

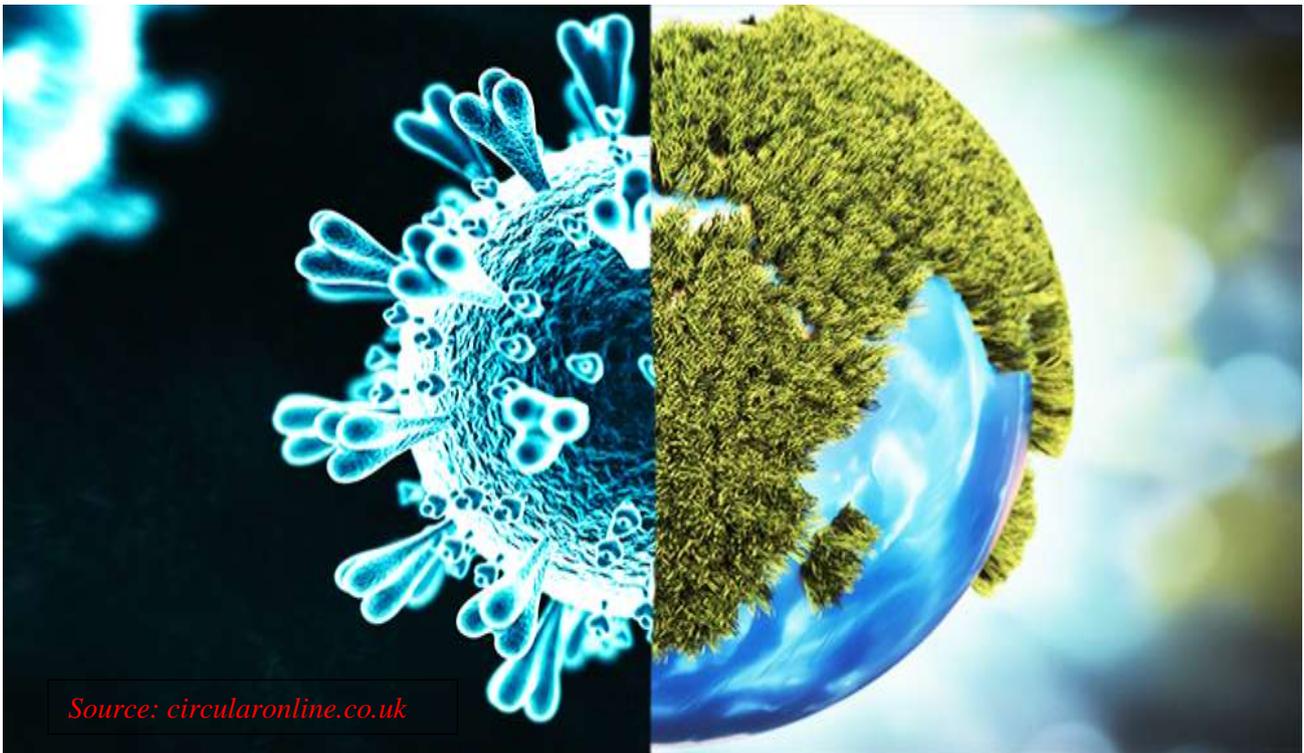
Climate Change Action or Economic Recovery?

It's the Economy, Stupid.

- By Divyanshu Jindal

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The year 2020, which was expected to be a watershed year in the fight against climate change, through the UN Climate Change Conference which would have set out the pathway for how nations will meet their climate emissions targets agreed in 2015 Paris Agreement has been postponed to at least till 2021. However, the bigger concern is, who cares about climate change action in times where governments are staring at their shattered economies by the ravages of a virus that doesn't seem to halt.



“We Shall require a substantially new manner of thinking if mankind is to survive”.

This, written by Albert Einstein, in connection with the development of atomic weapons today holds perfectly true in relation to climate change and the lacklustre response from the world's biggest economies and powers. This becomes an even fitter analogy when we consider the fact that even though energy from renewable sources can grow as rapidly as it has during the pre-

COVID times, the sustained emphasis on the use of fossil fuels, especially in fast-growing economies like China and India, as well as in developed ones like the US, will work towards keeping the issue of climate change at a roadblock.

An analysis by Carbon Brief said that Coronavirus is set to cause the largest ever annual fall in CO₂ emissions, more than any previous economic crisis or period of war (Evans, Carbon Brief). The analysis also showed how a big part of this reduction came from a temporary cut in emissions from China after it went into lockdown, resulting into a cut of 25 percent in emissions, however, even after this, the atmospheric carbon levels are expected to increase again this year as not only does China appears set on its current carbon-intensive development path and US' Trump administration attempting to rescue fossil fuel firms (Harrabin, 2020), but also countries like Brazil, where nationalist governments are much more reluctant to focus on investments in climate change instead of the slowing economy. This is already evident by the fact that Bloomberg NEF, which is Bloomberg's primary research service covering clean energy has already cut its forecast for global solar demand this year as policymakers and corporations focus on short-term economic stimulus measures instead of long-term clean technology (Newburger, 2020).

