

# COVID-19, THE ENVIRONMENT AND FOOD SYSTEMS:

CONTAIN, COPE, AND REBUILD BETTER  
*KEY MESSAGES*

Covid-19 Green Recovery Working Paper Series

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## **An evolving literature**

The sheer volume of reports and evidence on COVID-19 is staggering. This is not surprising given the fundamental shifts in opportunities, threats to livelihoods and the associated responses and shifts in behaviours caused by the pandemic. The authors have attempted to synthesize, curate and assess this literature. This process continued until August 2020, at which point the report was drafted and reviewed. Given the sheer volume of evidence generated on a daily basis, the authors may have missed some literature. The situation will also have evolved between August and the date of publication. The report will be released online with associated perspective pieces both on the report itself and more generally on the nexus between COVID-19 macroeconomic responses, food systems and environmental impacts. We encourage readers to submit responses to [Salman.Hussain@unep.org](mailto:Salman.Hussain@unep.org) and [Jacob.Salcone@unep.org](mailto:Jacob.Salcone@unep.org).

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# KEY MESSAGES





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1. **Governments around the world have invested about \$12 trillion to counteract the economic effects of COVID-19. This investment could contribute to progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and global climate targets if invested within a framework that supports both socioeconomic recovery and sustainability. Expenditures must be monitored to deliver multiple benefits simultaneously and guide rebuilding better.**
  - COVID-19 is an unprecedented global health and economic crisis. The fiscal and monetary stimulus to stabilize the economy and secure people's livelihoods as part of the global response to the pandemic so far totals \$11.7 trillion, equivalent to 13.9 per cent of global GDP. However, so far this investment has mostly ignored linkages to the environment, including the need to prevent further loss and degradation of habitat, which is associated with animal-to-human transmission and the spread of zoonotic diseases like COVID-19. Very little fiscal stimulus has targeted the green economy or investment in natural capital.
  - "Rebuilding better" requires targeted investment in sustainable development. The UN framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19 places environmental sustainability and gender equality at the centre of the United Nations' response to COVID-19. The global response must build on the observed positive changes in people's behaviour and mindset during the crises, including how we travel, how we produce and consume food, and how we use environmental resources. It will require concerted action by governments, the private sector and everyone involved. The complex and globally interconnected nature of this transformation requires multilateral cooperation, monitoring the effects of the investments and sharing positive results. The crisis has created a new situation and requires new thinking and action.

- “Rebuilding better” must also be based on a global – not national – paradigm of aid and development assistance. The pandemic has shown that national borders are irrelevant to global issues like health, food security and sustainability. Landscapes, ecological zones and the nexus between health, environment and economic activities are key features that must be addressed working together.

**2. COVID-19 increases poverty and limits access to food. The right to food is a basic human right and should always have highest priority. During a pandemic, food security is a precondition for successfully fighting the virus. Hungry people will not accept measures like social distancing and lockdowns.**



- The World Bank estimates that economic contractions could push 70–100 million people into extreme poverty in 2020. Similarly, the number of people suffering acute hunger could double from 135 million to 265 million by the end of the year. As the guardians of household food and water security, women are disproportionately affected by the impacts of the pandemic.
- On average, global food prices have not yet risen during the pandemic and prices are projected to remain stable. Interruption to global trade in agricultural products has also been limited. However, the decline in purchasing power linked to lost income threatens food security. Many poor people have less access to markets and poverty can lead to the consumption of less nutritious food. There have also been supply chain disruptions in many countries and in some cases export restrictions have stopped the flow of food products. Finally, the pandemic has interrupted the movement of migrant workers due to travel restrictions and revealed the dependency of our food systems on cheap labour from other countries and regions.



**3. So far, we have only limited information on the concrete impacts of COVID-19 on the environment, food systems and the SDGs. Initial analysis indicates that investments for economic recovery do not sufficiently address sustainability, concentrating instead on immediate economic risk management. The risk that COVID-19 is undermining sustainable development, especially sustainable food systems, has not yet been addressed.**

- The impact of the health and economic crisis on the SDGs must be closely monitored. Much depends on the extent to which investments and efforts to stabilize the economy are based on clear and transparent measures that support the SDGs. Food systems can support or hinder progress towards many of the 17 goals, including Zero Hunger (2), Good Health and Well-Being (3), Gender Equality (5), Decent Work and Economic Growth (8) and Climate Action (13). Countries, international agencies and all stakeholders must identify how the pandemic threatens food systems and make bold decisions for rebuilding better to ensure food security now and for the future.
- The economic downturn is already hurting ecosystems through cuts to budgets for the management of protected areas. The African Union has reported the postponement and, in some cases, outright cancellation of many sustainable forest management activities and has cited cases of increased poaching. Deforestation of the Amazon has soared in recent months as South America battles the pandemic. These developments increase the risk of new zoonotic diseases. Animal-to-human transmission is the source of 75 per cent of infectious diseases and evidence points to the biodiversity crisis as a contributory factor in the emergence of COVID-19. It is necessary to also analyse and minimize the risks to human health from industrial livestock operations and their impact on the environment.





