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# The socio-ethical consequences of the COVID-19 anthropause

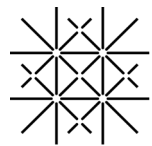
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**SGBE seminar for biomedical ethics**

**Bigorio, 18 January 2024**



Universität  
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Source: iStock

# The COVID-19 anthropause



Image: Twitter/@GonzaloAvilaNZ, indianexpress.com



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Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space

Impact Factor: **2.9**  
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Research article  
First published online January 10, 2024

## Don't waste the crisis: The COVID-19 Anthropause as an experiment for rethinking human-environment relations

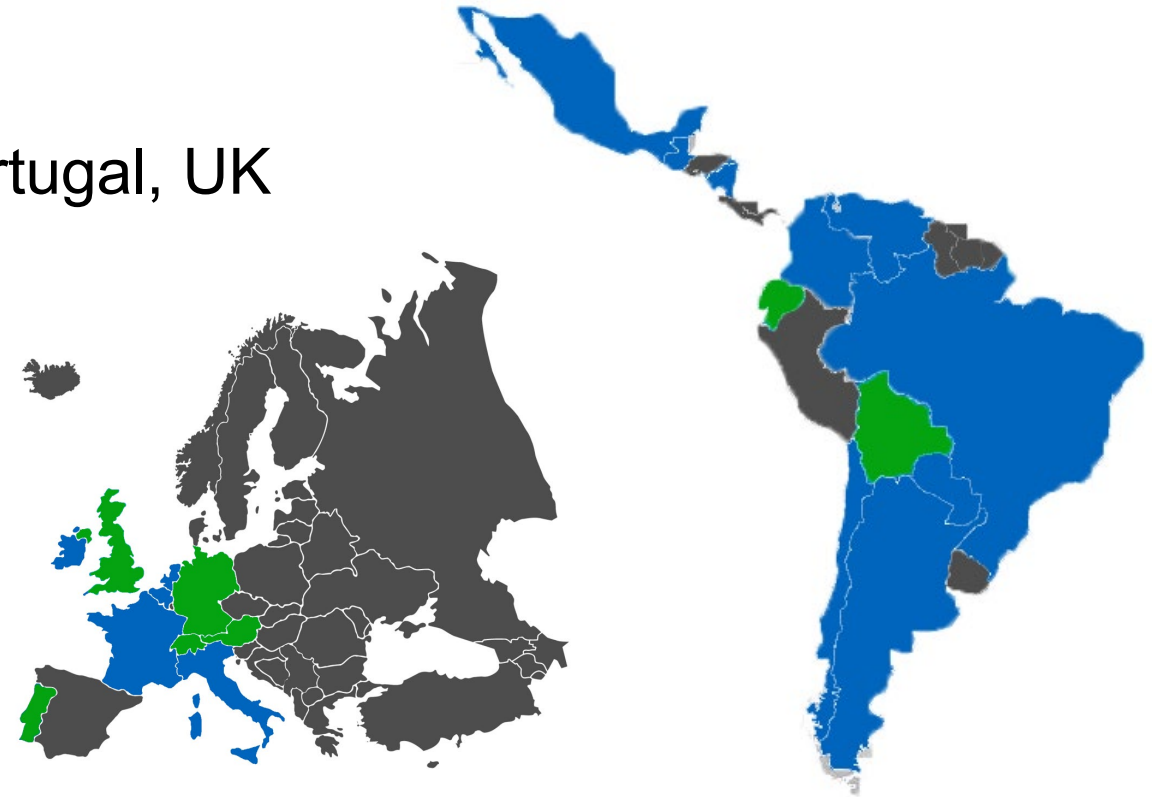
[Amelia Fiske](#) , [Isabella M Radhuber](#), [Consuelo Fernández Salvador](#), [Emilia Rodrigues Araújo](#) , [Marie Jasser](#) , [Gertrude Saxinger](#), [Bettina M Zimmermann](#), and [Barbara Prainsack](#) [View all authors and affiliations](#)

