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Coronavirus and Climate change: what science tells us

The sudden Covid-19 outbreak and an exponentially rising climate change are both posing unprecedented challenges to our planet and the international community at large.

Never has science been so central to our lives as today. The pandemic crisis reinforces the importance of science through evidence-informing government policies and direct role in decision making. A few days ago, the [UN Secretary General](#), Antonio Gutierrez, appealed to the world community on the need to ‘increase ambition and action on climate change especially as countries take measures to recover from the coronavirus crisis’. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean (PAM) fully shares his call.

In a [recent interview](#), the UN Secretary General also warned that Covid-19’s long term impact will be ‘to look into climate change, because there is a clear demonstration that when we rebuild our economies, we will have a chance to do it in a more sustainable way. Now, that we consume less energy, we move less, it is a moment to look at how to do it better in the future’. In fact, since the beginning of the crisis an increasing number of studies has analysed the direct impact of weakened human activity.

Due to the limitations imposed in relation to COVID 19, in [China](#), carbon emissions fell by around 25% over a four-week period, and global carbon dioxide emissions could fall by [0.3 percent to 1.2 percent](#) in 2020. In the [EU](#), daily emissions have fallen 58% compared to pre-crisis levels. In the [UK](#), air pollution levels have dropped significantly since the country went into lockdown, with some cities observing nitrogen dioxide levels fall by up to 60%. Similarly, in [Northern Italy](#), the Copernicus Satellite system has revealed a drastic reduction in such emissions. Unfortunately, as indicated by researchers at [Istituto Affari Internazionali](#), ‘it is unlikely that Covid-19 is going to be good for the planet. Reductions in local pollution and greenhouse gas emissions due to lower mobility and economic activity are only going to be temporary’.

It is also interesting to note that the SARS-COV-2, the virus behind the Covid-19 pandemic, might be getting a helping hand from atmospheric pollution. A study from [Harvard University](#) connects the impact of the novel coronavirus on highly polluted areas of the U.S. and found correlation between long-term air pollution exposure and consistent rise in the Covid-19 death rate. Moreover, scientists from the [Italian National Research Council](#) took into account the high concentration of Covid-19 in the Po river Valley in Italy, one of the most polluted areas in



Europe, and proposed to begin studying the trend of Covid-19 indicators and of the concentration of air particulates, [suggesting](#) that fine particle matters, as PM10, possibly being a Covid-19 vector. While such studies still need to be peer-reviewed and extended in their geographical scope, they suggest another layer of urgency to cleaning up pollution.

Similarly, international cooperation on ozone-depleting chemicals [suggests](#) that damaged climate systems could be partially healed, if governments would act promptly and deal with the causes of pollution. Now, more than ever, it is essential that PAM Delegates be familiar with these factors and studies, in order to be able to push for an enhanced accountability of governments towards their citizens, when the present crisis will be over.

This is relevant to MPs responsibilities, as rising health and financial fears could divert public attention from the climate change question, which had raised as a high priority for many citizens in the past few years. Instead, experts of [MIT Technology Review](#) have suggested that long-lasting shifts in carbon-intensive behaviours could take place as people start preferring remote working and virtual conferences.

PAM fully understands and supports the decision of the United Kingdom and the UNFCCC Bureau to postpone the COP26 UN Climate change conference to 2021, given the need to prioritize the suppression of the virus and to safeguard as more lives as possible. At the same time, PAM shares the wish expressed by the UN that ‘solidarity and greater ambition are needed more than ever to transition to a sustainable, resilient low carbon economy that limits global warming to 1.5 degree Celsius’, as well as that by the UN Climate Change Executive Secretary [Patricia Espinosa](#) for the international community to ‘continue to support and to urge nations to significantly boost climate ambition in line with the Paris Agreement’.

With the current priority being to help overwhelmed health systems and raising unemployment in the short term, climate change should never be taken out of the parliamentary radar of action. The pandemic crisis shall not divert the spotlight from the results achieved so far, and avoid that climate change only appears as a more distant threat. Instead, as said by the lead economist of the World Bank, [Stephane Hallegatte](#), ‘If we get it right, the response to Covid-19 may not only minimize pain, and suffering now, but can also build the foundation for a greener, safer, and more prosperous future’.

