



Environmental
Funders Network

COVID-19 and a green recovery

Building Back Better: what it
means, why we need it, and the
environmental connection

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About the Environmental Funders Network (EFN)

EFN is collaborating to secure a truly sustainable and just world, fit for people and nature. Our mission is to increase financial support for environmental causes and to help environmental philanthropy to be as effective as it can be. Our members are funders, mainly based in the United Kingdom, who pursue these aims at home and overseas. As their network we will work inclusively, efficiently, transparently, accountably, and to high standards of social and environmental responsibility.

EFN does not hold funds, consider or make grants, or advise fundraisers. Please do not send funding requests to EFN as we cannot respond to them. Funders interested in joining EFN or finding out more about the network should contact us at info@greenfunders.org. This report, along with other EFN publications and resources relevant to environmental philanthropy, is available on the Resources page of our website: www.greenfunders.org/resources.

About this report

The Environmental Funders Network is grateful to Liz Gadd for writing this and the other philanthropy briefings in the 'COVID-19 and the environment' series while on furlough leave from her role at New Philanthropy Capital

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What is ‘building back better’?

Globally, two thirds of citizens believe that the climate change crisis is as serious as the COVID-19 crisis and feel that if their governments do not act now to combat climate change, they will be failing their citizens¹. And as discussion builds on what happens next, 94% of the UK population say that they do not want to return to the same type of economy as before the pandemic².

The slogan ‘build back better’ is a banner for post-pandemic green economic stimulus packages that include social policies to address inequality. For many, the demands build upon the ‘green new deal’ concept, promoted in a range of countries since the 2008 global financial crisis³. The world may not have been ready for this change in 2009, but many believe the moment is now right⁴. There are variations in the demands for change between countries and groups. However, the similarities are well captured by the Green New Deal UK’s definition of *‘a world free from poverty, insecurity, and climate breakdown, where everyone lives fulfilled, healthy lives’*⁵. Common goals within the build back better and green new deal debate are:

- Transition to cleaner energy production, decarbonising the economy
- Strengthened green industries and creation of new jobs
- Reduced social and economic inequalities, building societal resilience to climate change
- Protection and restoration of the natural environment

“Sooner or later we will find a vaccine for the coronavirus. But there is no vaccine for climate change. Therefore [we] need a recovery plan designed for the future.”

URSULA VON DER LEYEN, EU COMMISSION PRESIDENT

Many third sector bodies are coming together to highlight these issues, including the Build Back Better coronavirus recovery campaign⁶ and via calls to government coordinated by the Climate Coalition⁷ and New Economics Foundation⁸.

Environmental issues played a key role in causes of the COVID-19 pandemic and therefore are addressed in the goals for recovery. Our unsustainable patterns of consumption led directly to COVID-19 through habitat destruction and our encroachment on nature (probably including the illegal wildlife trade, although this has not yet been proven), then our high levels of global air travel spread the virus faster than we could contain it. Air pollution (as well as, potentially, hormone disrupting chemicals in food and consumer products) made us more vulnerable to COVID-19’s worst effects by weakening our immune systems. In this way, COVID-19 effectively highlights why we need to restore nature and decarbonise our economy – while, having put such a catastrophic spanner in the works, giving us the imperative to address our economic system.

“For all of the suffering and sacrifice people have endured during this health crisis, it has provided us with a once in a lifetime opportunity to transform the way we live, travel and work – tackling the health, climate and nature crises all at the same time...If we fail to get this right, we may never get another chance.”

JOHN SAUVEN, CEO OF GREENPEACE UK

Transition to cleaner energy production, decarbonising the economy

Decarbonisation is the leading demand from proponents of green recovery packages. We need to achieve a net-zero economy by mid-century if we are to meet the 1.5°C global warming limit agreed in the 2015 Paris Agreement⁹. Net-zero means that we ensure that any remaining carbon emissions are balanced by absorbing an equivalent amount from the atmosphere. The goal is to minimize the worst effects of climate change, which result from increasing levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere (chiefly carbon-based emissions like carbon dioxide). Increasing levels of greenhouse gases are primarily caused by our burning of fossil fuels and our degradation, conversion and removal of healthy habitats like forests, to make way for agriculture and to produce products like timber and cellulose.

