

OPINIONS AND LETTERS

Post-COVID 19 scenarios

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With the world glued to news portals to glean the latest titbits of information on how the latest pandemic is panning out, many are splitting hairs in an attempt to predict the timeline of the virus' next moves.

Economists are the obvious choice as to the main category of experts conducting such forecasting guess-work. The Dutch multi-national banking and financial services corporation ING Group, for instance, has concocted four possible future scenarios which will see us dispatching the year 2020 off.

These scenarios range from the base case, which contemplates a gradual return to normality as lockdowns are partially lifted by the end of April, resulting in a U-shaped economic recovery, to a winter lockdown one as well as to a best case and worst case scenario.

The winter lockdown scenario is simply a slight deviation from the base scenario, with the virus rearing its head once again in autumn, delivering a W-shaped economic recovery graph.

According to the best-case scenario, lockdowns are lifted as soon as the curve of new infections is flattened, emulating China's steps, with a robust and fast economic rebound, represented by a V-shaped economic recovery, while the worst-case scenario contemplates a rigid imposition of lockdown until the end of the year, with the consequence being an L-shaped economic recovery trace.

The probability of the latter two scenarios occurring is considerably lower, according to the economists behind the crystal ball, than that for the first two scenarios.

But future scenario generation is not the exclusive turf of economists. Environmentalists are increasingly being asked to try their hand at it, given the materialisation of the new 'normal,' or rather the suppressed greenhouse gas emissions and improved air quality standards.

The unexpected improvement in urban air quality and



The urge to rebound economically in the short-term once the pandemic is behind us will invariably result in a restoration of pre-pandemic traffic flows. PHOTO: CHRIS SANT FOURNIER

the slump in greenhouse emissions has actually spurred some (such as *Alternattiva Demokratika*) to call for the preservation of this new 'normal', to pre-empt the reinstatement of the 'business-as-usual' scenario once the pandemic is over.

This would entail a greater investment in sustainable travel modes and in more efficient public transport, and will eventually materialise, albeit not in the short-term given the quantum leap in infrastructure and in collective behaviour that these represent.

I might sound like a wet blanket but the urge to rebound eco-

nomically in the short-term once the pandemic is behind us will invariably result in a restoration of pre-pandemic seasonal traffic flows, even though a predicted gradual relaxation of lockdown measures will probably not result in an abrupt surge in greenhouse and traffic-associated emissions.

However, while the COVID-19 impacts on emissions and air quality standards are somewhat predictable given the direct cause effect between vehicular flows and emissions, future trends in the land use and waste management domains are more elusive to predict.

The most likely related impacts of the current economic slowdown are Janus-faced in nature: on the one hand, a lower degree of liquidity, if sustained long enough, will result in lower land use pressures given that the property market is generally depicted as a judicious investment opportunity.

On the other hand, the urge to bounce back economically might suppress the general presumption against further development in Outside Development Zones (ODZs), with major government-mandated construction and infrastructural works seen as a panacea to tease up economic growth.

Dampened government revenue might translate in less

funds dedicated to the burgeoning costs associated with environmental management, including the running of the Environment and Resources Authority (ERA) and Wasteserv.

The disappearance of tourism as a result of the pandemic has mellowed our national freshwater consumption rates, which also translates into lower greenhouse emissions (as a result of the energy-guzzling desalination process).

If the current lockdown extends into and beyond the peak summer tourist season, then the positive environmental impact will also extend to the overall status of the marine environment given the subdued cruise liner and recreational vessel traffic flows as well as discharged treated sewage flows.

The current pandemic has had another, unexpected impact – that of enhancing the status of subsistence farming in Malta, as the reality of our dependence on daily food shipments from abroad dawned on many. Such a rise in status might result in an agricultural renewal on the islands.

The legitimate diversion of police resources to overseeing compliance with government COVID-19 regulations will probably take a toll on the identification of spring hunt-

ing infringements (and possibly even next autumn, when the main hunting season reopens, if the second advent of the virus outbreak materialises, as anticipated), as these are needed elsewhere.

There are already indications that a number of environmental infringements are on the rise, including the national pastime of dumping construction debris in the countryside.

On the positive side, a somewhat subdued effort in manicuring public spaces as a result of social distancing strictures has dampened the use of herbicides and insecticides, such that a rebound in insect populations, including those of pollinators, is anecdotally being registered, as well as in the extent of plants falling under the misnomer of 'roadside weeds.'

Despite a full lockdown looming over us, environmental advocacy by civil society has, to date, not waned, with environmental NGOs still struggling with the pace of the planning and development mill and the public increasingly resorting to social media to reporting cases of environmental infringements and to discuss the de-merits of a number of approved permits.

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