



Two birds with one stone: Greening the EU's post- coronavirus recovery

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Abstract

If there is a silver lining to the ongoing pandemic, it could be its potential to change people's behaviour and policymakers' attitudes in favour of more sustainable models. The article focuses on the global struggle with the coronavirus and the resulting economic crisis, amid the ongoing crises of climate change and environmental degradation, and argues that returning to business as usual is not an option. Instead, it suggests learning from the experience, harnessing the momentum and embracing new ways of doing things to achieve green growth. The EU's post-coronavirus recovery package has this sort of transformative potential for the economies and societies of the member states. If it is implemented well, it could turn the crisis into an opportunity, and people will reap its benefits for generations to come.

Keywords

COVID-19, Coronacrisis, Climate change, Pollution, Green recovery

Introduction

The ways in which human activity is affecting the environment and climate became painfully visible as most of the world locked down on account of the global coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Plummeting greenhouse gas emissions and pollution levels gave a glimpse of the greener future that can be achieved if the right policies are put in place and people's behaviour can be adapted to fit with a sustainable development model.

This article will first examine the fragile coexistence between man and nature, explain the causes of climate change and air pollution and explore how the two are

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interlinked, outline the current policies and analyse their results. It will then argue that a successful approach will need public acceptance and awareness, and that the coinciding climate and economic crises might serve to bring about both. It concludes that the recovery plan for Europe, adopted by the EU leaders in July, could have a transformative potential for society and the economy if implemented effectively, inclusively and without reservation.

Fragile coexistence

The COVID-19 crisis exposed many known truths about our world, including the impact of human activity on the environment and climate. The complex relationship between man and nature became strikingly evident during the pandemic.

COVID-19 is thought to have originated in the traditional Chinese open-air market-places. These ‘wet markets’ had already been considered a time bomb for epidemics due to the conditions in which they sell perishable goods such as fresh meat, fish, seafood and produce, and in some cases wild animals (Briggs 2020). The pandemic has cast a spotlight on the consumption of live wildlife and the global wildlife trade as one of the major drivers of species extinction.

Preventing the spread of the virus has also had consequences for the environment. In recent years, policymakers around the world have aimed to crack down on plastic pollution and have adopted various bans on single-use plastics, with the Council of the EU reaching a breakthrough agreement at the end of 2018 (Council of the EU 2018). The COVID-19 outbreak has caused the waste from personal protective equipment, including disposable face-masks and plastic gloves, to pile up, and conservationists are already sounding the alarm about this (Kassam 2020).

Even more significant is the interplay regarding emissions. The World Health Organization has estimated that, prior to the outbreak, smog caused 7 million premature deaths globally per year (WHO 2020). In the EU, about 400,000 people died in 2016 due to exposure to air pollution (European Environment Agency 2019). The link between COVID-19 and poor air quality appears to be threefold (Carrington 2020): first, death rates are higher in patients with chronic illnesses linked to exposure to air pollution; second, pollutants inflame the lungs, which become more susceptible to catching the virus; and third, particles of pollution might even serve as a vehicle to carry the virus further.

By the same token, greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution levels fell dramatically as the world came to a standstill amid the lockdowns imposed to halt the spread of COVID-19 (European Environment Agency 2020; European Space Agency 2020), while nature flourished in places long suffering from degradation. Businesses and economies, on the other hand, suffered hugely and are now eager to reopen. Mankind finds itself at a watershed moment and, if done right, the post-COVID-19 recovery could tackle two crises at once.

Air quality in tandem with climate action

Air quality and climate change are closely interlinked: through the physical processes and human activities that drive them, as well as the policy measures aimed at mitigating them. Reducing greenhouse gas emissions is a central part of the fight against climate change, with the primary target being carbon dioxide (CO₂), whose greenhouse effect warms up the atmosphere with devastating consequences for the planet. The EU is determined to reduce its CO₂ emissions and has aimed to achieve this through a wide range of policies including the trading of emissions in energy-intensive industry sectors (the EU Emissions Trading System), national targets for sectors outside the system, emissions standards for vehicles and rules on fuel quality, boosting energy efficiency, improving the labelling and design of products, promoting the use of renewable energy sources, and spurring innovation and investment in low-carbon technologies. On the international level, it adheres to the Paris Agreement and has committed to reduce CO₂ emissions by 40% by 2030 and to become climate neutral by 2050 (European Commission 2018).

Since greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution often have the same sources, tackling climate change would improve air quality, which is just as acute a problem, with direct benefits to human health, biodiversity and the climate as a whole. Air pollutants are different from CO₂, and rather than piling up in the atmosphere, they negatively and directly affect the air we breathe. The substances most harmful to human health are dust-like particulate matter, nitrogen dioxide, sulphur dioxide and ground-level ozone. Their existence is primarily caused by road traffic, shipping, agriculture, domestic heating and power generation. Air pollution is currently regulated both at the international level, by the UN Gothenburg Protocol, adopted in 1999, which sets binding emissions-reduction targets, and at the European level, by the Ambient Air Quality Directives (European Parliament and Council 2008; European Parliament and Council 2004), which set standards for the quality of the air we breathe. The EU also oversees the National Emission Ceilings Directive (European Parliament and Council 2016), which obliges member states to reduce total emissions of certain air pollutants, alongside other sectoral legislation.

Despite these comprehensive rules, the European Court of Auditors' (2018) report on air pollution noted that while air quality has been improving, most member states are still not compliant with the EU's air-quality standards. The European Commission faces limitations in monitoring and enforcing the rules. At the end of last year, it had 71 open infringement cases regarding air pollution (European Commission 2020b) and these cases could take up to 8 years to resolve. The report nevertheless concluded that citizens' health remains insufficiently protected. As for climate change, scientists are warning that the planet is warming up faster than ever before (NASA 2020), and that to keep global warming to well below two degrees Celsius requires urgent climate action. So how can we advance from the status quo?

EU environmental standards and climate targets have played a pivotal role in reducing air pollution and lowering greenhouse gas emissions in Europe, but there are limits to the

effectiveness of regulation. It is also evident that over-regulation is not the way to go. At the same time, we cannot deny the urgent need to act, from both ecological and health points of view.

Old habits do not have to die hard

What is needed is a paradigm that will shift attitudes towards a new ‘normal’. And the COVID-19 crisis might serve as the right trigger for this much-needed synergy between public support and political action. People were able to comply with the stringent lockdown measures because they understood the logic behind them. The key now will be to advance from compliance with set rules to a commitment to make better choices.

Research shows that greater immersion in the environment might change our attitudes towards its preservation (Kasriel 2020). In lockdown, people sought solace in nature—walking in the parks, gardening or just listening to bird-song on the Internet. Moreover, they observed the direct impact of their (in)activity as the clearer air, quieter roads and expansion of nature into urban environments brought into focus the normally invisible threat of climate change and environmental degradation.

This newfound appreciation for nature and raised public awareness should now be used to secure some of the new habits we have adopted as a society. But as important as individual efforts can be, effective climate action needs commitment from policymakers and businesses attuned to the bigger picture.

Never let a good crisis go to waste

It is estimated that CO₂ emissions fell by 8% during the lockdown period (Lombrana and Warren 2020). The International Energy Agency says that the world will use 6% less energy this year—equivalent to losing the entire energy demand of India (McGrath 2020). The European Environment Agency (2020) and European Space Agency (2020) both reported large decreases in air pollution, in some cities by more than 50%. But as encouraging as these statistics are, turning off the economy hardly constitutes a viable climate policy. It is certainly not enough to affect the amount of CO₂ that has been piling up in the atmosphere for over a century. Researchers estimate that even a 10% drop in emissions in 2020 would still translate into an increase of two parts per million in the concentration of CO₂ (Lombrana and Warren 2020).

The economic impacts of the crisis appear dire. It is forecast that COVID-19 will trigger the deepest recession in the EU’s history (Valero 2020). In July, the European Commission (2020c) corrected its initial 2020 economic outlook from 7.4% growth, estimating that the EU’s economy will now contract by a record 8.3% due to the severe economic impact of the lockdown.

The collision of the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate change emergency requires a coherent response that integrates solutions to both of these crises. Rather

than restoring the old economy, there is an opportunity to invest in a more sustainable one. The choices we make now will shape the global economy for the next decade. At the same time, it is the most critical decade in terms of climate action, when any further delays will be detrimental in terms of not being able to avoid the devastating tipping points. But is restarting the world's economy compatible with the need to halve our emissions by 2030? Christiana Figueres wrote in the *Financial Times* (Figueres and Zycher 2020) that it is not about whether we can tackle both at the same time, but whether we can afford not to do so.