It is an observable phenomenon that environmental campaigns too, like every other thing, have been halted by the advent of Coronavirus. For instance, a gathering of International Maritime Organization's Scientific Group and Legal Committee which was supposed to meet to discuss a number of issues related to possible greenhouse gas regulations for the global shipping sector has been postponed. Not only are the campaigns forced to get restricted to the online mode through social media, but also the world is now more distracted by the thought of a post-COVID world in terms of personal income and sustenance. Several national leaders have utilized this distraction to go ahead with plans which ignore any climate change concerns. To this end, local Chinese governments are going on a construction binge by adding coal power plants at an accelerated pace and establishing new fleets of fossil fuel powered generators along the stretches of its 'Belt and Road Initiative' (Browne, 2020) and US now desires to start drilling on more than two-thirds of the largest swath of US public land in Alaska for oil and gas (Eilperin & Mufson, 2020). Similarly, the Brazilian government has frozen climate funds and rolled back environmental regulations, giving free hand to land grabbers in Amazon at a time when law enforcement is at its weakest (Niranjan, 2020).

There exists a double dilemma in the approach towards solving the climate change issue that who among the governments and common people should it be, to take the lead on taking actions. In a post-COVID world, the personal carbon footprint can go in both directions as per the choices made. For instance, if the governments and institutions proceed with encouraging working people to find means to continue tele-working, promote electric mode of transportation and limit international as well as intra-national travel, vehicular pollution might be controlled. However, as the public transportation and concepts like carpooling and vehicle sharing might become a thing of great suspicion in a post-COVID world, especially in regions of high population density like South Asia, emissions from increased usage of personal vehicles may increase. Hence, the impetus cannot just be with the governments, personal consumption and travel habits are some of the many elements which will shape the path towards climate change policies. A better approach will be to focus on policies that could slash emissions on a broader scale, like carbon taxes or clean-energy subsidies. To this aim, World Economic Forum in starting of June this year launched the ‘Great Reset’ initiative, for a better world after the pandemic which puts emphasizes on the notion that this is the time to end fossil fuel subsidies and create a greener, fairer economy for the future (Parker, 2020).

But on the other hand, destructive forces at work are the political interests and power of the energy giant’s lobbying which hold much greater leverage over the governments worldwide in comparison to renewable energy sector lobbies. In US, the Republicans who are in power often argue that if China won’t commit to major emissions reductions, neither should the US (Bordoff, 2020). This is not something caused by the occurrence of the Coronavirus pandemic, as even before coming to power, the current US president was vocal on the same stance as exemplified by one of his tweets in November 2012 where he mentions that ‘The concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make US manufacturing non-competitive’ (Trump, 2012). As Rob Jackson, chair of the Global Carbon Project puts it, “Employment trumps environment in politics” (Newburger, 2020) this stance will get magnified when the governments go in search of post-COVID growth which will overlook environment considerations in lieu of employment and avoiding socio-economic discontent, thus rolling back any success the world has achieved till now in terms of sustainable development. One of the ways which can drive this issue is described by Dr Melissa Lott, a researcher at the Center of Global Energy Policy at Columbia University who says that “If economic stimulus packages drive money away from clean energy investments by infusing fossil fuels industries with short-term capital while ignoring clean energy supply chains... we

could see a domino effect that would push us further away from our clean energy needs” (Newburger, 2020).

The current developments in a pandemic stricken world have placed tremendous pressure on the Least Developed nations like Afghanistan and Nepal having the least contribution to emissions but having the most profound negative impacts because of the climate change. During the COP 25 held in Madrid, Spain in 2019, LDC’s raised voices underlining the impact they stand to face due to climate change and urged the biggest emitters to take substantial actions, however, as visible, economic concerns trump foreign relations in the sphere of actions on climate change. However, climate change has not been rolled back on everyone’s agenda as seen by the recent positive reactions from Europe where European Commission’s Vice-President Frans Timmermans said in a statement that, “We will not slow down our work domestically or internationally to prepare for an ambitious COP26, when it takes place”, re-emphasizing EU’s commitment towards climate neutrality by 2050 (Dennis & Mooney, 2020). Going beyond just commitments, EU has laid out a vision of a green future with a proposed recovery package worth more than \$800 billion that would transition away from fossil fuels and put people to work, making old buildings energy-efficient (Sengupta, 2020).

The world today stands at the crossroads between choosing a path of short-term gain and a path towards a better, cleaner, more sustainable future. As the nations get involved in the process of deciding the path that they want to follow in a post-COVID world, they have a choice in making better choices and take this opportunity to embark on the ‘Great Reset’. At the same time, their actions will be closely monitored by the people across countries, devising new ways to raise their voices and campaign against the interests of corporations and governments which tend to ignore the work done for decades to reach to the current point of agreements and self-consciousness of responsibilities. A coordinated approach towards the issue of climate change, while trying to get back the economies on track, will be the only way forward, if the world has to escape the pandemics, current and future ones, in reality.

About Author: Divyanshu Jindal is a Research Intern at AIDIA, currently pursuing M.A in Diplomacy, Law and Business at Jindal School of International Affairs, Jindal Global University.

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