



## PERSPECTIVES

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# How Coronavirus Policy and Environmental Policy Intersect

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** There are several intersections between policy responses to the coronavirus pandemic and environmental issues. The decision to maintain social distancing measures, for example, has implications for the environment that need to be considered. The clash of economic and environmental interests, which was already an issue before the outbreak, will undoubtedly heat up further as the world emerges from the worst of the crisis.

The intersections between the coronavirus pandemic and environmental issues fall into several categories, including the environmental consequences of measures taken to contain the virus and the environmental repercussions of different exit strategies. Preventing climate change was an important issue in the years leading up to the outbreak, but it has been overshadowed by coronavirus. One wonders how the climate change issue will reassert itself in the post-coronavirus world.

One much-heard claim is that human misbehavior and neglect of nature are responsible for the outbreak of the pandemic. This is often accompanied by statements from environmentalists to the effect that if humanity does not change its behavior, disease outbreaks will become regular events. (This argument will lose much of its power if definitive evidence is found that the virus originated, as some suspect, in a laboratory in Wuhan, China.)

The coronavirus and measures to combat it have had several direct and indirect environmental impacts, some of which were highly publicized. There were reports, for example, that the inhabitants of Venice could suddenly see marine life in their canals as a result of the lack of tourists and boat traffic, though those images have been disputed as doctored.

On a much broader scale, the positive environmental impact of closing many industries down and severely reducing air traffic is proving to be significant. The decline in car travel has similarly reduced air pollution. Some experts claim that it may now be easier for countries to meet their Paris Climate Accord goals due to the reduction in emissions. This is only one side of the crisis-related environmental impact of the virus, however. In the US, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has relaxed ecological standards as well as rules that penalize polluters.

The new coronavirus reality is temporary, and (we hope) largely behind us. One may assume that government exit strategies will aim to return society to pre-virus conditions as much as possible. Western economies were growing, albeit slightly, and unemployment was low to not very high in most countries. While it remains to be seen whether or not there will be a second wave of the pandemic, exit strategies cannot be based on the assumption that there will.

Regarding exit strategies and their impact on the environment, the big question is how long social distancing will be maintained. The continuation of this practice will have huge repercussions. To what extent is social distancing practically enforceable, and how long can societies live with it?

If social distancing is maintained and passengers on public transport are required indefinitely to keep well apart, local traffic in many places at certain hours of the day will be unable to meet demand. Will people who need to use public transport at certain hours be given priority? If society is to function, employees have to be able to reach their places of work.

Ongoing social distancing will have many other consequences for public transport. Separations between seats will have to be created to keep travelers from sitting too close together. NS, the Dutch national railway company, is working on a program for that purpose. It is doing trials on trains where only some seats can be occupied and plastic screens are placed between compartments. The company estimates that trains will only be able to take a quarter of the number of passengers who were traveling before the pandemic.

NS is also evaluating a special ticket for people who have essential jobs and who must get to their workplaces. This could serve as an example of how to accommodate priority travelers. Another possibility being investigated is whether travelers will be willing to reserve train seats ahead of time.

But what about non-priority travelers? Children have to get to and from school. School buses will take fewer passengers, so more trips might have to be made. One alternative is staggered class hours.

For decades, remote employment has been promoted for both full- and part-time workers. The concept has made inroads in several countries. In the US, before the pandemic, 3.4% of the workforce was working at least half the week from home. During the pandemic, many people have used Zoom as a substitute for face-to-face meetings and become familiar with it. The aftermath of the pandemic is likely to see a continued increase in remote working, but not to the extent that it can compensate for the decline in transportation. The cost of public transport will have to increase substantially. In addition to the expense of seat rearrangement, the decline in passengers will distort the pre-coronavirus cost-income ratio.

What will people do who find themselves excluded from public transport? Many cities would like to see more citizens on bicycles. Mayors from three continents are collaborating under the chairpersonship of the mayor of Milan to develop environmental programs for their cities to keep air pollution from rapidly accelerating again. One possible step is to rearrange car routes so they either avoid cities entirely or are cumbersome when they cut through cities. A well-known through road in Paris, the Rue de Rivoli, will soon be closed to car traffic.

Yet whatever measures are taken, the use of private cars by their owners will increase, and with it air pollution. As mentioned, social distancing will require the reduction of seats on public transportation. If that goes on, more and more people will likely choose to take their own car rather than ride the bus or train, which carry not only greater inconvenience but a greater risk of infection. Lower fuel prices should further boost this trend.

It is not easy to predict what this array of changes will do to cities. It is quite possible that the rise in the number of people opting to drive their own cars rather than risk the logistical headache and infection hazard of public transportation will result in traffic jams that will not only bring air pollution back to pre-virus levels but possibly even increase them.

Air travel is a major polluter. In several countries it has been environmental policy to gradually replace short-term air traffic with fast trains. If the number of available train seats radically decreases, this could affect those policies.

As far as long distance air traffic is concerned, demand is likely to decrease substantially. The need to social distance will inhibit some travelers who do not want to be on a plane with strangers for hours on end. Because seat demand is in decline, the leaving of empty seats is less of an issue, but it comes at a cost. EasyJet has announced that it would like to leave all its middle seats free and resume flying. That might work on the planes themselves, but the CEO of Heathrow Airport has said social distancing at

airports will mean kilometer-long queues to board each jumbo jet. Such a prospect will certainly give prospective travelers pause.

Many airlines will need government help through loans and guarantees. In a market where demand is dramatically down, placing additional environmental pressure on airlines may make recovery even more difficult. Yet politics are pushing in that direction. Air France is in advanced financing discussions with the French government. KLM's future remains uncertain. One of the Dutch government parties, D66, wants to include a condition for government finance to KLM: that it stop traveling to holiday destinations. If this does become a condition for government assistance, it will amount to an environmental policy destroying employment, and at a critical moment.

It remains unclear what is going to happen to global emissions after all this. A researcher at the Center for International Climate and Environment Research in Oslo claims that estimates of global emissions will decrease no more than 0.3% in 2020, less than in the crash of 2008-09.

There are other fundamental problems with green policies. The conceptual ideal is sustainable growth; i.e., to keep the world economy expanding while cutting back significantly on the use of the planet's limited resources. It has never been proven that this ideal is feasible.

There are also political aspects concerning the environment arising from the coronavirus crisis and the way it was handled. This can best be seen in Germany, which has a long tradition of environmental concern. The world's first major environmental laws go back to the Nazi era. In the pre-coronavirus societal mood of preventing climate change, public support for Germany's Green Party—the biggest such party in Western Europe—was increasing in the polls. In January 2020, it was the second-largest party in the country, only a few percentage points below Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU), which had fallen to 25-28%. The Green Party leader, Robert Habeck, was often discussed as the likely next Chancellor. But Merkel's handling of the coronavirus crisis brought about a revival of her party's popularity. Polls in April gave the Christian Democrats 37-38%, while the Green Party is not polling at even half that.

Many other environment-related issues will come to the fore as the world moves out of the coronavirus crisis. The conflict between economic and environmental interests, which was already intense before the pandemic, will heat up further.

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