

## IASS-Blogpost

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[Dachzeile]

# The pandemic: An opportunity for transformation?

## An interim report

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The response to the coronavirus pandemic has brought about changes that would once have seemed unthinkable. As part of its precautionary measures, the state has been permitted to limit freedoms in order to protect the health of its citizens. The flood of mass tourism has become a trickle and the number of people commuting to work has plummeted. As economies slow, so too do greenhouse gas emissions. As a result, Germany has reached its climate goals for 2020 after all. The pandemic has also seen a surge in solidarity, with citizens helping each other with the shopping, collecting donations for shuttered cinemas and much more. Parliaments have seen bipartisan support for bridging loans, debt moratoriums, and stimulus programmes to keep businesses afloat and support struggling families.

These developments soon piqued the interest of social scientists – including the authors. Is the coronavirus crisis a sufficiency scenario of the kind envisioned by some thought leaders and proponents of the “Great Transformation” towards sustainability? Is it really the case that we are accepting restrictions, ramping up our use of digital infrastructure, redistributing resources, and placing a priority on the well-being of the many rather than material wealth and consumer freedoms? How far does our concern for staff in critical sectors go? What will remain of our heightened appreciation for community and family cohesion when this crisis has passed? Such questions will be familiar to many of our readers. Previous epidemics, such as the bubonic plague that ravaged Europe for centuries, suggest that the lessons learned are

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not lasting ones. On the contrary, if we are to believe historians, by and large we prefer to forget and to focus instead on recovering and making up for what has been lost. [1]

A team of researchers from the IASS and infas, the Institute for Applied Social Science, launched a collaborative project in autumn 2020 to explore these aspects of the pandemic and its impacts. We have reached a mid-point in our research process but, like the pandemic, we are far from finished. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, our work on the development and evaluation phases has been accompanied by controversial and wide-ranging discussions.

### **Studying the pandemic’s impact on transformations towards sustainability**

Transformations towards sustainability are usually thought of in terms of strengthening, rather than weakening, local value chains, and the renunciation of energy-intensive behaviour is generally associated with a conservation gain, rather than a loss in social contact. Abrupt disruption of the kind seen in the service sector, e.g. in the resource-intensive hospitality industry, does not necessarily translate into long-term structural and societal transformations that deliver resource savings. Improving sustainability – in its local and global dimensions – requires in particular a reduction in social inequality worldwide rather than the increase that we have observed throughout the pandemic. And ultimately, a socio-ecological “transformation by disaster” would only be sustainable “by design” [2] if it succeeded in winning the lasting approval of citizens who are able to fully exercise their basic rights and are in a position to choose among different courses of action.

The pandemic presents us with a wholly different scenario. Reflecting on this last winter, German Chancellor Angela Merkel argued that the current circumstances represented a state of emergency rather than a new normal: “Our normality is the life we knew before the pandemic.” [3]

Is the widespread approval of the measures adopted in response to the pandemic in Germany a sign that people are gritting their teeth in the hope of an early (and complete) return to the pre-pandemic normality of heady consumerism? Are people persevering because the foreseeable reward seems to be almost within reach, rather than lying in some distant future or merely in the well-being of future generations? Or are there elements in this upheaval that will stay with us and facilitate learning for other, more far-reaching transformations? And if these elements will have a lasting effect, who are their social carriers?

These questions are of particular interest to our project. We began our work in October 2020 with an initial survey. Given the dynamics of this crisis, a one-off survey would paint a diffuse picture and could only amount to a snapshot, and so we opted to undertake at least two surveys in total. To date, the questions developed for this research have been included twice in infas’ monthly nationwide survey of 1,000 households (dual-frame sample) in slots spanning approximately ten minutes.

