

How We Can Build a Hardier World After the Coronavirus

By [Bill McKibben](#) April 16, 2020

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Inequality means that some people must live near sources of air pollution, such as a steel mill, in Detroit—which in turn weakens their lungs and means that they can't fight off COVID-19. Photograph from Alamy

have been operating on a very thin margin. The edifice seems so shiny and substantial, a world of silver jets stitching together cities of towering skyscrapers, a globe of soaring markets and smartphone connectivity. But a couple of months into this disease and it's all tottering, the jets grounded and the cities silent and the markets reeling. One industry after another is heading for bankruptcy, and no one knows if they will come back. In other words, however shiny it may have seemed, it wasn't very sturdy. Some people—the President, for instance—think that we can just put it all back like it was before, with a “big bang,” once the “invisible enemy” is gone. But any prosperity built on what was evidently a shaky foundation is going to seem Potemkinish going forward; we don't want always to feel as if we're just weeks away from some kind of chaos.

The [coronavirus](#) pandemic has revealed one particularly shocking thing about our societies and economies: they

So if we're thinking about building civilization back in a hardier and more resilient form, we'll have to learn what a more stable footing might look like. I think that we can take an important lesson from the doctors dealing with the coronavirus, and that's related to comorbidity, or underlying conditions. It turns out, not surprisingly, that if you've got diabetes or hypertension, or have a suppressed immune system, you're far more likely to be felled by *COVID-19*.

Societies, too, come with underlying conditions, and the two that haunt our planet right now are inequality and ecological turmoil. They've both spiked in the past few decades, with baleful results that normally stay just below the surface, felt but not fully recognized. But as soon as something else goes wrong—a new microbe launches a pandemic, say—they become starkly evident. Inequality, in this instance, means

that people have to keep working, even if they're not well, because they lack health insurance and live day to day, paycheck to paycheck, and hence they can spread disease. Ecological instability, especially the ever-climbing mercury, means that even as governors try to cope with the pandemic they must worry, too, about the prospect of another [spring with massive flooding](#) across the Midwest, or how they'll cope if [wildfire season gets out of control](#). Last month, the U.S. Forest Service announced that, owing to the pandemic, it is [suspending controlled burns](#), for instance, "one of the most effective tools for increasing California's resiliency to fire." God forbid that we get another big crisis or two while this one is still preoccupying us—but simple math means that it's almost inevitable.

And, of course, all these things interact with one another: inequality means that some people must live near sources of air pollution that most of us wouldn't tolerate, which in turn means that their lungs are weakened, which [in turn](#) means they can't fight off the coronavirus. (It also means that some of the same people can lack access to good food, and are more likely to be diabetic.) And, if there's a massive wildfire, smoke fills the air for weeks, weakening everybody's lungs, but especially those at the bottom of the ladder. When there's a hurricane and people need to flee, the stress and the trauma can compromise immune systems. Simply living at the sharp end of an unequal and racist society [can do the same thing](#). And so on, in an unyielding spiral of increasing danger.

Since we must rebuild our economies, we need to try to engineer out as much ecological havoc and inequality as we can—as much danger as we can. That won't be easy, but there are clear and obvious steps that would help—there are ways to structure the increased use of renewable energy that will confront inequality [at the same time](#). Much will be written about such plans in the months to come, but at the level of deepest principle here's what's key, I think: from a society that has prized growth above all and been willing to play fast and loose with justice and ecology, we need to start emphasizing sturdiness, hardiness, resiliency. (And a big part of that is fairness.) The resulting world won't be quite as shiny, but, somehow, shininess seems less important now.