

Sustainability and COVID-19

In Brief

- Governments around the world are responding to the pandemic with massive fiscal stimulus to support economic recovery.
- Climate change may very well be the global next emergency, and the unprecedented response to the pandemic shows that when threats arise, political responses follow.
- Neither the pandemic nor climate change are partisan issues. Rather, overcoming each challenge will require coordinated, collaborative efforts between political actors.
- Policymakers may choose to diversify energy sources, promote renewables, increase localization, and self-sufficiency, while maintaining rigorous environmental standards and investments in technologies like geoengineering and carbon

Context

As the world slowly moves away from an emergency response focused on the health aspect of COVID-19, political attention will turn to economic recovery what will be unprecedented stimulus packages. The recovery should be approached thoughtfully, as “there are reasons to believe that we will leap from the COVID frying pan into the climate fire” because [“the climate emergency is like the COVID-19 emergency, just in slow motion and much graver.”](#) Past crises such as the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, the World Wars and the Great Depression saw decreases in emissions but were followed by [sharp rises in the immediate recoveries](#) following the crises.

While climate change can be an ominous issue, we have also seen governments act in historical and decisive ways showing that [once an emergency is bad enough, political will exists to take necessary action in response](#). Scientists have been clear that the window for decisive climate action is shrinking, and the next six months will be pivotal to mark progress toward reducing emissions. Without action, the world is likely to miss the Paris Declaration goals of maintaining a rise in global temperature of well below 2 degrees Celsius.

Perspectives

Research has suggested that it is certainly possible for the COVID-19 response to promote both environmental and economic sustainability. [A survey of 231 policy experts from G20 countries](#) suggests that policy initiatives with a focus on low-carbon emissions have the additional benefit of offering a sizeable economic multiplier. While there has traditionally been hesitancy to adopt low-emission policies, [particularly in countries with historical economic reliance on oil and gas producers](#), there are signs that this might change. Policymakers from around the world are seriously considering such initiatives as not only feasible but vital to long-term economic prosperity and health. The European Union has committed to green and digital investments in the [EU's proposed recovery plan](#) to create jobs and encourage economic growth. As part of his platform, United States presidential candidate Joe Biden recently [pledged \\$2 trillion](#) to help expand the green economy if elected.





The Recovery Project

One of the primary challenges for climate change action is complexity and the dislocation between cause and effect, as well as issues of jurisdiction and accountability – [who is to blame and who is responsible for acting?](#) Similar challenges arise in communication, as opposing parties generally agree on the broad issues as well as even solutions but have siloed themselves off in competing camps. The resultant language used often becomes incommensurate when various parties might have much more common ground than is generally acknowledged. For instance, “transition” has become a popular new buzzword; but to many people, it means different things. Ironing out this and [similar language is key to bearing fruitful conversations](#) and eventual solutions to climate and energy crises.

Monica Gattinger and colleagues of the Positive Energy group at the University of Ottawa have [tracked Canadians’ views](#) on energy development and related environment and climate issues. Based on this evidence, [Gattinger and Brendan Frank note that for Canadians, a green recovery could be a polarizing issue.](#)

The economic recovery and climate change are both issues that demand collaboration, and partisanship may hinder, rather than help, either situation. Developing language that transcends ideological lines can help appeal to diverse opinions and ultimately come up with solutions to address either issue. Collaboration between people from all political backgrounds, including academics, governments, and the private sector can create forums for ongoing dialogue to [create revolutionary change](#). While often environmental policies are framed as ‘progressive,’ many argue the most effective way to fight climate change is through fiscal instruments such as taxes on transportation, energy, pollution, or resources, which alter incentives and behaviour. In making these fiscal instruments revenue neutral through a variety of mechanisms, they can be what would [traditionally be understood as conservative approaches](#).

Policy Approaches

Sustainability as a concept is about [maintaining a particular condition through time across socioeconomic and geographic barriers](#). Undoubtedly, it is crucial that governments, businesses, and individuals collectively take proactive responsibility for the issues facing the environment. While there are many [strategies that can be taken to address climate change in the short- and long-term](#), it may be most important to acknowledge that lowering carbon emissions will not yield substantial improvements. A [2018 report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) suggests that the only way to limit global warming to 1.5°C is with the use of carbon dioxide removal technologies. This has led many individuals to consider the use of this technology, as it has massive potential to both [help the environment and produce a profit for investors](#).

Some of the [most promising recovery policies](#) are green initiatives with high economic multipliers. These [include investment](#) in clean physical infrastructure, building efficiency retrofits, investment in education and training, natural capital investment, and clean R&D. Policymakers would be wise to consult guidelines such as the [Green Economy Principles](#) of wellbeing, justice, sufficiency and efficiency when considering their response plans. These principles can play crucial roles in maximizing the effectiveness of a green recovery. By adhering to such guidelines, managing the recovery will also protect the most vulnerable populations and help [create eco-friendly jobs](#).





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Most countries have primarily focused on short-term policies intended to make an immediate impact on the climate crisis, such as specific policies targeted at pollution. [Long-term solutions, however, depend much more on evolving governance and institutional arrangements.](#) Often these governance and institutional arrangements can be collective and work across cases. However, many require diversity and will not function in the same way across the board.

Policies targeting climate change could include flexible work and work-from-home arrangements, increased localization and self-sufficiency, and reversing the institutional trends toward [skepticism of multilateralism and coordinated global action.](#) Individuals are more willing to commit to tangible, easily tracked environmental actions, like water and soil quality targeted policy. Once again, developing active language and methods of communication can help localize the less concrete but more severe threat of global climate change. Improving scientific literacy through existing and innovative methods are potential vehicles for such change. Environmental issues are noticeably absent from pop culture. This gap is both an issue and an opportunity, as encouraging more literary fiction around issues of [sustainability can help add it to the daily lexicons of more average citizens.](#)

Technological innovations like carbon capture and bioengineering are still in their infancy. [Investment from both public and private sources](#) could help these technologies play crucial roles in the fight against climate change. The pandemic may also present an opportunity to move away from the use of fossil fuels as there will likely be a decrease in all forms of transportation in the future. The reduced reliance on traditional methods of transportation combined with consistently low oil prices suggests that there is an [opportunity for policies to favour the use renewables.](#) Fossil fuels continue to be taxed below adequate levels or subsidized, which continues to undercut the ability of renewables to be competitive. Beyond this, it will be essential to maintain environmental regulations and to provide support for industries contingent on environmental improvements.

Further Reading

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