Evidence is clear that global temperature rises must be kept below 1.5°C by 2030 if we are to avert catastrophic climate change. Decarbonising our economy will help us avoid global devastation in the form of sea level rises; increased storms, floods, droughts and heat waves; and widespread decimation of biodiversity on land and sea.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen an unprecedented fall in emissions (more than during any previous war and more than six times greater than during the 2008 financial crisis¹⁰). The International Energy Agency estimates we will have reduced our emissions by 8 per cent this year¹¹. To meet climate targets, we would need to sustain this level of emissions reduction every year this decade – the United Nations estimates at a rate of 7.6 per cent each year¹² – however



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maintaining the current lockdown measures is, of course, unsustainable longer-term. Instead, to reduce emissions, we need to break our dependence on fossil fuels. The COVID-19 pandemic provides governments, businesses, and communities with an unprecedented opportunity to do things differently as we rebuild.

The drumbeat for a green recovery is getting louder and coming from many directions. In addition to wide third-sector calls for change¹³, over 150 global corporations have urged world leaders to lead a net-zero recovery from COVID-19¹⁴, 200 health sector organisations representing at least 40 million health workers from around the world have written to the G20 seeking a green recovery package¹⁵, and, in the UK, a cross-party group of MPs has called for an extra £30 billion to aid green recovery from COVID-19¹⁶. Even Boris Johnson has said that ‘we owe it to future generations to build back better’¹⁷.

However, environmental gains are far from guaranteed. For example, polluters are campaigning against green recovery programmes¹⁸. And whilst Europe is leading the way in having published a green recovery plan, critics highlight that many climate-related conditions on the main EU budget have been lifted for three years because of the pandemic and the proportion of the budget reserved for climate projects remains stuck at 25 per cent¹⁹. Similarly, despite the 17 per cent reduction in global CO₂ emissions at the peak of the lockdown, scientists fear that as lockdown is eased, and people return to their cars as a means to support social distancing, CO₂ emissions will rebound and may be worse than

before²⁰. Such concerns are well founded, as after the 2008 financial crash a 1 per cent fall in emissions in 2009 was followed by a near 6 per cent rise in 2010 as a result of the conventional stimulus packages deployed²¹. This is why organisations such as the Climate Coalition, representing 140 organisations and over 22 million members, have called for bailouts of polluting industries to be conditional on action plans to contribute to the UK’s moves toward net-zero and the 1.5°C global warming limit. Additional calls to action include prioritising investment and reskilling in renewable energy, energy efficiency and zero carbon transport infrastructure, alongside investment in the transition to a UK land use and farming system that is positive for nature, climate and human health. Such calls sit alongside an awareness of the impact our decisions have on vulnerable countries and communities worldwide and associated calls to collaborate and act at home and abroad.²²

There is a health angle to decarbonising the economy that the pandemic has rendered all the more visible: air pollution (largely resulting from our burning of fossil fuels and wood) is the biggest environmental health risk of our time, killing an estimated 7 million people every year²³ even before the pandemic. Now, evidence shows that air pollution may be supporting the transmission of COVID-19²⁴, and researchers have found evidence of a causal link between air pollution and fatalities²⁵; there is also emerging evidence that prior exposure to air pollution may increase risk of fatality.²⁶ So air pollution may be both spreading the virus and making us much more vulnerable to its worst effects.

“We are at a unique stage in our history. Never before have we had such an awareness of what we are doing to the planet, and never before have we had the power to do something about that.”

