

During the pandemic, there was a temporary improvement in air quality, greenhouse gas emissions were reduced and a lower level of noise pollution was recorded. Unfortunately, these were not the only environmental consequences of quarantine, so the use of disposable plastics increased so sharply, as the demand for protective equipment such as masks, gloves and the use of disinfectants increased radically. Restaurants had to focus their offer on deliveries, so the use of disposable plastic food containers rose sharply, and more frequent stays at home contributed to a significant increase in online shopping, which also requires the use of plastic. Crude oil prices have fallen in the global market, making it cheaper to produce new plastics instead of recycling existing ones. Companies that produce recycled plastics have lost so much revenue during the pandemic that they are considering seeking public support for recycling or demanding the introduction of a tax on new plastics. Failure to take any action will certainly lead to the closure of European plastic recycling plants, given that many have already closed their doors during the epidemic. The historically low price of crude oil has simply made recycled plastics uncompetitive.

The key findings like the above are a reflection of the great work ahead of us to look at the consequences of the epidemic in the context of the environment and accompanying European policies, the EEA believes. Their conclusion is that a pandemic further emphasizes the cause-and-effect relationship between natural and social systems: The resilience of a society depends on the resilience of the ecosystem. The EEA emphasizes that the loss of biodiversity caused by the intensification of agricultural activity has made zoonotic diseases more common. Numerous social inequalities correlate with environmental factors such as poorer air quality which has different outcomes in the case of COVID-19 disease.

Interestingly, the Agency's report shows that anecdotal stories about the power of bird singing in the spring correlated with noise reduction in cities, confirming numerous studies on how noise pollution has negative effects on the natural world. It was concluded that less noise pollution - both in cities and villages - has a positive effect on the recovery of bird populations. Less human presence, offers birds more protection and a freer choice of nesting site. New research will focus on how to provide green oases in cities that would boost cities' resilience to new climate and health impacts. The agency believes that creating green oases in cities would contribute to sustainability policies. When we look at greenhouse gas emissions, it turns out that quarantine has reduced gases both at the European level (for now 7.6 percent, complete calculations cannot yet exist), but also globally. Interestingly, the forced decline in road passenger transport (57 percent) and air transport (62.5 percent), as well as budget cuts, will eventually lead to some of Europe's environmental goals - such as increasing the energy efficiency of the transport sector by 20

percent. With the decline in traffic, the concentration of NO₂ (nitrogen dioxide) particles in the air also dropped significantly. These are particles that are mainly emitted by road traffic (and apartment heating, wood burning, agriculture, industry, etc.), and which have diameters of PM₁₀ and PM_{2.5}. Recall that the coronavirus binds to these particles (aerosols) and in particularly polluted environments further endangers the body. For example, the city where a large correlation of PM particles in the atmosphere and escalation of COVID-19 disease has been recorded is Bergamo, Italy, from where we watched startling footage half a year ago in which the army was transporting corpses from the city by truck. Because these particles cause cardiovascular and respiratory disease, and bind to SARS-CoV-2 virus themselves, it appears that increased mortality from COVID-19 disease can be expected in more polluted environments. In Italy, the genetic material of the SARS-CoV-2 virus was detected on PM samples taken from the city of Bergamo in northern Italy (Setti et al., 2020). Although there are concerns that air pollution could transmit the virus over longer distances and trigger infection, it is not known at this stage whether the virus remains viable on the pollution particles. Another Italian study showed that because prolonged exposure to air pollution, including PM, ozone (O₃) and sulfur dioxide (SO₂), weakens the immune defense of the upper respiratory tract, it would facilitate the entry of SARS-CoV-2 into the lower respiratory tract which results in COVID-19 infection (Conticini et al., 2020). However, the EEA emphasizes that “within these early studies there are a number of significant limitations and the findings must be interpreted carefully”. During the epidemic, it also became clear that COVID did not affect all socio-economic groups equally. Several factors may have increased the vulnerability of people with low socio-economic status. Poor people are more likely to live in low-quality, overcrowded accommodation, where they do not have the ability to adhere to social distancing recommendations. They are also more likely to have jobs that cannot be done from home, such as working in health care, nursing homes, supermarkets, factories, warehouses, and public transportation. In addition, people with lower socio-economic status will find it more difficult to cope with unstable working conditions and face financial uncertainty due to the economic consequences of COVID-19. Such persons are under significant pressure to continue working even when they become ill, in order to protect household income. In addition to a higher risk of transmission in such conditions, chronic stress also weakens the immune system, increasing susceptibility to a number of diseases. Finally, poorer people in urban areas are likely to be exposed to higher levels of air and noise pollution associated with respiratory and cardiovascular diseases, and hypertension, respectively. All of these factors contribute to an increased risk of mortality from COVID-19, suggesting that people

of low socioeconomic status are more susceptible to mortality from COVID-19, the EEA report states.

Any accidental successes in achieving the 20 percent sustainability target of any sector will need to be kept in mind next year when Europe lists the areas where the target has been achieved. In most of them, success will not be the result of European environmental, health or socio-economic policies but a forced shutdown of the economy in 2020. This also means that all European successes will be reduced to 2020, while in the event of a pandemic we will continue with ideology „business as usual “already in 2021 to give bad results again.

Source: bilten.org