



Global Insights: COVID-19 - Climate Change and Energy

June 1, 2020, Think Development Blog

Original Post: https://blogs.warwick.ac.uk/po901/entry/global_insights_covid-19_1_2/

Authors: Ann Fitz-Gerald, Simon Dalby, Selam Kidane Abebe, Caroline Kuzemko, Jatin Nathwani, Malini Ranganathan

Editors: Briony Jones and Maeve Moynihan

This post is part of a larger collection covering the Global Insights webinar series, hosted jointly by Balsillie School of International Affairs (Canada), the Department of Politics and International Studies at the University of Warwick (UK), the Institute for Strategic Affairs (Ethiopia), American University's School of International Service (USA), and Konstanz University (Germany). Global Insights webinars take place every Thursday at 16:00h (BST). You can access a recording of this week's webinar [here](#).

Panellists: [Ann Fitz-Gerald](#) (Moderator – BSIA), [Simon Dalby](#) (Wilfrid Laurier University, BSIA), [Selam Kidane Abebe](#) (University of Reading), [Caroline Kuzemko](#) (University of Warwick), [Jatin Nathwani](#) (University of Waterloo, BSIA), [Malini Ranganathan](#) (American University)

As journalists around the world speak of a 'dual-crisis,' this Global Insights panel invited listeners to reflect on the COVID-19 crisis and the climate crisis. While the COVID-19 pandemic presents challenges for climate change, there are a number of promising opportunities to rebuild our societies for a more sustainable future.

How does the COVID-19 crisis intersect with climate change, certainly in the short to medium term?

The climate crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic very accurately reflect our deeply interconnected and rapidly globalizing world. The two crises intersect not only with one another, but with the stark inequalities that have come to define our world as well. Society has failed to appropriately prepare, and has been slow to respond to, both the pandemic and severe climactic events. Given this lack of preparation and response, those who are already at the margins of society are pushed further away. In this way, the pandemic is not only a double-crisis, but a triple-crisis at the intersection of health, climate change, and inequality. In the United States, the racial geographies of both the pandemic and of environmental harm are alarmingly similar. For example, in Chicago 30% of the population is African-American, yet people of color account for [50% of coronavirus deaths](#). Such deaths are concentrated in the Southwest part of the city, where coal plants and steel smelters have driven a rise in asthma and lung disease, making residents, most of whom are African-

American, particularly vulnerable to COVID-19. The intersection of these crises demonstrates that people experience multiple threats simultaneously. As such, innovative, comprehensive, and multilateral responses are necessary.

Before COVID-19, how much progress, if any, did we have with this agenda?

Although pre-pandemic society may feel distant, that the clean energy agenda had made noticeable progress prior to the outbreak of COVID-19. Before the outbreak of coronavirus, many companies had already started to recognize the liabilities surrounding fossil fuels, and noticed that they have the opportunity to shift to renewable energy. Such changes present a positive narrative of the clean energy agenda, suggesting that the pandemic could provide a test-commitment for sustainable change. Sustainable energy could provide dual-pronged benefits of improved efficiency and reduced poverty. However, our societies continue to be built on fossil fuels. In 2020, 85% of global energy continues to come from fossil fuels, the same share that they occupied in 1990. Furthermore, at a multilateral level, international treaties on climate change have not necessarily sparked extraordinary change at a national level, as national politics and economic situations govern such decisions.

In light of COVID-19, what does this mean for the Green New Deal, Environmental and Health Justice, and the postponement of multilateral conversations?

This is a historic opportunity to transition to a low-carbon energy future through a 'Green New Deal' and restructure our economies for a sustainable future. As governments around the world develop stimulus packages and economic recovery plans, such plans must turn to renewables and sustainable change. There is a very good case to do so, as such investment can have strong returns in terms of jobs and economic growth. At a time when economies are shrinking and unemployment is rising quickly, renewable energy could provide not only a climate-friendly society, but new job opportunities. These opportunities can only be taken if stimulus packages include re-skilling opportunities for those leaving the fossil fuel industry. However, the postponement of multilateral discussions on climate change, such as the [cancellation of COP26](#) in Glasgow for example, serves as a concerning challenge with respect to international treaties on climate change and the implementation of the [Paris Agreement](#) in 2021.

Are there any opportunities which COVID-19 throws up for climate change and the Cleaner Energy Agenda?

COVID-19 provides crucial and interesting opportunities for a shift to renewable energy, environmental justice, and health justice. Governments are now focused on how best to respond to and recover from the pandemic and have the unique opportunity to incorporate sustainable solutions into these plans. While the lockdown measures have allowed for cleaner air in places like [New Delhi](#) ecological regeneration in the natural world, we must not allow such imagery to distract from issues of environmental and health justice, such as the suffering of migrant laborers under India's lockdown, many of whom were forced to return to their villages on account of the lack of social safety nets in cities. Once back in rural areas, however, they [continue to face climate and environmental distress](#). The COVID-19 crisis provides a unique opportunity to address both. The crisis allows societies to shift

our gaze from individuals who have pre-existing conditions to societies that pre-dispose those particular groups to such conditions due to environmental factors, such as the case in Chicago above.

How do societies move forward during this liminal moment?

Whereas governmental financial support for the climate crisis was hard to come by, there is suddenly an incredible amount of capital available in the form of stimulus packages. Such funds can be used effectively to develop greener and more just societies that no longer rely on fossil fuels. However, if such stimulus monies are distributed to fossil fuel companies, as may happen in the United States for example, future consequences could be dire. Demand for coal, oil, and gas has declined, however such demand has not fallen for renewable energy, so it provides a greater share for energy than it did previously. Emissions [have fallen 5%](#) in the first quarter of 2020 when compared to 2019. While emissions [may continue to decline](#) by almost 8% as they did during the financial crisis of 2008, they may indeed return to normal as societies emerge from confinement stages of pandemic management. In order to make a more permanent shift, [subsidies for fossil fuel companies](#) must be removed and societies must take the social cost of carbon into account. Societies must continue to restructure social practices to continue emissions reduction for many years to come. For example, societies need to think systematically about a return to city-planning, transportation, and energy-efficiency at home and in the workplace. As governments move to address the pandemic nationally and multilaterally, the climate crisis must not be forgotten, and the situation in developing countries must be included in the recovery process.

Key Conclusions: Six pieces of advice for policy-makers

1. Develop legally mandated and politically consistent exits for low carbon societies.
2. Invest stimulus funding in renewable energy not fossil-fuels as we rebuild our economies.
3. Consider the collective multilateral global response as we build individual national responses.
4. Valorize and strengthen safety nets for essential workers in a greener economy, and think about health, environmental, and social justice together.
5. Create a just transition to greener economies by reskilling fossil fuel workers and phase out old systems appropriately.



warwick.ac.uk/pais/research/researchcentres/wicid



wicidwarwick



wicidwarwick



WARWICK

INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH CENTRE
FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT