

# Earth Day: Making history or winding back the clock?

Blog post by Practice Lead Elizabeth Beall and Senior Associate Mollie Brennan, 22 April 2020

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It's the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Earth Day. Oil is at its lowest price in history. Deaths today from covid-19 topped 175,000 worldwide. It is certainly an historic day.

There is much to celebrate in terms of what's been achieved on the environmental side. The question is: where will we go from here? That question is currently delivering two very different responses when it comes to climate and sustainability, with opportunists on both sides of the agenda. There are those that see the covid-19 pandemic as an opportunity to unwind environmental legislation, and those that see the covid-19 impact as the means to call attention to the need for greater climate action.

## Post-covid-19: one step forward, or two back?

The 2008 financial crisis demonstrated what a global crisis can do to climate and environmental ambition, with more than a decade lost in advancing policies and corporate action. The rollback of environmental regulations, the lifting of bans on single use plastics, and the postponement - or halting - of environmental initiatives ranging from chemicals to payments to farmers around the world make 'a turning back the clock' scenario look more and more probable. There is also the backlash against the praising of the short-term environmental benefits of the lockdown, painting climate activists as insensitive and idealistic. 'Doing whatever it takes' to get people back to work and to kickstart economies may translate into political short-termism and greater nationalism.

Just as quick as some are to draw similarities with 2008, there are others outlining the similarities of the covid-19 crisis with the climate crisis. The idea being posited is that governments will apply a more cautious prevention-focused approach as a result of learning from this pandemic. Parallels and lessons drawn include the need to listen to the science, the need for global cooperation, and the idea that it is possible to change the way we do business drastically in the face of a crisis. These arguments are a rallying cry for further climate action. Add to that the pictures of home baking, composting and planting, cycling and walking for exercise, and polling data indicate that a significant portion of the population does not want to return to 'normal'. So, could this really be the tipping point to net-zero?

## View from the US

The pandemic has heightened political differences and has reopened well-trodden battlegrounds. While Democrats have ramped up calls for more accessible healthcare, four Republican states have used the pandemic to push anti-abortion and anti-trans legislation. Trump has used the crisis to advance his existing agenda: suspending enforcement of environmental laws and rolling back fuel-economy regulations for new cars. The President's latest move to halt all immigration is another illustration of how his present priorities remain aligned with his overall policies. Meanwhile the Democratic campaign has now shifted full focus to the covid-19 recovery and plans for green stimulus and protecting the most vulnerable. To date, the virus has mostly impacted 'blue' or Democratic areas of the country. Winning the hearts and minds of voters in 'red' states will largely be determined on how hard - or if - the virus spreads through those areas.

### **View from the EU**

Even in arguably one of the greenest corners of the world, there is pressure to roll back or at least delay environmental regulations and climate action. From calls to lift circular economy action plan targets to ditching the Emissions Trading Scheme entirely, the EU is far from united on the way forward. There are early indications that Europe's forward momentum on climate action will continue, with the Council approving the role of a 'green transition' as part of the recovery plan and a number of governments and corporates across the continent advocating for climate change to remain a cornerstone of any EU spending or policy. This is amidst coal plants shutting down and oil companies announcing commitments to net-zero.

### **View from the UK**

Although not overtly, covid-19 is detracting from the UK's climate efforts. The UK has been forced to delay a number of environmental policies and allow a degree of flexibility on its climate objectives. Policies on single use plastic and air pollution have been delayed. The Bank of England confirmed that it will purchase debt from oil companies as part of its quantitative easing programme, after indicating that fossil fuel companies may be excluded. The collapse of the EU emissions trading system and oil prices have upended what was a growing financial incentive for UK companies to go green. The postponement of this year's COP climate talks is perhaps less concerning, for the UK at least. The delay provides more time to get the detail right around new climate targets, overcome political fragilities in the UK's COP leadership, and uncertainty can be avoided around the US election (assuming it goes ahead in November).

### **View from Asia**

From southeast Asia's forest fires to India and China's industrial smog, nowhere in the world does air pollution hold higher political capital. Add to that the impact of rising sea levels on so many of the region's major capitals. In spite of this, an emerging de-regulation stance in response to the virus is likely to see emissions quickly return to pre-covid-19 levels. Emerging first from the crisis, China has eased environmental regulation for businesses in a move to stimulate the economy. The modified regulation will give businesses a second chance at meeting environmental targets without receiving a fine. A similar approach is being mirrored in other countries in the region. Controversial de-regulation and mining bills scheduled by the Indonesian parliament in the coming months are one example. Whether these are short-term measures or longer-term unwinding of regulation that will stick remains to be seen. With the predictions of a pivot to Asia and great expectations about a Chinese or Indonesian net-zero target, the influence that this region will have on global environmental objectives over the next 50 years is huge.

### **A turning point**

The first Earth Day in 1970 was followed by a decade of landmark legislation - Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, Endangered Species Act, Marine Mammal Protection Act, and many others. Climate science indicates that emissions must be cut in half by 2030 to limit warming to 1.5 degrees - or 7% per year. The economics - for now - appear to be favourable for a move away from fossil fuels and towards a lower carbon future. But the post-covid-19 political landscape in many countries may pivot to a rolling back of environmental regulation, as economic downturns could lead to a further rise of nationalism, potentially opening the door for climate fascism. On a day of reflection, looking back to why the first Earth Day was successful at launching a global environmental movement, it all came down to making it

personal, something that has always been a challenge for mobilising action on climate. Could this be a turning point, just as Earth Day was 50 years ago? And if so, in which direction?