

Flattening the Inequity Curve for COVID-19 and Climate Change POLICY BRIEF

Key Messages

- “COVID-19 and Climate Change have overlapping implications for health equity” in that they differentially impact already vulnerable populations. (Buse, 2020).
- Equity refers to “fair and just treatment. Given its tight coupling with legal and philosophical traditions is intended to ameliorate wrongdoings and injustices” (Gislason, 2020).
- Multi-species Equity refers to rethinking how we treat animals and placing human welfare at an equal platform to animal welfare (Ziolo, 2020).
- A post-COVID recovery should also include mitigation and adaptation plans for Climate Change with a critical focus addressing inequities to build a more resilient, just, and sustainable world.

Executive Summary

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic produced a global emergency that has significantly changed our lives. Before the arrival of COVID-19, Climate Change was described as “the biggest health threat of the 21st century” (Costello, 2009, p.1693). Both emergencies impact aspects of our health which do not affect everyone in the same way. COVID-19 has revealed many existing social and environmental inequities. These emergencies demand critical thinking about how our social systems have produced the inequities we see today and actions towards effective solutions to rebuild back better in the ‘new normal’ of a post-COVID future.

A simultaneous recovery for these crises requires urgent action from policymakers through the application of social equity, multispecies equity and climate justice lenses, applied through a greener economic stimulus plan towards a sustainable future that will mitigate Climate Change and promote health, resilience, and wellness across communities.

Recommended actions are based on information presented by researchers during the webinar series “Learning and Relearning for Planetary Health: Early Lessons from a Pandemic.”¹

Importance of the Problem

There is urgency to control the spread of COVID-19, along with mitigating the rise of global temperature and existing inequities. The COVID-19 pandemic impacts the health of our communities and has magnified existing social inequities which have also been present in the Climate Change crisis. Both have parallel impacts on social, environmental and health disparities, which affect similar populations (Gislason, 2020).

¹ On April 22nd, 2020, the webinar “*Bouncing forward to a sustainable world: resilience, equity & climate change adaptation with a pandemic*”, was presented as a contribution to a series on “*Learning and Relearning for Planetary Health*”. Presenters were Dr. Kristie Ebi, a Professor in the Center for Health and Global Environment at the University of Washington, Dr. Maya Gislason, an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Health Sciences at SFU, and Dr. Chris Buse, a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Centre for Environmental Assessment Research at UBC, Adjunct Professor in the School of Health Sciences at UNBC, and an Adjunct Professor in the Faculty of Medicine at UBC.

A recording of this webinar and presenter slides can be accessed through this webpage: <https://learningforplaneta.wixsite.com/website/past-webinars>

The COVID-19 pandemic allows for critical reflection on how social structures set in place have contributed to these disparities (Gislason, 2020). It is necessary to use an equity lens that “look[s] at individual and social problems” (Gislason, 2020), such as the Social Determinants of Health, to begin to think about equity issues pertaining to both COVID-19 and Climate Change.

During the pandemic, we have seen that while there are many people who can work from home and self-isolate, there are many who cannot. It is important to consider the socio economical background of those who are unable to, and any resulting consequences. This has a role in economic disparities, and higher exposure to COVID-19 infection (Gislason, 2020; NCSBN, 2020). These lenses can also be applicable to the Climate Change crisis. The wealthy highly contribute to greenhouse gas emissions, but it is lower-income communities and individuals who are disproportionately being impacted by its health impacts (Buse, 2020).

Background

Increasing global temperature and changes in our climate are due to human industrial activities that release large quantities of greenhouse gas emissions. At a global scale, we collectively emit 50 billion tons of carbon emissions each year (Ritchie, H., & Roser, M., n.d.). The IPCC Climate Change Synthesis reports from 2014 and 2018 state that “continued emission of greenhouse gases will cause further warming and long-lasting changes in all components of the climate system, increasing the likelihood of irreversible impacts for people and ecosystems” (IPCC, 2014).

Climate Change factors such as increasing temperatures and extreme levels of precipitation lead to exposure pathways of extreme heat, poor air quality, and increased chances of vector-borne and zoonotic infectious diseases. Zoonotic diseases are transmitted from animals to humans, and human activity has led to increased zoonotic spill-over events from continued stress to wildlife. This includes keeping animals in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions, destruction of habitats, expansion of fossil fuel economies, and increases in food production (Ziolo, 2020; World Animal Protection, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic is not an exception to this, as human encroachment put stress on wildlife which resulted in a bat-pangolin-human spill over event. Our interactions with our environments have played a significant role for both Climate Change and COVID-19 (Ziolo, 2020).