SIR DAVID ATTENBOROUGH, BLUE PLANET

Strengthened green industries and creation of new jobs

Leading economists believe that environmentally-friendly policy initiatives could help move the world closer to net-zero emissions and also offer the best economic returns for government spending.²⁷ A University of Oxford analysis shows that green projects create more jobs, deliver higher short-term returns per dollar spent and lead to increased long-term cost savings in comparison with traditional fiscal stimulus packages²⁸. Indeed, a post-pandemic 'green shift' in transport alone could create up to 15 million jobs worldwide²⁹. In the UK, the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) Environmental Justice Commission reports that a green recovery could create 850,000 new green energy jobs this decade. Renewable and clean energy sources such as solar, wind, hydroelectric, biomass and geothermal power can provide energy without the global-warming effects of fossil fuels³⁰, but despite this, governments around the world are subsidising

fossil fuels by £6 million every minute—whilst this £3.4 trillion-a-year industry³¹ continues to lobby for relaxed environmental regulations³².

The concept of a 'just transition' – where workers and communities affected by the move to a low-carbon economy are supported through a managed transition – has become increasingly important, with organisations such as Climate Outreach calling for wider engagement on this transition within the most vulnerable populations³³ and the IPPR's Environmental Justice Commission calling for a *'future where people and nature can thrive, centred on good jobs and meaningful work, low carbon businesses, and where inequalities are reduced and opportunities offered to all'*³⁴. Organisations like Platform, which have long been campaigning for an end to oil, are working to ensure that oil and gas workers are consulted in the phase-out of their industries and given power in the policy decisions surrounding it.³⁵



Reduced social and economic inequalities, building societal resilience to climate change

Many of those calling for us to build back better are interested in seizing the opportunity to address issues of inequality, intergenerational injustice, racial injustices, gender rights and human rights. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated these inequities - while demonstrating that collective action to care for one another is possible.

Almost twice as many people have died from COVID-19 in the most deprived areas, compared to the wealthiest areas of the UK³⁶. As Sadiq Khan, London Mayor, said, *'Ultimately, this is about health inequalities, about deprivation and affluence and how important socio-economic status is in determining health outcomes'*³⁷. Similarly, climate change disproportionately affects those most vulnerable and least able to adapt to more frequent and more severe storms, droughts and floods; and, as Oxfam reports³⁸, *'the world's poorest people have done the least to cause climate change and yet it is likely to reverse the huge progress made over recent decades in the fight against poverty'*. In fact, the World Bank estimates that 60 million people could be pushed into 'extreme poverty' as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic alone³⁹. For many, including JP Morgan's CEO, Jamie Dimon, COVID-19 is a 'wake-up call' to build a fairer society⁴⁰.

The relationship between climate change and social inequality is a vicious cycle, whereby initial inequality causes disadvantaged groups to suffer disproportionately from the adverse effects of climate change, resulting in greater subsequent inequality⁴¹. Climate change has already exacerbated global inequalities, and this will get worse. For example, in sub-Saharan African countries - including Burkina Faso, Niger and Sudan - climate change has already

driven GDP per capita more than 20 per cent lower than it would have been in the absence of climate change. Looking ahead, Stanford University has reported that the average income in the world's poorest countries could decline 75 per cent by 2100, while some of the richest countries could experience gains in income.⁴²

In much of the global south, women - who make up 70% of the world's poor - are responsible for activity such as gathering food, water and fuel for cooking and heating. All these tasks are becoming harder as the climate changes. Many, including the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), highlight this gender disparity and call to maximise input of the knowledge and understanding of women to mitigate and adapt to climate change⁴³.

Intergenerational justice is also intertwined with building back better. The Lancet Countdown, a collaboration of 24 academic institutions and intergovernmental organisations from across the world, has declared the impact of climate change on health to be 'the major threat of the 21st century'⁴⁴ and emphasised that *'the life of every child born today will be profoundly affected by climate change, with populations around the world increasingly facing extremes of weather, food and water insecurity, changing patterns of infectious disease, and a less certain future'*⁴⁵. António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, has also emphasised intergenerational justice, stressing that *'the [COVID-19] recovery must...respect the rights of future generations, enhancing climate action aiming at carbon neutrality by 2050 and protecting biodiversity'*⁴⁶.

