

Climate and COVID-19: converging crises



The climate crisis is still raging. A year ago, news headlines were dominated by the climate youth movement and a sense of urgency. But COVID-19 has displaced that interest and awareness. In fact, the causes of both crises share commonalities, and their effects are converging. The climate emergency and COVID-19, a zoonotic disease, are both borne of human activity that has led to environmental degradation. Neither the climate emergency nor a zoonotic pandemic were unexpected. Both have led to the preventable loss of lives through actions that are delayed, insufficient, or mistaken. However, aligning responses presents an opportunity to improve public health, create a sustainable economic future, and better protect the planet's remaining natural resources and biodiversity.

That health and climate change are interwoven is widely accepted, with extensive evidence of their interactions. For the past 5 years, the *Lancet* Countdown on Health and Climate Change has monitored and reported more than 40 global indicators that measure the impact of our changing climate on health. The newly published 2020 report includes novel indicators on heat-related mortality, migration and population displacement, urban green spaces, low-carbon diets, and the economic costs of labour capacity loss due to extreme heat. The breadth of the indicators has deepened scientific understanding of how climate affects health and puts stress on health systems. This is manifested in, for example, the health effects of air pollution leading to asthma, challenges to global food security and reduced crop yield potentially leading to poor diets, limited access to green space increasing risk factors for mental health conditions, and vulnerability to heat in people older than 65 years. Treating these resultant health conditions effectively depends on health systems' capacity, which is in turn dependent on the resilience of health services that are increasingly stretched in response to the two crises.

5 years of the *Lancet* Countdown on Health and Climate Change has also consolidated the importance of regional data to inform country-level policy. To that end, *The Lancet Public Health* has published the first regional report of the Asia chapter of the *Lancet* Countdown, joining the third annual publication of the Australian MJA-*Lancet* Countdown. As the planet's largest carbon emitter and home to a fifth of the world's population (1.4 billion

people), China's response to climate change is crucial at both national and international levels. The key findings of the report lead to a call for province-targeted responses in the face of accelerating health risks due to rising temperatures. The 23 indicators show that although impressive improvements have been made across several sectors, and the potential for improving public health by tackling climate change can already be seen, the gap in China's response to the health effects of climate change is still substantial.

Curbing the drivers of climate change will help to suppress the emergence and re-emergence of zoonotic diseases that are made more likely by intensive farming, international trade of exotic animals, and increased human encroachment into wildlife habitats, which in turn increase the likelihood of contact between people and zoonotic disease. Increased international travel and urbanisation leading to higher population density encourage the rapid spread of zoonoses once they spill over into the human population. These factors also have an important role in climate change as environmental determinants of health.

Both COVID-19 and the climate crisis have exposed the fact that the poorest and most marginalised people in society, such as migrants and refugee populations, are always the most vulnerable to shocks. With regard to climate change, those most impacted by extremes have usually contributed the least to the root causes of the crisis. This year's Countdown report finds that no country is immune to avoidable loss of lives arising from widening inequalities, with every indicator in the report following a worsening trend.

Climate has slipped from the top of the global agenda because of political indifference and the need to deal with the immediacies of COVID-19. 5 years on from the Paris Agreement, seizing the opportunity to refocus interests on sustainability offers the co-benefits of protecting our future health, the environment, and our planetary systems. As governments embark on economic recovery plans in the wake of COVID-19, concerns for climate change and equity are rightly focused on a green recovery. A global rapid transition to clean energy sources is needed, ending the stranglehold of fossil fuels. Decisions being made now must tackle both crises together to ensure the most effective response to each. ■ *The Lancet*



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For the 2020 China report of the *Lancet* Countdown on health and climate change see [Health Policy Lancet Pub Health 2020](#); published online Dec 2. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667\(20\)30256-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(20)30256-5)