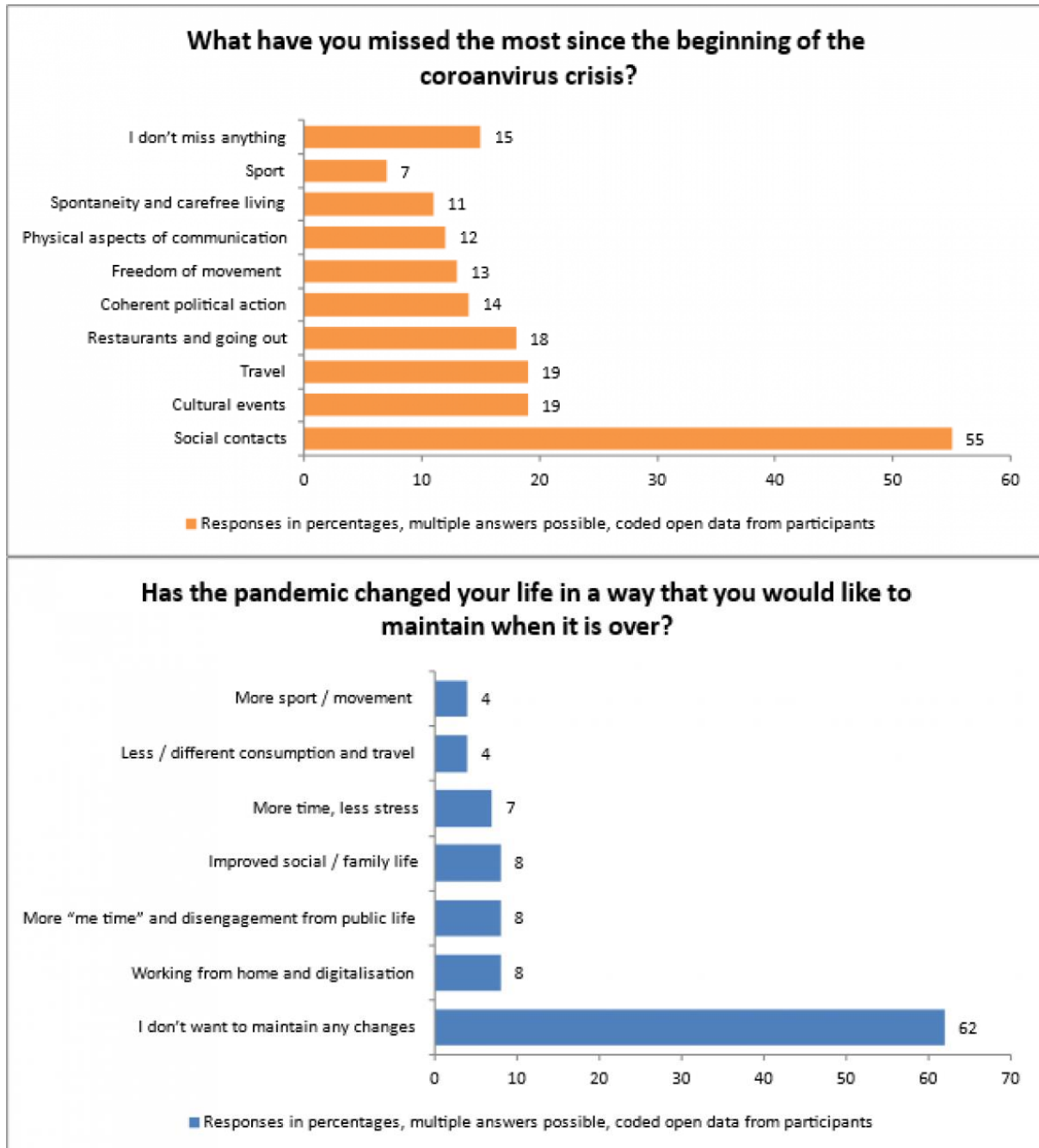


Inspired by the insight that people are more likely to “switch cognitive gears” [4] when changing circumstances render familiar routines obsolete, we want to find out who is actually switching gears and in what direction. By no means do we wish to play down the hardships experienced by people – whether directly or indirectly – in connection with the pandemic. However, the focus of this research lies on experiences of change in professional and private life, including social connections and identities, as well as experiences of the local natural environment – these are explored against the backdrop of a research agenda that is informed, at least to an extent, by an environmental psychology perspective. [5]

### **Covid-19: The great equalizer?**

Our first survey, conducted in autumn 2020, took place before the second lockdown was imposed and long after the shock of the first. In line with the findings of other authors, we observed a broad range of changes in everyday life that people assessed both negatively and positively, especially in response to our open-ended questions. However, the breadth and detail of our results clearly go beyond those of previous research. And this against the background of what our respondents on average assessed to be a moderate impairment of everyday life (on average 3.2 points on a scale of 1 – 5).

