

OPINION: Bringing climate justice thinking to the COVID-19 pandemic

by [Teresa Anderson & Niclas Hällström](#) | ActionAid

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Like the climate crisis, coronavirus and its spiralling impacts will hit women, the poor and marginalised the hardest - that is not an acceptable trade-off for reducing emissions

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With the coronavirus pandemic gripping the planet, industries are shutting down, planes are being grounded and shoppers are staying home. COVID-19 has already reduced China's **greenhouse gas emissions by 25%**. Other countries may experience similar trends, leading to lower emissions in 2020 than in previous years.

But this doesn't mean that we should be cheering the climate benefits of the outbreak.

Instead, advocates for climate justice recognise that like the climate crisis, the pandemic and its spiralling impacts, will hit women, the poor and most marginalised the hardest.

We believe that responses to climate change – and all global emergencies – must have social justice at their core. This means rejecting the idea that the suffering of vulnerable people and increasing inequality are acceptable trade-offs for reducing emissions.

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The global response needed for the pandemic provides lessons for the action needed to tackle climate change. Governments, movements and society must internalise these principles to address these emergencies with solutions that ensure justice for all:

Equality: Governments must protect women, the poor and vulnerable from both crises and their impacts, valuing every human life equally regardless of nationality, wealth, gender, race or age. Similarly, it is not acceptable for one generation to continue business-as-usual in the knowledge that they are relatively safe, while increasing the risk and impact for another generation.

Social protections: Free, universal healthcare, paid sick leave and unemployment benefits for workers in the formal and informal economies, are urgently needed so that people don't have to choose between protecting their livelihoods and protecting society during the pandemic. Similarly, social protection measures, such as job guarantees, income support or guarantees of the same wage and benefits, will be key to helping workers in carbon-intensive industries make a just transition away from jobs that harm the climate. Governments must also address the fact that women are disproportionately affected by both crises, as they tend to carry a greater burden of unpaid care and frontline work.

Solidarity: No country can 'go it alone'. Governments must work together and avoid retreating into nationalistic and competitive approaches. As with climate change, wealthy countries must do their 'fair share' and scale up financial and technology support for lower-income countries. True solidarity also means embracing and sharing solutions, many of which are being pioneered in the Global South.

The 'invisible hand of the market' won't fix this: Both crises show the need for deep systemic change. These emergencies expose the injustices of neo-liberal economic systems, in which powerful corporations prioritise profits over the common good and do all they can to avoid regulations. Governments' responses to the pandemic require them to make public policy decisions, including strong regulatory measures, in the interests of their citizens rather than their corporate political donors. Calls for a massive scaling up of public financing, and nationalisation of health and other services to deal with the pandemic, must be expanded to energy, water provision and public transport.

Build back better: When crises hit, responses must strengthen people's ability to cope with future emergencies. Just as responses to the pandemic must protect society now and in future, humanitarian responses to climate disasters must also strengthen communities' longer-term resilience through social protections and climate-resilient interventions.

It's never too late to act: Every day that passes counts. Every action that limits harm is worth it. Even if we're slower out of the starting blocks than we should have been, we must start now. Giving up is not an option, however bad the situation may appear.

Do what it takes – but don't abuse power: As many governments have been slow to take stringent measures to halt the pandemic, citizens have called for stronger measures to contain the crisis. Society has shown its willingness to accept inconvenience, strong government intervention, social protections and yes, less shopping and flying, if it means protecting millions of vulnerable lives. Governments must take heed of this. Our resolve to do what it takes to solve the climate crisis, in ways that advance social justice, is just as strong. But they must not abuse their power, nor cement measures taken in times of emergency into authoritarian limits on freedom after the crisis has passed.

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