Protection and restoration of the natural environment

Protecting and restoring our natural environment mitigates the impacts of climate change, including safeguarding our health. Action on biodiversity and action on climate change *'are actually two sides of the same coin'*, as Synchronicity Earth put it; climate impacts nature, and loss of biodiversity exacerbates climate change.⁴⁷ For example, as much as 30 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions can be attributed to deforestation and mangrove destruction⁴⁸ – these important carbon-absorbing areas known as 'carbon sinks' play an essential role in carbon dioxide capture and supporting the planet's biodiversity.

Increase in prevalence of diseases such as COVID-19 represent just one of the impacts of ecosystem harm. Coronaviruses, like COVID-19, are zoonotic, meaning they can be transmitted between animals and people. Researchers have found increasing numbers of zoonotic diseases passing to humans, and spreading, over the past 80 years, with a significant uptick since 1980. As we cut down forests and convert habitats for agriculture, wild species are crowded into smaller and smaller spaces, increasing the chances of diseases spreading across animal species. For similar reasons – road building, deforestation, agricultural conversion, the wildlife trade – humans are coming into contact with wild animals and increasingly vulnerable to those diseases. To prevent future outbreaks, we must address the human threats to ecosystems and wildlife, including habitat loss and the illegal wildlife trade⁴⁹.

While many zoonotic diseases originate in wildlife, livestock often serve as a bridge between wildlife and human infections. This is particularly so for intensively reared livestock,

as their resilience is hindered by limited genetic diversity when bred for food production rather than disease resistance.⁵⁰ More than 50 per cent of all zoonotic diseases, and more than 25 per cent of all diseases, can be traced back to agricultural drivers⁵¹. Moreover, as reported by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), *'perhaps the most worrisome impact of industrial meat production, analysed and discussed in many scientific publications in recent years, is the role of livestock in climate change'*⁵². It is unlikely that global temperature rises can be kept below 1.5°C in the absence of a radical shift in meat and dairy consumption⁵³.

Destruction of habitat – for example, agribusinesses clearing forests to grow soy to feed livestock, oil companies damaging marine environments to mine for oil, logging companies felling ancient trees, developers draining wetlands – has been identified by the Convention on Biological Diversity as the leading driver of emerging infectious diseases. Alongside other man-made changes to natural ecosystems, this affects patterns of infectious diseases by changing the abundance of organisms, interactions within and between them, and interactions between plant and animal life and other components of the environment such as water and air⁵⁴. The Convention on Biological Diversity reports that, globally, humans have significantly altered three-quarters of land and two-thirds of marine environments, with over a third of the world's land surface and nearly 75 per cent of freshwater now devoted to crop or livestock production⁵⁵. These changes threaten our clean air, fresh water, food security and the natural regulation of pests, disease and pollination.

The role of the third sector

The third sector plays a critical role in driving the green transition – in holding policy makers to account, evidencing impact, mobilising communities and protecting our natural world through conservation. For example, and to name but a few: Greenpeace's new manifesto for a green recovery from COVID-19 provides detailed recommendations in relation to clean transport, green buildings, smart power, restoring nature and a circular economy; WWF has recently reported⁵⁶ that the UK could reap £90bn in annual benefits through improved health and living conditions from moving to net zero emissions; and ClientEarth are holding governments and businesses to account where legally binding commitments are not met.

As our government and businesses make key decisions about how to allocate resources through bailouts, stimulus packages and revised strategies, a well-resourced and coherent third sector is critical in maximising the opportunities to build back better.

In the run-up to the postponed international Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26) in November 2021, the UK government is seeking to encourage businesses, cities, regions and nations to take forward net-zero recovery programmes through its UN-backed 'Race to Zero' campaign⁵⁷; evidence of what works and what doesn't will be required. This information is often sourced from the third sector, whether that is, for example, the data-driven analysis of Carbon Brief⁵⁸, Greenpeace exposing how UK-consumed meat is contributing to destruction of the Amazon⁵⁹, WWF's research into the numbers of new jobs that

could result from investing in clean power and energy efficiency⁶⁰, or Possible highlighting the ground source heat potential of public parks⁶¹.

Unfortunately, environmental organisations (eNGOs) have almost universally been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, with over a quarter of those surveyed recently concerned about their financial viability and estimated average losses of £4 million per organisation in the coming year⁶².

