

# Could COVID-19 mark a turning point for global action on climate change?

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## Abstract

COVID-19 and climate change are both threats of immense proportions, however, the differing perception of climate change as far-off, projected and unpredictable, persists as a marked barrier to global action. COVID-19 is increasing awareness of the connection between human actions and environmental consequences. The current slowdown of fossil fuel use has given a glimpse of the quitter, cleaner and more caring world that effective climate change could also achieve. Decisions made in coming months can either “lock in” economic development patterns that will do permanent and escalating damage to the ecological systems, or, if wisely taken, can promote a healthier and greener world.

## KEYWORDS

climate change, COVID-19, health professionals, healthy recovery

The Lancet Countdown report in November 2019, informed by the health professionals and experts, was categorical in its conclusion that our planet is facing an unprecedented climate emergency which demands an unprecedented response.<sup>1</sup> Yet, meaningful global action on climate change to date has been perpetually impeded by politics of nations with widespread lack of political will, clout of polluting industries, questions of responsibility and accountability, and the high costs of adaption acting as substantial barriers to limiting global emissions. While the world comes to a standstill in the face of COVID-19, over 350 organisations representing over 40 million health professionals and over 4,500 individual health professionals from 90 different countries, wrote to the G20 leaders calling for a #HealthyRecovery.<sup>2</sup> Today, we wonder whether COVID-19 could mark a turning point for global action on climate change and provide an opportunity for healthy recovery.

To explore this notion, we will firstly outline a rationale for action on climate change by demonstrating the pandemic and climate change as ‘twin’ collective action crises and explore how their divergences have led to drastically different global responses. We will then demonstrate how the twin crises are intersecting within the global economic crisis with awareness of how regular human activity impacts upon the environment increasing throughout global society.

In the space where these crises meet, we will argue that there is an opportunity to create real structural change to ensure a more sustainable and resilient future. As the world stands united against the pandemic, we have a singular opportunity to truly take unprecedented global action to protect our planet from climate change – the question is, are we ready for it?

## 1 | TWIN CRISES: COVID-19 AND CLIMATE CHANGE

We believe that COVID-19 and climate change, both threats of immense proportions, should be recognised as twin collective action problems which equally necessitate global-scale responses. With neither the virus nor climate change paying respect to national borders, no single actor can therefore limit their devastating effects and collaborative global action is vital.<sup>3</sup> The current scientific consensus on climate change action is to keep global temperature rise to well below 2°C which may only be achieved through international cooperation and facilitated through mechanisms for action such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).<sup>1,4</sup> However, in order to generate effective action, such

international agreements must achieve unprecedented levels of participation, sustain a high level of compliance and attain significant reductions of global emissions, all of which are yet to be realised.<sup>4</sup>

Instead, efforts taken by the global community to address climate change have been perpetually marked by contention, with little agreement among world leaders on the priorities and responsibilities for action.<sup>5</sup> The lack of concerted global action against climate change is in part due to the complexity of its challenge, which is made apparent when considering the many global issues which affect and are affected by climate change; from economic development and food production, to energy use and human health.<sup>6</sup> Substantial uncertainty surrounding the potential local, regional, social and economic impacts of the climate crisis has further impeded drastic and long-term decision-making.<sup>5</sup>

Conversely, since The World Health Organization's recognition of COVID-19 as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on the 30th of January 2020, nations have taken drastic actions to contain the rapidly-spreading virus through testing and treatment of patients, contact tracing, restricting travel and gatherings, quarantining citizens and placing whole cities into lockdown.<sup>7,1</sup> The common perception of COVID-19 as a threat which is immediate, rapidly-escalating and with clearly-defined impacts on human health, society and the global economy has facilitated unprecedented global action to contain the collective action problem.<sup>8</sup> Despite recognition of both climate change and COVID-19 as equally threatening all areas of life, human health and economic prosperity, and both necessitating immediate collective global-scale responses, the differing perception of climate change as far-off, projected and unpredictable, persists as a marked barrier to global action, and the costs of inaction will be devastatingly high.<sup>9</sup>

## 2 | THE INTERSECTION OF THE TWIN CRISES

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, widespread stories of animals 'taking over' empty cities, from wild Kashmiri mountain goats in the Welsh town of Llandudno to pumas in Santiago, and clean air in major economic hubs leading to unseen glimpses of the Himalayan peaks in Indian cities and clear skylines across the United States, are spreading throughout the media.<sup>10-12</sup> This visible intersection of the twin crises of COVID-19 and climate change at the point of a global economic crisis is raising awareness across civil society of the powerful affect that human activity holds over the natural world and provides a glimpse for many into what a low-carbon future may look like.<sup>12</sup>

However, many experts recognise that this silver lining is likely to be fleeting. Despite emissions projected to take their greatest fall since World War Two – with globalised production and supply chains disrupted, economic activity contracting and decreased consumption world-wide – such changes are likely to be temporary.<sup>13</sup> Analysts from the Carbon Brief have reported that the benefits of

emissions reduction for climate change will likely be negligible with global emissions needing to fall by at least 6 percent every year this decade in order to limit global warming to less than 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels.<sup>14</sup> Although, early signs suggest there is a risk that communities will invest in high emissions infrastructure, with members of the National COVID-19 Coordination with mining and fossil fuel interests pushing for expansion of gas projects. As factories reopen, flights once again take to the air and people resume their daily commute, very little tenable change will have occurred within the structure of global production and consumption with the climate, once-again, an after-thought.<sup>14</sup> This entails locking in years of pollution and unsustainable consumption and production with devastating consequences for the health of the planet and ensuring any attempts to adapt in the future will be more difficult, more costly and likely faced with more resistance.<sup>15</sup> This is not the right path forward.