The policymakers do not have to find themselves faced with a binary choice: creating jobs and growth versus preserving the environment and combating climate change. The post-COVID-19 economic recovery presents a landmark opportunity to steer the world's economies towards more sustainable and resilient models. The clean energy transition should continue to be part of the process. Prioritising investments in energy efficiency and renewable energy over fossil-fuel subsidies will create resilient jobs fit for the future. The timing could not be better, as the prices of onshore wind energy and solar photovoltaics have fallen by 70% and 89% respectively during the past 10 years. Energy storage technologies have also advanced significantly (Erlanger 2020).

But not all governments have the same priorities. Wary of the rising unemployment figures and slumps in industrial production, many politicians would argue in favour of postponing the introduction of environmental regulations and focusing on the economy. Negative oil prices (for the first time in history) could make the use of fossil fuels attractive. In the US, the Environmental Protection Agency announced a sweeping relaxation of environmental rules in response to the pandemic. Some EU member states also explored the possibility of back-tracking on their climate commitments (*ERR News* 2020).

The proposed €750 billion recovery plan, Next Generation EU (European Commission 2020a), is focused on a green and digital transformation and shows the way forward. The European Commission foresees that financial support for investments and reforms to boost sustainable jobs and growth will bring prosperity and resilience. Special emphasis has been placed on research and innovation by significantly augmenting the Horizon Europe programme. The most vulnerable regions will benefit from the Just Transition Fund to alleviate the impacts and achieve an inclusive green recovery.

The European Green Deal (European Commission 2019) is the centrepiece of Europe's resilient post-corona economic recovery, with concrete, incremental initiatives that will work towards achieving the long-term goals of climate neutrality and net-zero pollution. By the end of 2020, the European Commission envisages a revision of the 2030 emissions-reductions targets, and gradually proposing strategies on the renovation of buildings, climate adaptation, forests, farming, sustainable finance, offshore renewable energy, the smart sector, the circular economy, consumers,

biodiversity, chemicals, hydrogen and on low-carbon mobility, including in the aviation and maritime sectors.

As member states tap into the massive EU recovery fund, they can help their manufacturers bounce back and, at the same time, tie the support to investment in low-carbon technologies. Policies can be put in place to enable the energy industry to move towards renewables and hydrogen. Sustainable mobility and improved air quality in cities can be explored. Refurbishing the housing stock will improve energy efficiency in buildings and create jobs for the newly unemployed. Any bailouts of the traditional sectors should come with green strings attached. Electrification, artificial intelligence, the 5G network, machine learning, smart production and data management will all play key roles. Sustainability should be mainstreamed in all EU policies, including finance and investment, promoting research, innovation, education and improved public information. On the global level, the EU should advocate for a clean post-COVID-19 recovery in all international fora.

Local and regional governments have a pivotal role to play. As EU leaders outline plans for massive public investment and fiscal measures to aid industries struggling due to the COVID-19 crisis, these lower levels of government should not miss the ecological opportunities to achieve sustainable growth and provide resilient jobs in their communities. Strategies to create a cleaner environment should be supplemented by the efficient and transparent use of available EU funds. People in rural areas should have access to affordable cleaner fuels to heat their homes. In cities, local governments should promote more sustainable forms of transportation. Many mayors have already begun to add to cycling infrastructure and enlarge public spaces as a step towards deconfinement while maintaining social distancing. Where feasible, employers should enhance the opportunities to work from home, which will reduce traffic peaks. In general, improved digitisation of the workplace could cut emissions as well as companies' costs. Raising public awareness will empower citizens to make informed individual choices to opt for environmentally friendlier alternatives.

Conclusion

The EU's post-COVID-19 recovery fund has the potential to tackle two crises at once—jump-starting the economy while embedding sustainable development across all policy areas. A responsible and pragmatic approach to climate and environment policy focused on innovation and targeted investments will enable businesses and individuals to make smart choices while creating added value for the economy. Public acceptance and awareness will be key to the success of the green recovery. To achieve the desired effect, taxpayers will need assurances that their money is accessible and being well spent. An efficient and transparent system of checks and balances must deter (or detect) fraud, yet not discourage honest applicants by creating red tape. Sharing best practices and reporting on the achieved results will further motivate others to contribute to the sustainable transition—within the EU itself as well as on the global stage. A healthy planet, thriving nature and a prosperous society are the ultimate goals and the best shield against any future threats.

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