Health impacts of Climate Change can include heat stroke, and respiratory and cardiovascular diseases (Ebi, 2020; Howard & Huston, 2019). Importantly, these exposures do not affect everyone equally; key populations such as the elderly and children are at higher risks of health impacts from extreme heat events and low air quality. Those with pre-existing conditions have increased chances of complications from air pollution exposure (Berry et al., 2014). The same populations are impacted during this pandemic, as they are at higher risk of severe COVID-19 infection.

In addition to these populations, other key populations which are impacted by both crises are marginalized communities such as Indigenous peoples, racialized groups, and those of lower socioeconomic status. These communities are often highly exposed to pollutants and hazards from industrial and waste facilities located and built near them, bearing a disproportionate environmental burden described as Environmental Racism (Waldron, 2020). This type of

exposures is linked to respiratory conditions, during a pandemic whose virus also targets our respiratory system. Utilizing the social determinants of health is necessary to understand how social factors can impact individual health (Canada, 2020). This includes rethinking how our economic frameworks play a role in perpetuating low socioeconomic status to continue to develop and create social safety nets to keep people out of poverty, such as the Canadian Emergency Relief Benefit (Gislason 2020, Buse, 2020).

It is important to recognize and celebrate the resilience of these communities through these times. Front-line workers are important figures in the healthcare sector and our economy, which include many registered nurses, and grocery store workers; predominately from racialized communities (NCSBN, 2020; Gislason, 2020). Through historical and intergenerational trauma, Indigenous communities have continued to overcome adverse health impacts from infectious diseases (First Nations Health Authority, 2020a). They continue to show resiliency during this pandemic through extensive public health measures such as the temporary closure of First Nation borders to contain the spread of COVID-19, showcasing their “isolation as a strength” to protect Elders in their communities (First Nations Health Authority, 2020b).

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres urges that “making peace with nature is the defining task of the 21st century...[and] in overcoming the pandemic, we can also avert climate cataclysm and restore our planet” (“The UN Secretary-General”, 2020). The human actions that play a role in both Climate Change and in the stress of wildlife need to be modified as we strive to bounce forward into a post-COVID recovery. This change must be done through mitigation and adaptation strategies for Climate Change, and through actions in developing greener economic plans that amplify resilience and well-being within communities and environments.

Policy Recommendations

Policy Recommendation 1:

Apply an Equity lens to responses and issues that regard existing social systems and Climate Change adaptation plans.

Policy makers should use equity-informed lens that effectively address environmental racism when constructing policies. The building of these policies must be done in collaboration with Indigenous Elders and leaders from marginalized communities (Gislason, 2020).

i. Social equity lens

Policy work should commit to using the Social Determinants of Health and the Diversity Wheel to broaden the understanding of how personal, social, and environmental factors intersect and play a role on individuals' health. (Gislason, 2020; Canada, 2020)

ii. Multi-species equity lens

Must commit to policy for protection of animal welfare to avoid stressful conditions for the environment and increased vulnerability to infections. (Gislason, 2020; Ziolo, 2020; World Animal Protection, 2020)

iii. Climate justice lens

To design just adaptation and mitigation actions that acknowledge the disproportionate burden of health effects of climate change. (Buse & Patrick, 2020)

Policy Recommendation 2:

Stimulate a low-carbon economy

- i. Policy makers can “make COVID-19 stimulus spending carbon neutral, or at least climate-friendly” (Buse, 2020). In using the Green Stimulus recommendations as a foundation, policies can direct efforts into carbon pricing and an economic stimulus that can manage Climate Change by focusing on zero emissions and clean energy to support Canada’s zero net emissions goal by 2050.
- ii. Advocate for a Green New Deal at a municipal and provincial level to support the management of Climate Change by moving away from fossil fuels to clean energy and creating new jobs to get people back to work (Buse, 2020; ‘Green Stimulus’, 2020). Passing Motion M1 and Bill C-230, for example, requires commitment in **leaving no one behind** as we move away from the fossil fuel industries and support for a just transition for workers in those industries (Buse, 2020)

Policy Recommendation 3:

Mitigating and adapting to Climate Change

- i. Policy should commit to adaptation and mitigation plans for Climate Change “that consider key populations affected and marginalized communities to improve access to healthcare to address social inequities” (Ebi,2020; IPCC, 2018).
- ii. Consideration of the shared socioeconomic pathways should be made to prepare for a sustainable future within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals outlined by the United Nations, to support resilient Climate Change actions as well as the strengthening of our health care system (Ebi, 2020; Sellers & Ebi, 2018).

Word Count: ~1551

(excluding the key messages box)

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