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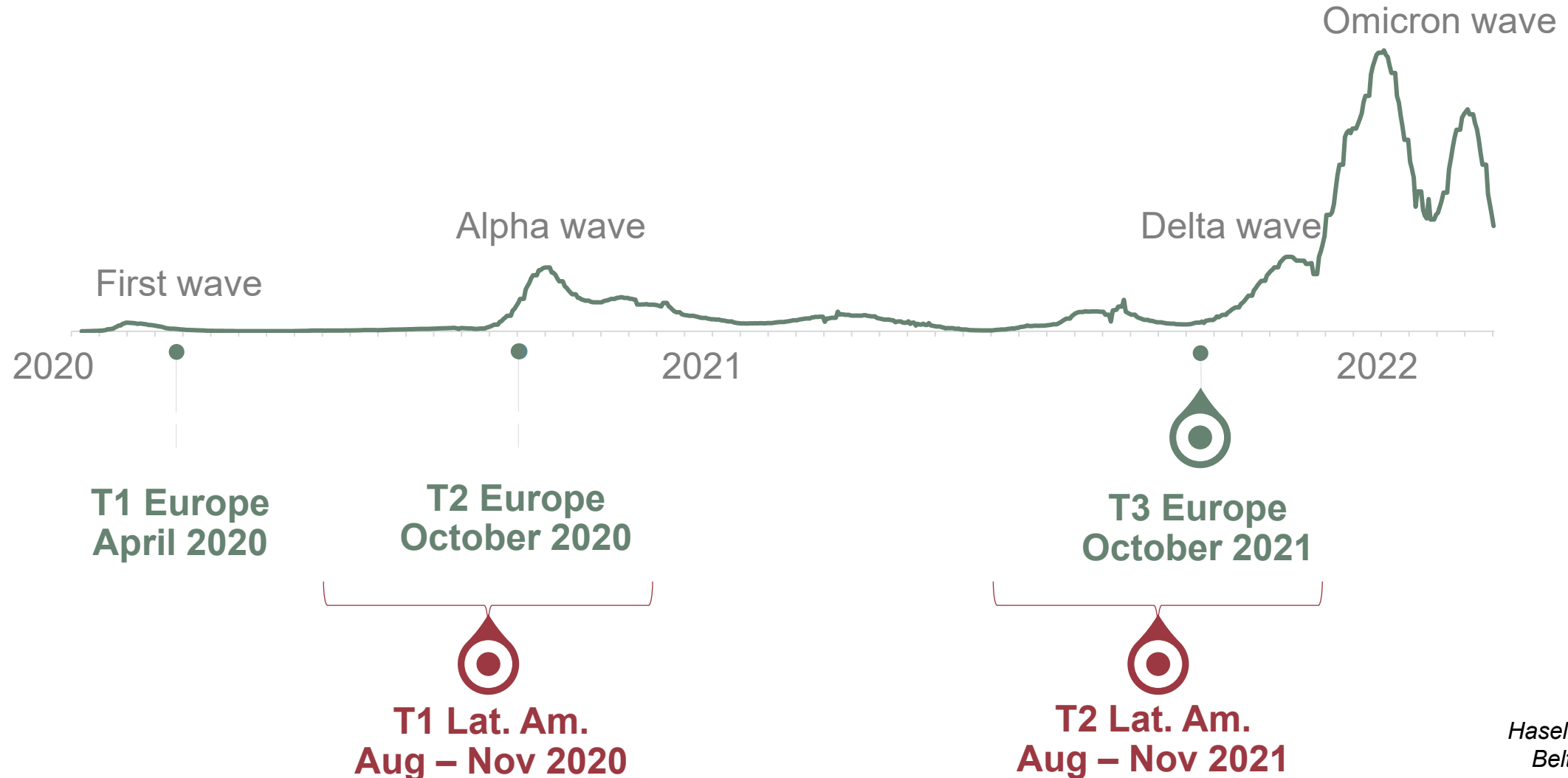
# The SolPan(+) Research Commons

- A large-scale longitudinal qualitative interview study
- 10 European and 12 Latin American countries
- This analysis:
  - Austria, Germany, Switzerland, Portugal, UK
  - Bolivia, Ecuador



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# Methods: longitudinal interview study



Hasell, J., Mathieu, E., Beltekian, D. et al. A cross-country database of COVID-19 testing. *Sci Data* 7, 345 (2020).

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# Recruitment and interviews

- Recruitment
  - Adult residents of participating countries eligible to participate
  - Recruited through online ads, social media, snowballing
  - Purposive sampling – variety of demographics (age, gender, income, household, living area, employment situation)
- Interview guides
  - Focus on the lived experiences of participants → narratives and reasoning
  - Topics relevant to the pandemic situation at the time of the interviews (e.g., face masks, contact tracing apps, vaccination, health certificates, etc.)
  - Focus on changing practices and behavior, expectations for the future

# Data analysis

- In total, 539 interviews analyzed (152 Austria; 62 Bolivia; 72 Ecuador; 92 Germany; 38 Portugal; 57 Switzerland; 66 UK)
- No explicit questions concerning the environment, issue was raised spontaneously in 26% of interviews (n=141)


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# Findings Overview



**1** Pandemic as a window of opportunity

**2** Hope vs resignation

**3** Intersectional crisis

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# Findings 1

## Pandemic as a window of opportunity

“[I hope that people] also realize that they don’t have to have everything, don’t have to be part of everything. Don’t have to go everywhere. Not jetting around the world all the time.”

*(Participant from Switzerland)*

It would be really great to see more of an understanding of an impact that we have on the planet. And those lessons to be learned, in terms of conservation and global warming. Seeing no planes in the sky, and immediately, kind of a boost in wildlife. My garden is absolutely riddled with birds and species that we wouldn’t normally see around here. I just think, wow. That is how quickly it can change.

*(middle-aged parent living in a small town in the UK)*



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# Findings 1

## Pandemic as a window of opportunity

“And so [the pandemic] could be viewed as a great, great opportunity. We can see how quickly [...] very radical decisions can actually be made. And that’s actually also a good example to illustrate that we can no longer allow ourselves excuses that everything always takes so long. Especially with all the political decisions on climate protection. Within hours, gigantic aid packages, etcetera, are decided, and in the best-case scenario, this willingness to make decisions must continue. Just to move forward with the whole climate protection issue.”