- In island states and coastal areas, people who are unemployed may turn to fishing for food and income, which could increase pressure on near-shore fish stocks. The pandemic may also exacerbate unregulated and unreported small-scale fishing in some areas, while in other areas the drop in demand may increase poverty in fishing communities.
- New research has found that long-term exposure to air pollution may be one of the most important contributors to COVID-19 fatalities around the world. Agrifood systems contribute to overall air pollution, particularly through the burning of stubble in harvested paddy crops.
- In many parts of the world, women and girls spend hours each day fetching water or waiting in crowded queues for water vendors, potentially increasing their risk of exposure to the virus. Conversely, lockdowns and curfews can limit access to water and sanitation.
- The International Energy Agency (IEA) estimates that overall global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions will fall by as much as 8 per cent in 2020. However, they will increase again in line with the economic recovery, unless rebuilding better is translated into serious action. In this regard, monitoring CO<sub>2</sub> emissions while the economy is gaining traction will be one of the indicators of the success of a green recovery. The pandemic should not delay action to cut emissions because the climate crisis has already started. The 2019 UNEP Emissions Gap Report estimated that emissions will need to continue to fall by 7.6 per cent every year for the next 10 years to limit global warming to 1.5 C.



#### 4. What we need to do: nine proposals for action

The global sustainable development agenda must promote the resilience and sustainability of food systems via a framework of policies and measures that (i) account for environmental thresholds and trade-offs; (ii) promote food security and healthy diets; (iii) enhance and protect rural livelihoods; and (iv) address the inequalities and injustices that have emerged during the crises and that will also prevail during a post-COVID transition. UNEP will play an important role in ensuring that rebuilding better does not lose sight of these important considerations. We propose the following nine measures:

- **Proposal 1 – *Aligning with global agreements*:** Wherever possible, international cooperation on achieving the SDGs must align emergency fiscal measures to prevent a global recession with the overarching goals of the SDGs and the Paris Agreement. Investments to recover economic development can yield multiple benefits in achieving global goals and agreements.
- **Proposal 2 – *Ensuring food security*:** Measures to mitigate the pandemic and promote economic recovery will only be successful when food security is guaranteed. Job losses and increased poverty reduce access to food. Social safety nets and food transportation networks that minimize loss and waste are needed, alongside simultaneous action to promote local food production.
- **Proposal 3 – *Labour supply*:** Action is needed to facilitate the movement of workers in the agrifood sector so that demands for their services can be better satisfied. This must take place in parallel with measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 among farm workers and food processors by improving their working conditions.
- **Proposal 4 – *Do No Harm measurement and monitoring*:** At the very least, measures for the recovery should conform to a “do no harm” criterion and a prerequisite coordinated mechanism to measure and monitor the environmental impacts of COVID-19 recovery policies. Countries and international agencies must also assess the wider social and natural capital consequences of policy responses and the various fiscal stimulus packages. Advantage must be taken of opportunities for leapfrogging to green investments and promoting nature-based solutions to rebuild better. The effectiveness of recovery and stimulus packages should be measured against indicators for progress on the SDGs.
- **Proposal 5 – *Recognize that win-win opportunities exist and capture them*:** Natural capital investment in ecosystem resilience and regeneration, including restoration of carbon-rich habitats and climate-friendly agriculture, have been identified as having a long-run multiplier and highly positive impact on climate. Environmental

clean-ups, sustainable investment in agriculture, safeguarding natural resources and improving energy efficiency all have the potential for positive short-term stimulus effects, as well as environmental benefits in the longer run.

- **Proposal 6 – *Water*:** In developing countries, there is significant potential to improve the efficiency of existing water infrastructure, in terms of reducing illicit water extraction and incentivizing water-efficient agriculture. Water scarcity will negatively impact food security and create competition between different demands for water. COVID-19 has underlined the importance of clean water for sanitation. Access to water is also an equity/gender issue that must be addressed.
- **Proposal 7 – *Markets for meat*:** Steps must be taken to regulate animal trade to reduce the chances of a new pandemic, protect endangered species and support rural livelihoods.



- **Proposal 8 – *Using extant tools to apply a food systems approach*:** Evaluation tools such as the TEEBAgriFood Framework exist and have proof-of-concept. They should be used to ensure ecosystem services are valued, human and social capital is included in assessments, and a full value chain assessment is applied.
- **Proposal 9 – *A One Health approach*:** International agencies and member states should emerge from the crisis with an international implementation plan for One Health, an integrated approach that prevents and mitigates the threats at animal–human–plant–environment interfaces. This will address zoonotic threats and gender disparity within the agrifood system.