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*Global Health Security*

## **COVID-19 Crisis: Timely Reminder for Climate Change**

*By Margareth Sembiring*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*The COVID-19 outbreak disrupted our daily lives and impacted national economies. Amidst the virus turmoil, our natural surroundings have benefited from the slowdown. The global community needs to make a concerted effort to rethink our approach to economic growth to avert a climate crisis.*

### **COMMENTARY**

THE RESPONSES to the COVID-19 outbreak are unprecedented. Among the various measures that governments have introduced, there is one distinct characteristic that is visibly different from the usual policymaking processes. It is their readiness to relegate the economy's timeless supremacy in place of a pressing public health crisis.

The extent to which the economy is pushed to yield differs across countries. Although some segments in society may have more resources to better healthcare services, the fact that the infection risk pays no regard to social economic status makes curbing its spread everybody's business. It thus gives legitimacy to bold and swift interventions regardless of the inconvenience, discomfort, and disruptions to normal day-to-day activities, and even if they disproportionately affect some socio-economic groups more than others.

### **Environmental Silver Lining**

The resulting economic slowdown has cleared up skies and rivers in many parts of the world. This phenomenon shows that the economy and the environment are still

standing on opposing sides. It therefore suggests that the current approaches to economic growth needs to be rethought to avert a climate crisis.

The environmental reprieve brought about by such interventions is hardly surprising. Government interventions essentially force people to self-isolate, and this has brought down carbon emissions and pollution levels.

In China, [carbon emissions](#) reduced by 25% in the four weeks following the Lunar New Year. India's [Ganga River](#) has got cleaner and became suitable for bathing. In [northern Italy](#) and other [major cities](#) in the world, the levels of nitrogen dioxide, a major air pollutant closely associated with factory and vehicle emissions, have visibly reduced since COVID-19 began to restrict economic activities in these places.

Considering the scale of fear and human suffering associated with the virus, the environmental benefits are not a cause of celebration. After all, the winding down of the economy is not completely voluntary, and the environmental repercussions are not intentional. They are a side-effect of otherwise unlikely interventions under normal circumstances.

### **Environment Breathes, When Economy Gives Way**

Regardless, the phenomenon serves as a powerful reminder that economic activities in particular are responsible for environmental degradation and climate change. A similar experience in emission drop was observed during the [2008-2009 economic crisis](#).

These suggest that the environment can only breathe when the economy gives way. It thus calls into question whether the current vision for unlimited economic growth can truly stand side by side with the care for the planet.

Governments' willingness to loosen their grip on the economy is needed to fight climate issues. This determination, however, will be a challenge. First, COVID-19 creates an immediate sense of danger. It activates a survival instinct that places human life over all other considerations.

On the other hand, climate change does not project the same sense of urgency. Despite numerous projections and plausible catastrophic scenarios that have been made over the years, climate change evolves relatively slowly. Additionally, the perceptions on climate threats vary across countries because of their rather localised impacts so far.

### **Lessons for Climate Change**

The COVID-19 experience provides invaluable lessons for climate change responses. When the outbreak just started to make news headlines in late 2019, there was a general impression that the virus would only be a problem in China. Outside China, there was little sense of urgency.

Not much was done to get healthcare systems ready and systematically prepare the people for the eventual arrival and spread of the virus locally. The perceived

government complacency could have been driven by other factors; but it is closely reminiscent of the general attitude towards climate change.

The scale of disasters that COVID-19 brings is still largely unknown. However, it has now become clear that it painfully stretches healthcare systems in many countries including in advanced economies.

Similarly, while climate change may impact countries and societies differently depending on their geographical characteristics, resources, and resilience, the eventual scale of catastrophes remains a mystery. The stresses they may exert on the existing systems thus cannot be underestimated.

Although the novelty of the virus caught the world by surprise and can partly explain what seems like clumsy responses across the globe, climate change impacts are known. Unlike coronavirus, the warnings about climate change have been foretold for decades.

The lack of bold and urgent action on it is therefore ironic. If the new coronavirus has proven that not even the rich and the powerful can be immune to the infection, even if they have access to first class healthcare services, climate disasters could be just as far-reaching and chaotic despite the technologies, infrastructure and resources put in place to protect people.

### **Sustainable Recovery**

The window to avert climate calamities is fast closing. The United Nations [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) predicted that global warming may reach the 1.5 degree Celsius mark within a decade. The coronavirus situation may force human and economic activities to halt temporarily, but at the same time, it shows that things can be done differently. The stay home arrangement and the closing down of most businesses compel people to get in touch with what is the most essential. Cutting down on air travel, fine dining, shopping delights and other habits of consumerism may be inconvenient, but it certainly does not kill. That is what the current COVID-19 measures are showing us.

When the coronavirus crisis is eventually over, countries will get their economies rolling again. In view of the climate crisis, governments need to seriously consider recovery packages that support climate goals. Additionally, the consumption-driven economic growth model needs rethinking since sustainable development, despite its noble vision, has thus far proven ineffective in clamping down on carbon emissions.

The COVID-19 experience shows that the economy may need to make way for the environment to prevent climate disasters. A concerted global effort is imperative to move away from the current practice of using natural resources unabatedly in a bid to achieve unlimited economic growth. If the international community can work together to control COVID-19, this should also be possible for climate change.

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