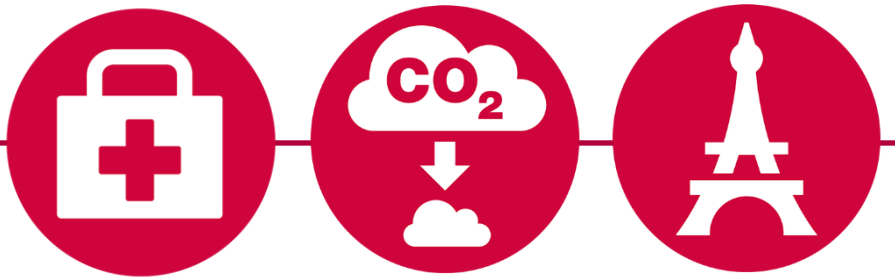


A chance to build a better future

From COVID-19 to climate action

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We all have seen the pictures on the news: crystal clear water and shoals of tiny fish in Venice's canals, falling pollution levels and wild boars roaming the streets of empty cities. Indeed, the lockdowns in response to the outbreak of COVID-19 have had immediate effects on the environment and caused a dip in global CO₂ emissions. Germany may even reach its climate target for 2020 according to forecasts. However, there is no reason to be cheerful. The pandemic and its consequences may seriously set back climate action around the globe.

Although both are global (health) emergencies, governments and people respond to COVID-19 and climate change differently. The COVID-19 pandemic requires short-term coping. People and policymakers have taken appropriately drastic measures to flatten the curve of infections. Climate change is a global emergency, too, set to cause more than 250.000 deaths a year due to heat waves, severe droughts and sea level rise. As global warming continues, the prospected negative impacts on all beings are accumulating. Unabated climate change is likely to reach dangerous tipping points in our Earth system with devastating consequences for future generations. However, climate change is still not perceived and responded to as a global emergency. At least not comparably to the degree of responses observed to COVID-19. Even worse, the current pandemic could destroy the momentum that the climate movement, especially thanks to FridaysForFuture, has built up over the last year by taking away public attention. The decisive UN climate change conference in 2020 (COP26) after the underwhelming results of the last COP has been postponed to 2021, which will further slow-down the dragging international climate process.

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Moreover, the dip in emissions won't last for long. Now that many countries are lifting their lockdowns, emissions will rise again, both caused by a catch-up effect and by people's return to old habits, such as frequent flying. Furthermore, several governments have announced intentions to bail out the aviation and fossil fuel sector, which will significantly contribute to increasing pollution. Clearly, COVID-19's affirmative side effects will not be enough to mitigate global warming. From a climate perspective, the lockdowns are not even a short gasp of relief.

Just as with the impacts of climate change, countries of the Global South are especially hit hard by the pandemic. Now they have to fight against both the consequences of COVID-19 and the devastating impacts of climate change. Many countries are facing multiple vulnerabilities, such as limited access to water and sanitation, weak or extremely stretched health systems, higher levels of poverty, weak institutions, fragile governance and an absence of social safety nets. According to the IMF, foreign investors have already withdrawn USD 100 billion from emerging and developing countries since the beginning of the pandemic. Remittances from migrants are expected to decrease dramatically. These additional challenges and financial losses will further restrict the leeway of governments to continuously implement internationally agreed climate and sustainability goals. Development cooperation needs to respond to this dual crisis and step-up support to the poorest and most vulnerable societies.

The climate crisis may not yet be as visible as the current pandemic, but the need for action is just as urgent. One year of decreased greenhouse gas emissions is not enough to get on track – long-term solutions and policies are needed as well as systemic changes to align our economic system with the global common good and update our democracies to better safeguard societies against future crises such as climate change. It is high time to align politics resolutely with sustainability and upgrade climate action to a public goal. An adequate response to the looming climate catastrophe requires action by the Global North. First and foremost, Germany and the European Union should align all post-pandemic recovery activities and beyond with the more ambitious 1.5 degree goal of the Paris Agreement.

The fact that many governments took the advice by scientists and reacted so drastically to the coronavirus outbreak indicates that strong economies can raise the political and financial capital to react to the climate crisis, too. However, while the pandemic can hopefully be overcome with the help of a vaccine, there will be no vaccine against climate change. The good news is that also in the case of climate change, scientific advice is readily available. Now all recovery measures must be dual purpose: Aligning short- and mid-term efforts with long-term sustainability and transfer local to global solidarity so that no one is left behind. Despite all grief that COVID-19 is causing, the recovery efforts also offer a chance to build a better future for everyone by flattening the climate curve, too.