

Global warming to global warning

Prof. Pierre MALLIA

There is no doubt that the amount of air pollution in countries struck by the COVID-19 virus went down considerably. The lockdown decreased the amount of cars for starters and even industry was affected according to sources. But the real question is whether this is temporary. Are we going back to square one once things return to normal? Are we going to take this as a 'global warning'?

The answer, I believe, lies not in individual decisions. Left individually we all buy the necessary products, we all use cars daily, we continue to go to places, such as school meetings, after which we ask why we attended. The word 'solidarity' was thrown around a lot – perhaps with wrong timing – but solidarity has to come with together starting somewhere to reduce our air pollution and in turn reduce traffic congestion, time of travelling, expenses of diesel and petrol, and indeed waste of time. The answer, again, in my opinion, is to use what we have learned to reduce the amount of traffic and air pollution. Here are some ideas:

1. Children have been receiving lessons at home, and university students got used to virtual learning and 'Zoom' meetings. Adults also worked from home. If we assess the success of these endeavours in a crisis and see how they can be improved in more normal times, can we not make the jump of dividing our office ours, where possible, into two or three days physically at work (to meet clients, have social contact, and maintain the working environment), but also have one or two days a week in which work can be done electronically from home. Probably meetings will have less confrontation. Children are facing a virtual world anyway and this will serve them as good training. It was a first for me to use virtual meetings for both local and international meetings. They waste less time and avoid local and international travel.
2. Can we do away with useless meetings such as crowded parents' days? If need be we can have virtual meetings here too, spread over some time or by appointment.
3. Do we really need to deliver that car application, or passport application for that matter, in person? Why cannot these be done online? We would certainly reduce a considerable amount of travel especially during traffic hours.
4. Even hospital appointments have been shown to be able to withstand a little reduction. Cardiology doctors were personally calling patients to see how they were doing and giving them advice. Rather than having two or three appointments a year, people can have one when they are outside the danger zone. It saves a considerable amount of time and avoids a lot of people sitting together in waiting rooms.

I am sure that working together many people can come up with many other ideas. We once generated twenty ways on how to reduce traffic. But small steps at a time will definitely help. Do we really need all these cars in the country – what incentive can we give to use public transport? Perhaps a tax reduction? A look at balance sheets could show that this may just be possible.

On an international level the EU has come under attack. It was certainly not prepared and countries showed how divided they are when it comes to the introduction of emergency measures, shutting down airports, and now supporting each other financially. Can our parliamentarians reduce the amount of travel and waste they carry out at EU level? They all complain about the futility and extra travel resulting from meeting in Strasbourg. Moreover, travel by air to and from countries does not really set an example. Let's face it, our habits of increased travel, low cost airlines, and travelling further and further away have given nature more vectors on which such viruses can travel. But imagine the carbon emissions being added to the atmosphere.

Let's face it, we are not about to give up our luxuries without incentives unfortunately. We are all going to buy cars and go for perhaps more than one holiday a year. Don't even mention giving up on our mobile phones and changing them every two or three years. Luxury is very difficult to give up. But what we can do is change the way we do things without giving up anything else really. If COVID-19 has taught us anything in this regard, it is that besides the initial 'survival of the fittest' instinct of buying and hoarding groceries, we can all use the internet to greater advantage and we all appreciated the lack of congestion on roads and the news that our air is cleaner. So are we simply going to go back to the original state of affairs?

Natural events have given us a warning. It does not take a tsunami to kill many people. A disaster situation can be caused by a virus. We knew this. The WHO knew this. And yet we were still unprepared. Internationally at least we did not have a contingency plan.

Prof. Pierre MALLIA

MD PhD CBiol MPhil MA(Law) DipICGP
MMCFD FRCP(London) FRCGP(UK)

Editor, JMCFD

Former President, MCFD

Email: pierre.mallia@um.edu.mt