

The Green Rebound:

Mobilising COVID responses for climate neutrality

Briefing Paper 1: 'Delivering the "new normal"'

Climate Strategies' members discussed the 'new normal' context after COVID-19 through a climate policy lens. Some questions raised were:

- What does a 'new normal' look like in relation to COVID-19 recovery and climate action?
- In the midst of one of the most significant periods of transformation in the last century, what will be the enduring changes to governance, society and economy?
- What practical steps can be taken to shape the COVID-19 crisis to enable greener, transformative futures?

Members highlighted the greater prominence of expertise and researchers in the current crisis. This comes with a responsibility to engage with policy makers to encourage evidence-based decisions, and to push back against backsliding. As stimulus packages and policies are put in place, there will be a very short window in which to mobilise this change. This paper is a summary of the discussion. It is not intended to be a single narrative but rather a set of issues raised from diverse perspectives.

Decarbonising key sectors

State bailout packages can trigger long-awaited shifts to low-carbon energy and the decarbonisation of hard-to-abate industries. However, keeping up the pre-COVID-19 momentum for these changes will be challenging, as the temptation to postpone the shift to a zero-carbon trajectory for 'quick hit' responses with a high carbon character and 'revenge effects' by industry practitioners would counter greener societal responses.

Generating evidence-based wish-lists for policy makers on how the public sector and policy makers can recover better may guide the creation of stimulus packages that drive decarbonisation fully.

Trade, global cooperation and multilateral governance

In the current crisis the role of multilateralism, particularly its role in governing trade, is highlighted. Existing geopolitical tensions around trade may be amplified as countries become more inward-looking, with potentially significant effects on the global supply chains. This inward orientation may be triggered by a sense of vulnerability due to the dependence on global value chains, further amplifying geopolitical and economic tensions. A broader failure of multilateral institutions, beyond the WHO, is a further catalyst for illiberal nationalism.

However, new forms of technological cooperation under the WHO are being shaped, with increased open-source knowledge for more effective medical responses. Can this scale of technological cooperation be applied to the challenges of climate change governance?

Role of the state, labour protection and recovery packages

The role of the state is shifting in the face of the current crisis. Governments are applying powers to restrict societal freedoms, but it also comes with new levels of support and scrutiny from the public. In many countries, such as India, there are tensions in federal structures between the centre and provincial governments. A 'new normal' could highlight the state's fundamental role in protecting its population. COVID-19 is a hazard, and state responses define whether it is a disaster or not.

In some countries, introducing a universal basic income (UBI) would simplify the expanded welfare role the state is now playing and increase its role as protector. UBI could support the low carbon transition and the restructuring of major industries by acting as a social support net for transitioning workers – aligning with broader labour debates on the increase in precarious work and the gig-economy. However, those outside of traditional employment and state protection – such as informal workers – remain unprotected. Further, changes in social welfare measures can propel further carbon mitigation and can be aligned with adaptation. Nordic models have shown strong social protection can enable both transition and higher personal fulfilment.

Recovery measures must be aligned to the Paris Agreement and avoid back-sliding into business as usual high-carbon development. This includes the use of legal interventions to ensure low-carbon commitments. Stakeholder groups are engaging with governments and organising to that end already.

COVID-19 may jeopardise the usual dynamics of government-opposition in the face of the crisis and the unity usually desired in these circumstances, while activists are unable to leave their homes. There is a need to be attentive to reflexive democracy under emergency, as states can exploit emergency measures to suspend ordinary processes of governance, downplay scrutiny and lead to extended states of exception.

Behaviour

There is a need to understand the shifts in people's preferences regarding consumption, employment and living spaces, and whether these will endure, or are limited to periods of lockdown. Here, we can consider the new normal as an aspiration, examining outcomes such as more remote working leading to reduced carbon from transport and servicing office space. Conversely, behavioural change leading to more online consumption from e-commerce could increase the carbon footprint of domestic consumption.

Populism and science

Pre-COVID-19, populism posed a challenge to climate action due to its reliance on scientific knowledge, authority and outward facing international solidarity. The rise in inward facing media has increased mistrust both domestically and internationally. However, the increasing deference towards science by policy makers in response to the pandemic has contributed to higher levels of public trust in expertise and knowledge, undermining the populist playbook. Can a new normal harness this engagement to aid mutual understanding, and promote positive perceptions of climate action?

Alternatively, there is a need to be aware of governments instrumentalization of science for the purpose of strengthening illiberal tendencies or showcasing regimes as effective performers of action.

Resilience

Public discussion around the resilience of services, in particular health and education, has increased, yet attention should be given to how this intersects with climate resilience. For example, if cities are hollowed out, will bailouts reimburse city governments for lost tax revenue rather than the more transformative action of changing the financial basis of urban living?

Oil price, taxes and subsidies

Current low prices for fossil fuels create an opportune moment to introduce taxation measures, end subsidies, and use state bailouts to harness alignment to the Paris Agreement, while keeping and furthering incentives for low carbon activities. Recent examples are in India – which moved quickly to tax the difference in oil price to fund the COVID-19 recovery, and in the Netherlands, where the bailout of national airline KLM included future lower CO2 emissions as a condition for state aid.

Next Steps

- Common themes for further engagement: role of a state, transport and social engagement.
- Opportunity for a joint journal article based on discussions.

This briefing paper was prepared based on a videoconference on 28.04.2020 attended by the following Climate Strategies Members: [Kornelis Blok](#), [Kasturi Das](#), [Tom Downing](#), [Robyn Eckersley](#), [Navraj Ghaleigh](#), [Maurits Henkemans](#), [Ingrid Jegou](#), [Tim Lancaster](#), [Richard Lorch](#), [Chipo Mukonza](#), [Jiahua Pan](#), [Graham Sinden](#), [Peter Wooders](#)

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