

Scientists see COVID-19 as historic moment for UK's environmental future

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McLachlan climate protest. Credit: Unsplash

A leading group of University of Manchester academics are imploring policy makers to use the UK's post-pandemic recovery as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to lead a positive green revolution.

The UK is slowly easing COVID-19 restrictions and has recently announced financial aid to stimulate [economic recovery](#) including a £3bn plan to cut emissions. Now a collaborative group of leading scientists are imploring governments the world over to use this moment in history to turn towards a vastly more sustainable, green future.

In a new publication, "[On Net Zero](#)," recommendations ranging from; emissions reductions, [economic incentives](#) and new technologies have been put forward. The report brings together some of the country's leading energy, policy, and [climate change](#) experts to offer their opinions and solutions for the UK's most pressing [energy issues](#), including new data as a result of global lockdown restrictions.

Lord Deben, Chairman of the Committee on Climate Change, who wrote the foreword for "On Net Zero" commented: "We have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to address these urgent challenges together; it's there for the taking. The steps that the UK takes to rebuild from the COVID-19 pandemic can accelerate the transition to a successful and low-carbon economy and improve our [climate](#) resilience. Choices that lock in emissions or climate risks are unacceptable."

Professor Carly McLachlan is the Director of Tyndall Manchester, one of the founding partners of the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research: "Analysis of the impact on emissions of various lockdown orders across the world has demonstrated an average global reduction of 17%.

"The analysis estimates that even if some restrictions remain in place to the end of 2020, the overall reduction in emissions for the year will only be 3-13%. While this does tell us that we can do things differently and that it does have an impact, it also indicates how deeply embedded the use of fossil fuels is in our lives. Even when our lives 'feel' very different—they are still powered by fossil fuels.

"Our recovery must support structural change that addresses the way we power our lives—all levels from the individual, to business, to the energy system, to government policy must be aligned to deliver the significant reductions we need."

"On Net Zero" key takeaways:

- At a national level we need to be clear that substantial [emissions reductions](#) are expected from the vast majority of sectors and that the limited removals we can deliver within the UK are likely to be needed for specific sectors.
- Clear policies are needed to support Greenhouse Gas removal. The extent to which we rely on this should reflect our confidence in the existence of proven technologies, robust monitoring approaches and sustainable supply chains.
- Far from being 'difficult to decarbonise', the shipping sector has significant room to manoeuvre, even over the short time horizon dictated by the Paris Agreement.

The impact of COVID-19 on energy use around the world has been stark, with the current background showing a reduction in energy demand tied with a decrease in economic activity and increased home working. The report also tackles the issue of energy poverty linked to vulnerable households, income reductions, job losses and lack of access to existing infrastructure.

Stefan Bouzarovski is Professor of Human Geography at The University of Manchester, where he leads the Manchester Urban Institute's People and Energy Programme: "We often hear the phrase 'no one must be left behind' in the movement towards a climate friendly future. Low-carbon initiatives, including net zero policies, should take into account existing social and economic inequalities, while ensuring that disadvantaged people are adequately represented and supported.

"Climate policies, however, require deep reconfigurations of socio-economic patterns of energy supply and demand. Not only can climate policies transform existing inequalities, but they may also create new ones as they unfold. Recent international research argues that energy transitions may adversely affect the social, economic and political vulnerability of actors involved in and affected by the process; from individual households to entire states. Thus vulnerability to domestic energy deprivation cannot be considered as a household issue, but rather a phenomenon that is distributed throughout the 'energy chain'."

Provided by University of Manchester

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