

To recover from Covid-19, we need to invest in a healthy and green future

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In this year of unprecedented change, advanced economies have a once in a generation opportunity to demonstrate true global solidarity. Governments can lead the way by investing in pandemic recoveries that improve the long-term public health populations, both within and outside of their borders. For this, stimulus packages need to be pollution-free and climate-safe, while avoiding locking in economic development patterns that will do permanent and escalating damage to the ecological systems that sustain all human health and livelihoods. It is the only way for us to get out of the current health crisis and prevent future ones.

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The year 2021 has been extreme for many reasons: millions of casualties from Covid-19; disrupted societies; and growing extreme weather events⁽¹⁾ and climate change impacts. While the world is responding to the current health crisis, the climate crisis is already here.

To address these crises, governments have two significant challenges in front of them; first, charting a path out of the acute phase of the pandemic while leaving no one behind, second, kickstarting the global economy in the wake of Covid-19 in a way that avoids worsening the climate crisis.

Both challenges will require global solidarity and radical change, and the financial commitments to match them.

In recent months, WHO and others have repeatedly called on advanced economies⁽²⁾ for a stepped-up coordinated strategy, backed by new financing, to vaccinate the world in a fair manner. The recent commitments⁽³⁾ from high-income countries, to share 870 million Covid-19 vaccine doses in 2021 and 2022, are a significant step in the right direction, but these pledges must be realized now to remedy the growing vaccine inequity. Vaccines donated next year will be far too late for those dying today.

Taking a more long-term view, however, global solidarity also means investing in resilient, just and green

recoveries⁽⁴⁾. Stimulus packages must improve public health, be pollution-free and climate-safe, while avoiding locking in economic development patterns that will do permanent and escalating damage to the ecological systems that sustain all human health and livelihoods.

Despite the now undeniable health impact of climate change, G20 governments have committed more than USD 300 billion⁽⁵⁾ in stimulus funding to support fossil fuel energy since the pandemic started. This is terrible news for our health. Fossil-fueled air pollution causes about 13 premature deaths a minute⁽⁶⁾, or 7 million every year. It is the silent pandemic, the consequence of decades of inaction despite stark warnings from science.

We must put a stop to it, this decade, and we can.

Investing now to rapidly scale up clean energy technologies and infrastructure is one of the greatest contributions governments, companies and investors can make today to improve long-term public health. It will also create millions of new jobs, boost growth and well-being globally⁽⁷⁾, and help avoid the worst health impacts of the escalating climate crisis⁽⁸⁾.

We're working hard to show what that change can look like. In collaboration with GAVI and UNICEF, we are providing solar panels to power the fridges needed to keep vaccines safe at health facilities without mainstream electricity supply, making hospitals more resilient to outages from

(1) <https://www.france24.com/fr/am%C3%A9riques/20210630-au-canada-une-canicule-historique-fait-plusieurs-dizaines-de-morts>

(2) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/05/31/why-we-are-calling-new-commitment-vaccine-equity-defeating-pandemic/>

(3) <https://www.who.int/news/item/13-06-2021-g7-announces-pledges-of-870-million-covid-19-vaccine-doses-of-which-at-least-half-to-be-delivered-by-the-end-of-2021>

(4) <https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/who-manifesto-for-a-healthy-recovery-from-covid-19>

(5) <https://www.energypolicytracker.org/region/g20/>

(6) https://www.who.int/health-topics/air-pollution#tab=tab_1

(7) <https://www.iea.org/reports/net-zero-by-2050>

(8) <https://www.who.int/news/item/03-12-2019-climate-risks-to-health-are-growing-but-prioritized-funding-lacking-to-safeguard-human-health-from-climate-change>

unstable grids and closing the large energy gap⁽⁹⁾ that still remains for many hospitals.

Another example is the health programme⁽¹⁰⁾ we have designed in partnership with the UK government – the incoming presidency of the COP26 UN climate conference in Glasgow this November – which calls on governments to build health systems that are both climate resilient and low carbon.

These are great examples of projects that – with support – can be scaled up rapidly to safeguard our health and our

climate. They have the added benefit of keeping fossil fuel fumes out of our lungs and atmosphere.

The damage from air pollution cannot be offset by green actions somewhere else in the world, or at a later date. It must be prevented instead. Cutting all permits, subsidies and financing to fossil fuel use is a crucial first step. This would free up significant budgets that can be redirected to healthy, green recoveries. Governments can send a clear and aligned signal on greening their own recoveries, while providing significant funds and incentives to other governments to do the same.

It is time to invest in the future we want. That means financing a healthier, fairer, and more resilient world.

Let's get to work.

(9) <https://www.who.int/initiatives/health-and-energy-platform-of-action>

(10) <https://www.who.int/publications/item/cop26-health-programme>