## 3 | COVID-19 AS A COSMOPOLITAN MOMENT FOR ACTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE

Perhaps then, we should instead view this intersection of the twin crises within the global economic crisis as a window of opportunity to create real global action on climate change and ensure a healthy recovery. Ilona Kickbusch and her colleagues have even framed COVID-19 as a "cosmopolitan moment",<sup>16</sup> as those unprecedented moments in time when the global community is able to come together, united, to introduce new mechanisms, institutions and ways of being, otherwise not possible.

It is important to acknowledge that the rapid global response to the virus, which has triggered devastation across societies and economies, is unsustainable. The social and economic costs of the pandemic cannot be understated, and forced lockdowns are certainly not the appropriate path towards a more climate-conscientious future.<sup>13</sup> Global and local climate movement and civil society have been, and continue to be, actively advocating for a "green recovery" and post-COVID-19 stimulus packages that concurrently address climate change and economic recovery. As we invest for the post-COVID-19 recovery, we can seize this one-in-a-generation opportunity by addressing healthy, green and fair recovery that ties in with commitments on climate action and carbon-emissions targets to secure livelihood, our struggling natural ecosystem, and population health and wellbeing.<sup>2</sup> A health-led economic recovering, which address climate change as well, would:

- Provide green stimulus packages with a focus on clean and low emission technologies, and assure decent wages and conditions for workers. According to a report by economic consultancy Ernst and Young (EY), it is found that a renewables-led economic recovery will create almost three times as many jobs as a fossil-fuel-led recovery.<sup>17</sup>

- Prioritize supporting hospitals and health care providers to adapt to renewable energy and, where applicable, install solar and other forms of renewable energy generation.<sup>2</sup>
- Prioritize investment in decarbonisation initiatives and offer the opportunity for economic benefits while acting on the climate crisis. For example, now healthcare facilities can join the circular economy by converting food waste into fertiliser overnight.<sup>18</sup>

"A truly healthy recovery will not allow pollution to continue to cloud the air we breathe and the water we drink. It will not permit unabated climate change and deforestation, potentially unleashing new health threats upon vulnerable populations," stated by more than 40 million health professionals from 90 countries in the letter to G20 leaders.<sup>19</sup>

## 4 | ARE WE READY FOR IT?

The global response to COVID-19 has clearly demonstrated that true international solidarity to combat collective threats is indeed possible.<sup>16</sup> The virus has taught us that the global community is able and willing to change behaviour rapidly for public good when there is the popular support and political will to do so.<sup>20</sup> With the catastrophic experience of a pandemic uniting humanity against a common enemy, the possibility of another form of social reality has been recognised – one in which collective interests take precedence over the interests of the individual.<sup>21</sup> This deeper understanding of our shared humanity may allow us to carve the path to a more compassionate and conscientious organisation of society in order to save our planet Earth from climate change.<sup>22</sup>

To conclude, we unequivocally believe that now is the moment to create real global action on climate change. As both the pandemic and climate change act as immense collective action challenges, their threat may only be contained through equally unprecedented and global-scale responses.<sup>3</sup> In a post-pandemic era, we argue that economic recovery must address climate change for healthy recovery. It is undoubtable that human society will be irrevocably changed coming out of this devastating experience of COVID-19, but perhaps we may come out of it yet with a more sustainable, resilient and conscientious way forward.

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### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

This manuscript expands on the prior research through the University of Sydney that we have conducted and published on Croakey Organization with the help of Dr Melissa Sweet, managing Editor at Croakey Health Media. Here is the link to the media article: <https://croakey.org/what-some-health-leaders-are-hoping-might-emerge-from-pandemic-disruption/>. We confirm that this manuscript has not been published elsewhere and is not under consideration by another journal. Each named author has substantially contributed to conducting the underlying research and drafting of this manuscript. Additionally, to the best of our knowledge, the named authors have no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise.

[croakey.org/what-some-health-leaders-are-hoping-might-emerge-from-pandemic-disruption/](https://croakey.org/what-some-health-leaders-are-hoping-might-emerge-from-pandemic-disruption/). We confirm that this manuscript has not been published elsewhere and is not under consideration by another journal. Each named author has substantially contributed to conducting the underlying research and drafting of this manuscript. Additionally, to the best of our knowledge, the named authors have no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise.

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