With a heavy reliance on traded income, memberships and face-to-face fundraising, the lockdown has not been kind to eNGO income streams. The biggest concern for 98 per cent of UK-based eNGOs is the postponement or cancelling of planned events or projects and overall loss of revenue. Internationally the situation is similarly stark, with 40 per cent of international development charities reporting that they could fold in the next six months⁶³. Despite the financial challenges, eNGOs have been working non-stop to maintain habitats and keep wildlife safe, burning through cash reserves as they do so⁶⁴. As the environmental sector faces an unprecedented funding crisis, key green targets are at risk of not being met⁶⁵ and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and drivers of future pandemics exacerbated.

The work of environmental charities and the philanthropists supporting them has never been needed more, and as the world makes decisions regarding the post-pandemic recovery model and prepares for COP26 in November 2021, environmental donations will have greater impact than ever before.

“The UK has a chance to lead on the world stage next year with COP26, and set an example of what building back better actually looks like. Committing to this ahead of the climate talks will show international leadership what a truly green recovery looks like.”

MORTEN THAYSEN, GREEN RECOVERY CAMPAIGNER, GREENPEACE UK

Further information

WATCH

Committee on Climate Change's 2017 [UK Climate Change Risk Assessment](#)

WATCH

Green Alliance online event on [Building back better, ensuring a green and just recovery](#)

WATCH

[2040](#) (2019) - Award-winning director Damon Gameau explores what the future would look like by the year 2040 if we simply embraced the best solutions already available to us

WATCH

David Wallace-Wells, author of 'The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming' on [How we could change the planet's climate future](#)

READ

Green Alliance blog by Tony Juniper, leading British environmentalist and former CEO of Friends of the Earth, on [Why this pandemic is an environmental issue](#)

READ

Possible's [Climate Justice Starter Pack](#)

READ

The Committee on Climate Change's [2019 progress report](#) to the UK parliament

READ

'[The Future We Choose](#)' book by Christiana Figueres and Tom Rivett-Carnac

EXPLORE

Decide the best way to slow global warming in this [climate simulator](#)

LOOK OUT FOR

The [TED Countdown Summit](#) in October 2021

Example eNGOs working to ‘build back better’

There are many impactful environmental NGOs operating in the UK and globally as well as many charities focussed on directly relevant social issues – including the issues touched upon in this paper. This list provides examples of organisations specifically working on the ‘build back better’ concept. Please note that no due diligence has been conducted by EFN on the organisations listed below.

Organisation	Focus areas
<u>ClientEarth</u>	UK-based international charity that uses the power of the law to protect the planet and the people who live on it
<u>Common Wealth</u>	A UK think tank designing ownership models for a democratic & sustainable economy
<u>Friends of the Earth</u>	A grassroots environmental campaigning organisation working to ensure environmental and social justice, human dignity, and respect for human rights and peoples’ rights so as to secure sustainable societies
<u>Green Alliance</u>	An independent UK think tank and charity focused on ambitious leadership for the environment
<u>Green New Deal UK</u>	A UK non-profit movement made of ordinary people calling for ‘green new deal’ solutions that match the scale of the challenge
<u>Greenpeace</u>	Global NGO that uses non-violent creative action to pave the way towards a greener, more peaceful world, and to confront the systems that threaten our environment
<u>New Economics Foundation</u>	A UK think tank promoting social, economic and environmental justice
<u>The Climate Coalition</u>	The UK’s largest group of people dedicated to action against climate change with 140 member organisations—including the National Trust, Women’s Institute, Oxfam and RSPB
<u>The Wildlife Trusts</u>	A UK grassroots movement made up of 46 Wildlife Trusts, each of which is an independent charity, comprising people from a wide range of backgrounds and all walks of life who believe that we need nature and nature needs us
<u>World Wildlife Fund (WWF)</u>	An independent global conservation organisation with a mission to create a world where people and wildlife can thrive together
<u>350.org</u>	An international movement working to end the age of fossil fuels and build a world of community-led renewable energy for all

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