

COVID-19 will not solve the climate crisis – longer-term change is needed

*With COVID-19 lockdown bringing about a reduction in carbon emissions, **Professor Ric Williams** (University of Liverpool), considers how this affects the UK's progress towards the Paris Climate Agreement and reaching net-zero emissions by 2050. However, as countries loosen restrictions the latest data shows a bounce back in carbon emissions, which means COVID-19 will not solve the climate crisis and that longer-term change is needed.*



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The Long Road to Paris

Since lockdown began over 80 days ago in mid-March, there has been a 30 per cent drop in the UK's daily CO₂ emission levels. This is estimated to translate into an 11 per cent reduction in the UK's CO₂ annual emissions for 2020 compared to pre-lockdown levels. At face value, this reduction in CO₂ emissions will be viewed as a positive change by many, although of course, no one would ever welcome the terrible cost of the pandemic. However, most of this reduction in CO₂ emission will be temporary and will only continue whilst we remain in lockdown. As lockdown measures are eased and transport usage increases over the coming months, CO₂ emissions will begin to rise once more towards pre-lockdown levels.

To avoid exceeding the 1.5°C warming target set out by the Paris Climate Agreement, the UK must reduce its emissions by 3 per cent per annum in order to reach its net-zero ambition by 2050. Whilst this 11 per cent reduction during lockdown goes much further than the 3 per cent annual reduction target, sustained and year on year action over the next 30 years will be required for the UK to achieve its net-zero goal.

Unique Insight

During the lockdown, there have been drastic changes in our collective behaviour. Carbon emissions linked to aviation have dropped by 90 per cent and emissions from other forms of transport have been halved compared to pre-lockdown levels. Yet despite enforced social distancing and limited travel, our CO₂ emissions in the UK have still only reduced by 30 per cent over the last 80 days, which means that 70 per cent of our current CO₂ emissions have remained.

So, why has this reduction been so limited? The answer is simply due to how much our CO₂ emissions are tied into how we produce energy and use energy, both in industry and in the home. The COVID-19 crisis has provided us with a unique insight into the effect our different actions have on emission levels. It has clearly demonstrated that changing our behaviour can have an effect, as evidenced by the 30 per cent reduction emissions, whilst highlighting that further collective action will be needed to sustain the change we need.

Net Zero Ambition

There are several major goals that we need to work on for the UK to meet its net-zero goal:

- We need to reduce the demand for energy and continue the expansion of renewable energy. There has been major progress in reducing the carbon emissions from the UK by 40 per cent since the 1990s by improving the efficiency in energy generation, in large part due to the success of offshore wind and the renewable energy sector.
- We need to change how we heat our homes, making the transition from fossil fuels to electrification.
- We need to change how our transport system operates, expanding low carbon ways of travel by vastly increasing the use of electric vehicles and harnessing hydrogen-based technologies to power public transport.
- Developing ways of capturing the CO₂, whether that is from growing trees and enhancing green spaces or by developing chemical ways of utilising the CO₂. How we restart our economies and the extent to which we

follow net-zero targets for carbon will be crucial as we move out of lockdown.

Systematic Change

The COVID-19 crisis has taught us all that changes to our lifestyles are possible and we do not always need to maintain the standard way of operating. There have been positives which have come from this change, such as adopting more flexible ways of working, experiencing the benefits of less air pollution, and becoming aware of the benefits of green spaces. COVID-19 has presented us with an opportunity to reset our priorities.

As we move out of lockdown, we have the opportunity to make choices that enable society to move towards a safer future, both in terms of resilience to future pandemics and mitigation of the most destructive effects of climate change. Whilst some of these actions can be undertaken by individuals, there has to be systematic change in the way we produce and use energy for the UK to have any chance of meeting the Paris Climate Agreement.

For further information on this topic, see UK report by the Committee on Climate Change, www.theccc.org.uk, providing independent advice to the government on building a low carbon economy and preparing for climate change. For global analysis, see paper by Le Quéré et al. (2020), Nature Climate Change, 19 May 2020.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the COVID-19 blog or LSE.