, in particular for valuing ecosystem services. The European Green Deal is all the more important as most countries also have to cope with the costly obsolescence and lack of resilience of infrastructure systems inherited from the 19th and the 20th centuries.

Existing infrastructure stocks have often locked-in too much carbon intensive development pathways and therefore, governments and private sector leaders should champion a real paradigm shift. Long-term investment in environment and energy related infrastructure, services and technologies should also be designed to support MS-MEs and to transform entire value chains including R&D, construction, equipment, manufacturing, control etc. In return, this would help accelerate the delivery of new, higher value services, based on artificial intelligence and the use of environmental data at the service of many sectors of the economy such as agriculture, industry or services. Implementing a systemic transformation also calls for a better territorial anchoring of large companies and the de-

velopment of new industrial alliances to develop innovation, new jobs, new skills, new scientific and industrial models... and patents. While interactions between human health and the environment are at the heart of post-Covid-19 concerns, better traceability and management of flows and pollution could also contribute to the development of the circular economy at all scales, another field of sustainable growth for which Europe could lead the way forward.