

COVID-19 vs climate change: what can we learn?

by Kim DeRidder

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An aerial shot of Manila taken before COVID-19
(Credit: Monica Arellano-Ongpin/Flickr/CC BY 2.0)

Unlike its health, economic, or gendered impacts, COVID-19 has yet to cause an overt crisis for Asia's environment. On the contrary, with factories closed and roads empty, the smog-layered **skies above most major cities are clear blue for the first time** in years. With humans indoors, **deer and monkeys are venturing out to explore Asia's now empty urban jungles**, **songbirds are heard in cities**, and **great leatherback turtles are laying eggs** on Phuket beaches in record numbers.

But is COVID-19 really a boon for the environment? The jury is still out. While **greenhouse gas emissions are significantly down**, both **China** and the **United States** are already relaxing emission controls to ease economic pressures. When COVID-19 is finally reigned in, economies are likely **to rebound with a vengeance**—burning even more, now cheaper fossil fuels. Asia's natural resources are likewise taking a hit, with millions of unemployed day labourers returned to their villages and now relying heavily on local forests, rivers, and oceans for food and other basic needs. Reef and forest destruction is also increasing from illegal loggers, miners, and fishing operators, **taking advantage of lax enforcement during this time**.

Either way, the global health crisis has brought our relationship with the environment into sharp focus, raising many new questions. Will we continue to see an **uptick of life-threatening zoonotic diseases** like COVID-19, SARS, MERS, and Ebola as the **planet's last remaining wildlands are invaded by humans**? **Why was pandemic risk not incorporated into national disaster management strategies** despite the specific reference in the **Sendai Framework**? Can't we develop a better safety net for the **socio-economically disenfranchised in times of crisis than simply sending them back to their villages to further burden dwindling natural resources**?

Perhaps the most intriguing question relates to the dramatic reduction in greenhouse gas emissions caused by the global lockdown. If humanity can put our economies on hold as a safeguard from a global threat like COVID-19, why haven't we been able to take similar measures to confront a global killer like climate

change? The latter does not require that we put our economies on hold. But it does require us to revamp the energy and consumption infrastructure that drives them—transitioning from fossil fuel reliance to renewable energy resources: from consumption to sustainability. There are more than a few parallels between the two crises: death and disruption on a global scale; heavy reliance on science to inform policy responses; and those most affected largely powerless to influence the mitigation measures taken.

By the time the last of 120 countries worldwide went on lockdown on April 23, COVID-19 was responsible for **3 out of every 1000** deaths globally, which is both tragic and alarming. It is notable however, that as far back as seventeen years ago **climate change was already estimated to be responsible for 3 out of every 1000 deaths annually**, from increased heat exposure, malaria, dengue, undernutrition, and diarrhoea alone. This ratio didn't account for the thousands more dying annually in increasingly frequent climate-related disasters such as floods, drought, and cyclones. Today, we now know this metric is only the tip of the melting iceberg. The World Health Organization now tracks deaths caused by the *drivers of global warming*—namely, black carbon, sulphur dioxide, and nitrogen oxides, together with ozone and carbon monoxide. The number? **Eight million each year**. That's **140** out of every 1000 deaths globally, and 46 times the proportion of deaths from COVID-19 at global lockdown. And **we have only just begun to feel the effects of climate change**. Far more serious impacts are projected for the future, including **ecosystem collapses, more extreme weather events, sea level rise, and more**, ensuring that climate-related mortality rates will only rise.

So why hasn't the world responded to climate change with anything resembling the speed of response and political will it has demonstrated for battling the coronavirus? Cost? Apparently not. By way of example, it would cost the United States **about \$5.7 trillion to transition completely to renewable energy** over 15 years, while it has already committed **\$6 trillion to COVID-19** in the past three months. Granted, **transitioning the entire global economy to renewable energy** will be considerably more expensive; but it will surely be less than the monumental costs of a global climate crisis. So, if money isn't the deciding factor, what is?

Immediacy. **Research shows that people not only respond much more decisively to immediate and tangible threats, but tend to exhibit avoidance behaviours for future threats—no matter how potentially grave**. It is this immediate threat of COVID-19 that mobilised the political will to halt economies, enforce lockdowns, and spend trillions. In contrast, the **lack of immediate consequences from climate change** have left many nations subordinating clean energy to economic priorities. In UNESCAP's latest assessment of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the **Asia Pacific region is behind on all 17 SDGs**, including clean energy and climate action.

Home to 60% of the world's population, 99 of the world's 100 most polluted cities, and 5 of the 10 countries at greatest risk from climate change, the region continues to spend \$240 billion on fossil fuel subsidies, while investing only \$150 billion in renewables.

Countries must proactively spend billions to “green” their economies. As we marshal huge resources for post-COVID-19 economic recovery, we have a unique opportunity to make a paradigm shift. A recent Oxford study shows recovery packages can, in fact, deliver on both economic and climate goals, but only if governments act decisively with strategic investments that decouple economic growth from greenhouse gas emissions, while fostering behaviour changes in work and transport practices.

As we contemplate the conditions—rapid urbanisation and development—that contributed to the unleashing and spread of viruses like COVID-19, we must acknowledge our pivotal moment in the trajectory of human impact on the planet. As with the current pandemic, so too climate change: the longer we delay necessary action, the broader reaching, costly, and lethal the consequences. If we must witness disaster up close to inspire action, then disasters like COVID-19 are perhaps our most illuminating view into how bad the future could be. And the blue skies we enjoy today could be another window—offering a glimpse of the future we all hope for. The policies we embed in stimulus packages in response to this global pandemic are key to the future we choose.

The post is part of the #COVID-19 and Asia series. It is co-published with The Asia Foundation.

For another perspective on climate change and COVID-19, click [here](#).

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