*(architect living in a Swiss city)*

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# Findings 1

## Pandemic as a window of opportunity

“Perhaps it all came together [heat waves, flooding], and perhaps the pandemic in recent years has made us particularly receptive to thinking about our future and therefore perhaps be more open to the issue of sustainability.”

*(young, highly educated German resident)*

“Well, the beauty of the pandemic is precisely to value, to be in the midst of all this nature and all this potential and to be able to enjoy not being stuck in a small apartment there in the city, believing that you are in the middle of development.”

*(business owner living in the Amazon region of Ecuador)*

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# Findings 2

## Between hope and resignation

“I live in front of the sea and I have seen that the sea waters got cleaner during the pandemic and everything. But then I also started seeing too many masks on the ground, too much plastic, too many other things that are not good for the environment either, and so I think [...] the pandemic cannot be understood as the driver for a change about how we are going to inhabit the planet, because pandemic was something external to us with which we had to deal with.”

*(middle-aged individual working in the health sector  
in a large metropolitan city in Portugal)*

# Findings 2

## Between hope and resignation

“Let’s see, here we are very close to the forest, in the jungle, and, [the idea] for example, to raise awareness about deforestation, is something that maybe at the beginning [of the pandemic] was a central part of the conversation, that there was a need to change, but with time those ideas [were dropped] and nothing [has been] done about it...”

*(business owner with a young family from Ecuador)*

“I wish that on the one hand somehow a system change would result from [the pandemic] and that the economic system would be rethought, [...] but I don’t think that will happen.” *(young person living in Austria)*

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# Findings 3

## Intersectional crisis

Intersection of pandemic, economic, and climate crisis

We cannot continue to use the planet the way we are using it. We cannot continue to allow that [...] there is a minimum percentage of people who have, for example, more money than most of the people in a town. [...] So, [we need to] change that paradigm, [to] a paradigm that makes us more responsible: What are we doing on earth? [...] So, that's when I mentioned to you that this [pandemic experience] could be a civilizing process that makes us see reality.

*(retired academic living in a large Bolivian city)*

*u<sup>b</sup>*

# Findings 3

## Intersectional crisis

Worry about multiple crises, particularly in Bolivia and Ecuador

“The state does not have a contingency plan for when these things happen [...] last year there was a wildfire in Bolivia, more than six million hectares were burned [in total] and five million hectares had to be burned [before the government moved] to bring an air tanker, to put money to solve that problem. [...] we have no strategy for any emergency, we have to wait for the emergency to arrive to see where to get [necessary resources ...]”

*(resident from Bolivia)*

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# Findings 3

## Intersectional crisis

Economic crisis weakens environmental protection

“[Regarding] the environment we are very concerned, during the pandemic there has been a lot of abuse against nature, at all levels. Suddenly the authorities removed so many [staff] that sometimes it seems that it is on purpose. So, [...] there is expansion of shrimp farms, there is destruction of forests, there are tons of shark fins captured supposedly unintentionally, there are turtles sold, so it has been chaos.”

*(individual from an Ecuadorian city)*

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# Findings 3

## Intersectional crisis

Structural inequalities



Well, in my community, my mother got ill. [...] all the time we were in the city and she was here [in the territory] [...] it was much more difficult and traumatic, where many times we wanted to call her but there is no [cell phone] signal here, so it was very traumatic for us. [...] The village where we live, we decided to use traditional medicine. And so she was able to recover from the virus. But half of the people close to us who died, that is, infecting other family members, because there was no way to protect themselves from the virus.  
*(woman living in the Monkoxi nation in Bolivia)*



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# Discussion

## Temporality of the anthropause

- Limited, short-term reductions in emissions and energy at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (only during first lockdown in Spring 2020) (Mathur 2020)
- More medical waste (Uhlmann, 2022)
- Rising deforestation rates, increase in wildfires since the beginning of the pandemic (Carstens 2020, Eklund et al. 2022)
- Climate and environmental crises are enduring problems, not momentary ones → crucial temporality of the anthropause

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# Discussion

- Study illustrates the importance to view the COVID-19 pandemic as an intersective crisis that is entangled in other regional and global crises of structural inequalities, economic challenges, climate change, etc.
- The same can be said about the crises that came after the pandemic: energy crisis, Ukraine war, Middle East conflict ...



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# Final thoughts

- Challenges of tackling creeping crises (e.g., climate change, structural inequalities, etc.) as opposed to immediate crises (with immediate consequences, e.g., pandemics, wars, etc.)
  - Comparable on the policy response level?
  - Comparable on the ethical level?
- As researchers studying the ethical, legal, social, and societal aspects of such crises, it is important to keep a holistic perspective
  - Challenging to move away from anthropocentrism

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## SoIPan(+) Research Commons



**Institute of History and Ethics in Medicine**  
Technical University of Munich, Germany



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