



From containment to recovery: Environmental responses to the COVID-19 pandemic

The focus of this brief is on the immediate steps that governments can take to ensure that emergency measures implemented to tackle the Coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis do not derail their efforts to address pressing environmental challenges and improve the environmental health and resilience of societies.

The COVID-19 emergency is affecting the lives of people around the world. Containing and mitigating the spread and infection of the coronavirus is the first priority of governments, with concerted efforts to shore up public health systems and unprecedented social and economic response measures. The immediate effect of widespread virus containment measures has been a severe and sudden reduction in economic activity globally. This has resulted in some short-term environmental improvements, including significant reductions in local air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions in many countries (particularly in urban areas). However, these effects are likely to be temporary as governments put in place a wide range of stimulus measures in order to reinvigorate economic growth, and the environmental gains made in recent decades could even be reversed once a recovery is underway.

The spread of COVID-19 has increased public awareness of the consequences of a lack of resilience and preparedness to deal with such a pandemic. Climate change, water pollution and the drivers of biodiversity loss, such as deforestation and illegal wildlife trade, may increase the risk of further pandemics, such as vector-borne or water-borne infections. Outdoor air pollution results in 4.2 million premature deaths a year, including through respiratory diseases, and reduces the environmental health of communities. In addition, lack of access to clean water and sanitation in some developing countries, including for hand-washing, can accentuate the impacts of pandemics. Such environmental factors significantly undermine the environmental health of large sections of societies, especially vulnerable groups such as the less well-off segments of society. It is therefore important that countries integrate a gender and inclusiveness perspective in their environmental action.

Looking beyond the immediate health crisis, government efforts to support economic recovery are essential but should not undermine action to limit the threats from climate change and environmental degradation, which could be as destabilising to societies and economies as COVID-19 but are on a different time scale. Stimulus measures and policy responses need to be aligned with ambitions on climate

change, biodiversity and wider environmental protection. The window of opportunity to take strong action on climate is closing fast and short term economic measures will have a significant impact on the ability to meet global goals.

Recovery efforts will give countries a chance to make much-needed environmental improvements an integral part of the economic recovery, rather than such measures being perceived as an additional burden at a time of crisis. Stimulus measures can be an opportunity to invest in the economic transformations and technological innovations we know are necessary to deliver the sustainable improvements in people's lives that depend, amongst other things, on a healthy environment. As well as providing economic opportunities in the near term, such improvements are essential to enhance the overall resilience of societies. Both short-term and longer-term measures should aim at achieving the multiple purposes of delivering economic prosperity and wider well-being, improving productivity, enhancing resilience and decarbonising the economy.

In developing immediate, short-term, sector-specific and macroeconomic policy responses to the COVID-19 emergency, governments may wish to:

- **Systematically evaluate possible unintended negative environmental impacts of new short-term fiscal and tax provisions.** While the priority is rightly on providing urgent relief to impacted businesses and individuals, a careful screening of the environmental impacts of stimulus measures would significantly add coherence to policies and avoid creating perverse and unintended environmental consequences that might damage the future resilience and environmental health of societies.
- **Do not roll-back existing environmental standards as part of recovery plans.** As countries implement urgent measures to tackle the health and immediate economic impact of the crisis, it will be important not to retreat from the gains made in recent decades in addressing climate change, air and water pollution, biodiversity loss, and other environmental challenges.
- **Make sector-specific financial support measures conditional on environmental improvements where possible.** The use of financial support measures such as preferential loans, loan guarantees and tax abatements could be directed towards supporting stronger environmental commitments and performance in pollution-intensive sectors that may be particularly affected by the crisis.
- **Ensure that the measures will enhance levels of environmental health in order to strengthen the resilience of societies.** A cleaner environment will have a positive impact on human health; for example, reductions in air pollution will improve the health of vulnerable segments of urban populations and can make them more resilient to health risks.
- **Communicate clearly on the benefits of improving the overall environmental health of societies.** Underscoring the benefits to well-being and prosperity from more resilient societies can strengthen public support for measures aimed at enhancing environmental health.

As the COVID-19 emergency evolves, the effects of governments' stimulus packages will need to be assessed with respect to the long-term environmental impacts. A focus on the transition to low emissions and resource efficient economies will be a central component of such a process. For example, the investment plans associated with recovery will be critical in setting the environmental pathway for the next few decades, crucial for global efforts to avoid dangerous climate change. The OECD will continue to support governments as they implement policies to drive stronger environmental outcomes that are supportive of efforts to overcome the current public health emergency

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