

ProSPER.Net Webinar on Sustainability in Higher Education 2021

Planetary Health Perspectives: Lessons from COVID-19 towards Climate Action

Organized by the Ateneo de Manila University and the University of the Philippines Diliman,
In collaboration with the United Nations University – Institute for the Advanced Study of Sustainability

October 22, 2021, 2-4pm Philippine Standard Time (3-5pm Japan Standard Time)

Background:

Spreading to every inhabited continent, the COVID-19 pandemic is said to be the “defining global health crisis of our time and the greatest challenge we have faced since World War Two (UNDP 2021)”. The UN Office for the Coordination of Human Affairs has logged a total of 47.5M cases in the Asia Pacific region with a spike of nearly half a million new cases in a day in May 2021 (UN OCHA 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic represents not only a global health crisis but also a socio-economic one as livelihoods and supply chains have been disrupted. However, the environmental impacts of COVID-19 response measures have varied – on the one hand, medical and hazardous wastes increased, and plastic and packaging wastes impose a burden on the environment; but on the other hand, GHG and other air pollutant emissions have decreased, and reduced anthropogenic activity has allowed ecosystems to recover (Rume and Islam 2020). These unintended “benefits” require a deeper reflection of the connections between COVID-19 and the environment. In this webinar, we focus specifically on learning from COVID-19 towards more effective climate action.

On the surface, the COVID-19 crisis seems to be a very different challenge from the climate crisis: the pandemic spread across the globe quickly, with immediate and dire impacts such as rising mortality rates. On the other hand, the impacts of climate change may be delayed across space and in time, and quantifying deaths directly attributable to climate change is difficult. However, connections between the two challenges are coming to light. For example, extreme weather events requiring evacuation and emergency shelters have posed additional challenges to the enforcement of physical distancing, as well as endangered supply chains and the provision of health services (Salas et al. 2020). Wearing a face mask in high heat and humidity increases the risk for heat-related illnesses and co-morbidities for COVID-19 such as cardio-vascular and pulmonary diseases have also been linked to the impacts of climate change (Salas et al. 2020)

At a deeper level, the COVID-19 crises and climate crisis do have aspects in common – both are trans-boundary and require transdisciplinary solutions (UNICEF 2020a). Both are “systems” problems requiring the concerted efforts of different sectors. Both are reflections of the importance of dynamic and open dialogue at the science-society interface towards effective decision-making. And both have shown that delaying action can be costly (Klenert et al. 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic, like the climate crisis, has also shown how the marginalized sectors, who lack access to basic services and sanitary and safe living conditions, are disproportionately vulnerable. Moving forward from the COVID-19 pandemic will require a re-thinking of lifestyles and economies. Interestingly, the paradigm shift required is something that would also benefit climate action. In the words of UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres:

“The world is facing an unprecedented test. And this is the moment of truth... The recovery from the COVID-19 crisis must lead to a different economy.... Everything we do during and after this crisis must be with a strong focus on building more equal, inclusive and sustainable economies and societies that are more resilient in the face of pandemics, climate change, and the many other global challenges we face.”¹

¹Cited in UNICEF (2020b), *Re-Imagining our Future: Build Back Better from COVID-19*; Originally in the launch of report on socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 “The recovery from the COVID-19 crisis must lead to a different economy” Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/launch-report-socio-economic-impacts-covid-19>.

In this face of the COVID-19 pandemic, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have shifted their energy and resources or adapted their operations to tackle the immediate needs crisis, perhaps, some may argue, even at the expense of other efforts to address the SDGs such as climate action. But separating the health sector policies and actions from climate sector policies and actions is “a dangerous delusion (Harvard T.H. Chan, n.d.)” given that individual and societal health is dependent on the health of the planet we live in. Already, the research into potential origins of COVID-19 virus and other similar viruses has shown how viruses in other species can be more easily transmitted to humans due to environmental problems such as deforestation and habitat loss, which are also aggravated by climate change. Thus, care for nature indeed translates into care for society.

Moving forward, how can HEIs lead the way towards social and environmental transformation that will build resilience in our communities and promote a healthy planet?

Objectives and Key Questions:

This webinar aims to share insights around our experiences of the pandemic, and reflect on what these mean for higher education institutions who seek to lead social and environmental transformations towards a more resilience society and a healthier planet.

The keynote speech will revolve around the key question, *“What lessons can we learn from the COVID-19 pandemic that can help us take action against global climate change?”*

The panel discussion will further delve into our experiences during the pandemic, touching upon the following questions in the context of the Asia-Pacific region:

- *What do the challenges of COVID-19 and climate change have in common? How are they different? What would these similarities and differences mean for how we re-structure our systems, processes, and perhaps, even lifestyles?*
- *What can we learn about ourselves and our institutional capacities based on how we have handled the COVID-19 crisis? What might this imply for the climate crisis?*
- *To what extent has our COVID-19 response practiced evidence-based decision-making? How can we improve on the interface between science and society?*
- *How has our COVID-19 response impacted progress on the other SDGs, particularly SDG 13 on climate action? Were there compromises or trade-offs in efforts to address the other SDGs while resources were diverted to address the pandemic? How can we move forward in a way that synergizes recovery from the pandemic with climate action, and social and environmental resilience?*

Panelists are invited from different fields – the physical and natural sciences, social sciences, the humanities, and management – to provide different perspectives. The interdisciplinary composition of the panel format will help demonstrate how these perspectives can be complementary towards crafting a holistic approach for community climate action. The interdisciplinary approach of HEIs is an important element towards understanding and crafting a transdisciplinary and transboundary approach to complex problems. This webinar will try to clarify the role of HEIs in facilitating a transdisciplinary approach to problem-solving across different sectors. The webinar will conclude with a reflection on the ways forward for HEIs to ensure that the lessons learned from the pandemic are put into practice specifically towards inter-/trans-disciplinary and sustained climate action.

Tentative Programme

Time (Philippine Standard Time)	Agenda	Speakers
2:00 – 2:20 pm	Welcome Ceremonies Welcome Remarks Congratulatory Remarks	Fr. Roberto C. Yap, SJ, PhD, President, Ateneo de Manila University (TBC) UNU-IAS (TBC)
2:20 – 2:40	Keynote Speech	Fr. Jose Ramon T. Villarin, SJ, PhD, IPCC Climate Scientist, Executive Director of the Manila Observatory, and former President of ADMU
2:40 – 3:40pm	Panel Discussion with Q&A (8-10 minutes speech per panelist followed by Q&A)	ProSPERNet Panelists: Prof. Ika Dewi Ana, Vice Rector of Research and Community Services, Universitas Gadjah Mada Prof. Rajib Shaw, Graduate School of Media and Governance in Keio University's Shonan Fujisawa Campus (SFC); Former Executive Director of the Integrated Research on Disaster Risk (IRDR) Prof. Arun Kansal, Dean (Academic) & Head, Department of Regional Water Studies, TERI School of Advanced Studies (Deemed to be University), India, IPCC Scientist Panel Moderator: Prof. Deepak Sharma, Asian Institute of Technology, ProSPER.Net Board Chair (TBC)
3:40 – 4:00 pm	Reflection on the role of HEIs Closing of the Program	Dr. Fidel R. Nemenzo, Chancellor, University of the Philippines Diliman

Emcee (Master of Ceremonies): **TBD**

References

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