With respect to those behaviours that can be changed in the short term, a particularly large number of respondents missed unrestricted travel (which leaves a considerable ecological footprint). The same proportion of respondents, almost one fifth, lamented the suspension of cultural events. The changes that respondents experienced as positive included more conscious (or less) consumption and an increase in time spent outdoors, an improved work-life balance and improved home office options. However, only around five percent of respondents reported such experiences respectively. Almost one fifth of the people in our sample reported a strengthening of social and family relationships despite the contact restrictions. Half of the respondents, however, did not report any positive changes at all in October 2020. And only a third (38 per cent) expressed a desire to carry over lifestyle changes into the post-pandemic era.



**Data basis: 1,006 telephone interviews (CATI, Dual Frame), October 2020**

The surprising thing about the data collected in October, however, was not the actual responses, but the fact that their variance across the sample could not be explained by the usual socio-structural indicators such as age, gender or income. Many of the factors that one would expect to influence subjective responses to restrictions imposed in connection with the pandemic were either absent or so minimal that they accounted for less than four percent of

the variance ( $r < 0.2$ ). Age effects and differences in available housing space per person or along the infas living situation index (ilex) did not play a important role, for example. Also, although positive experiences and the willingness to change were significantly more pronounced among women and members of the middle class than among men and members of the lower and upper classes, these correlations were also of an order of magnitude that can only be described as "homeopathic". Nor could this variance be accounted for by psychological moderator variables such as value orientations or control beliefs, which we also surveyed. Different cluster solutions also failed to reveal any discernable patterns that could be better interpreted.

In our preliminary analysis we arrive at two not irreconcilable but certainly divergent interpretations for this finding. It is possible that for a large number of people a sense of continuity of pre-pandemic everyday life prevailed through to October 2020 so that the anticipated adoption of different adaptation strategies and "switching" in different social strata failed to occur. This dovetails with the response of 31 percent of those surveyed at the time, who stated that there had been no negative changes in their lives as a result of the pandemic. It is also possible that the pandemic acted as more of a leveller at this stage of its development. This would reflect both our tendency, when faced with acute threats, to emphasise commonalities with those to whom we feel a sense of belonging in order to compensate for a loss of individual control [6] as well as the similar impact on most people of the restrictions on social contacts.

Now, over six months later, we have the opportunity to review these interpretations based on the findings of our second survey. In the process, we will consider whether people are increasingly longing for a return to "pre-pandemic normality" in the face of this prolonged crisis or are in fact already adapting to these changed circumstances. It is our assumption that the burden of this crisis will have heightened differences between living situations, but also between age groups and household types. We anticipate that this will affect both people's perception of their needs and their expectations around how these will be satisfied in the future. Which social groups will embrace change, if tentatively, and what connections they will make between the pandemic and the ecological crisis remains to be seen and we hope to offer some answers in the second half of the year.

**This blog post was first published in a modified version in the infas magazine "Lagemaß" (issue Nr. 11).**

### **Further reading:**

- [1] Volker Reinhardt, Die Macht der Seuche. Wie die große Pest die Welt veränderte 1347 – 1353. Munich 2021.
- [2] B. Sommer & H. Welzer, Transformationsdesign. Wege in eine zukunftsfähige Moderne, München 2017, S. 27
- [3] "Ich bin im Reinen mit mir". Interview with Angela Merkel, FAZ, 25.2.2021
- [4] M. R. Louis & R. I. Sutton, "Switching cognitive gears: From habits of mind to active



thinking”, in *Human Relations* 44(1), 1991

[5] G. Reese et al., „Sars-Cov-2 and environmental protection: A collective psychology agenda for environmental psychology research”, in *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 70, 2020, 101444

[6] I Fritsche, E. Jonas, T. Fankhänel, “The role of control motivation in mortality salience effects on ingroup support and defense”, in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 95(3), 2008, S. 524-541