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Doughnut model offers a way out of the hole we are in once the coronavirus crisis lifts

Philip Rodney | Monday April 27 2020, 12.01am, The Times

“Never waste a good crisis.” The quote has been variously attributed. Most probably it originates from Winston Churchill in the mid-1940s as the end of the Second World War approached. It resonates strongly as we enter the sixth week of the lockdown.

There is at least hope that coronavirus cases are starting to plateau. The possibility of a limited relaxation of the restrictions is being debated. What form it will take is not yet clear, nor is the timetable.

But there is also a tension. On the one hand, there are those who long for a speedy return to [business as usual](#) — both figuratively and literally. On the other, there are some who believe that the experience of our reaction to the Covid-19 pandemic has taught us some important lessons and that these give us an opportunity to reboot our approach.

Over the past couple of months, as we’ve been living simpler and slower lives, perhaps we have also reprioritised our needs, creating space to develop new interests and skills (I baked our youngest son’s birthday cake). We also appear to have enjoyed some of the by-products of our simpler lifestyles. The roads are quieter, pollution levels are substantially lower and people smile at each other.

If we just bounce back to our old ways, are we perhaps missing an opportunity to rethink some fundamental issues? By that I mean more than the ability to work in our pyjamas or substituting Zoom for human engagement. Is this not a chance for self-examination and reimagining the shape of progress?



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This month Amsterdam took the brave step of adopting the Doughnut Model, a framework for sustainable development created by Kate Raworth, an economist who worked for 20 years for the United Nations and Oxfam, before becoming a visiting research fellow at the University of Oxford. If you haven’t watched it, I would recommend her TED talk — *A healthy economy should be designed to thrive, not grow*. The broad thesis — set out in her book, *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st Century Economist* — is that our belief that growth provides the means to solve problems by throwing resources at them simply creates stresses and strains in other ways. Instead, we should aspire to a model where everyone has access to their basic needs.

The hole in the middle of the doughnut is where people fall short of life’s essentials. The inner ring delineates the minimum requirements (the necessities for a good life) of income, work, health, social networks, political participation etc. The outer ring signifies the ecological limits of the planet, such as climate change, ozone layer depletion and a decline in biodiversity. If we overshoot the outer circle, we overload our planet. The area between these two rings represents the sweet spot where we can balance the needs of people without harming the environment. This contrasts with our present approach, where growth is seen as providing a cure for all but benefits only a minority.

Amsterdam sees the adoption of a circular economy as helping its post-pandemic recovery. Rather than setting itself conventional GDP objectives, it aims “to give ourselves and others a fair chance at a good life”. As an example, by 2030 the city aims to cut food waste by 50 per cent, with the surplus being distributed to those who need it most. It also has set the objective of by then halving the use of new materials by using products longer, sharing and repairing them. It will adopt tougher sustainability requirements in construction tenders and will reduce its own use of raw materials by 20 per cent.

Similar ideas are being explored here. The [Circular Glasgow initiative](#) launched by Glasgow Chamber of Commerce is aimed at inspiring businesses to become future-proof by adopting circular strategies. It has focused on pilot projects. As an example, in a collaboration with Aulds the Bakers, the craft microbrewery Jaw Brew has created a blond beer using surplus morning rolls as one of its main ingredients. Everyone wins.

As Homer Simpson rather sagely said: “You can’t buy happiness, but you can buy doughnuts. And that’s kind of the same thing.”

Philip Rodney is a consultant, columnist and non-executive director

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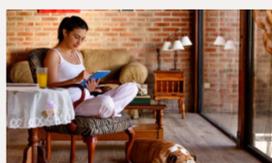
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