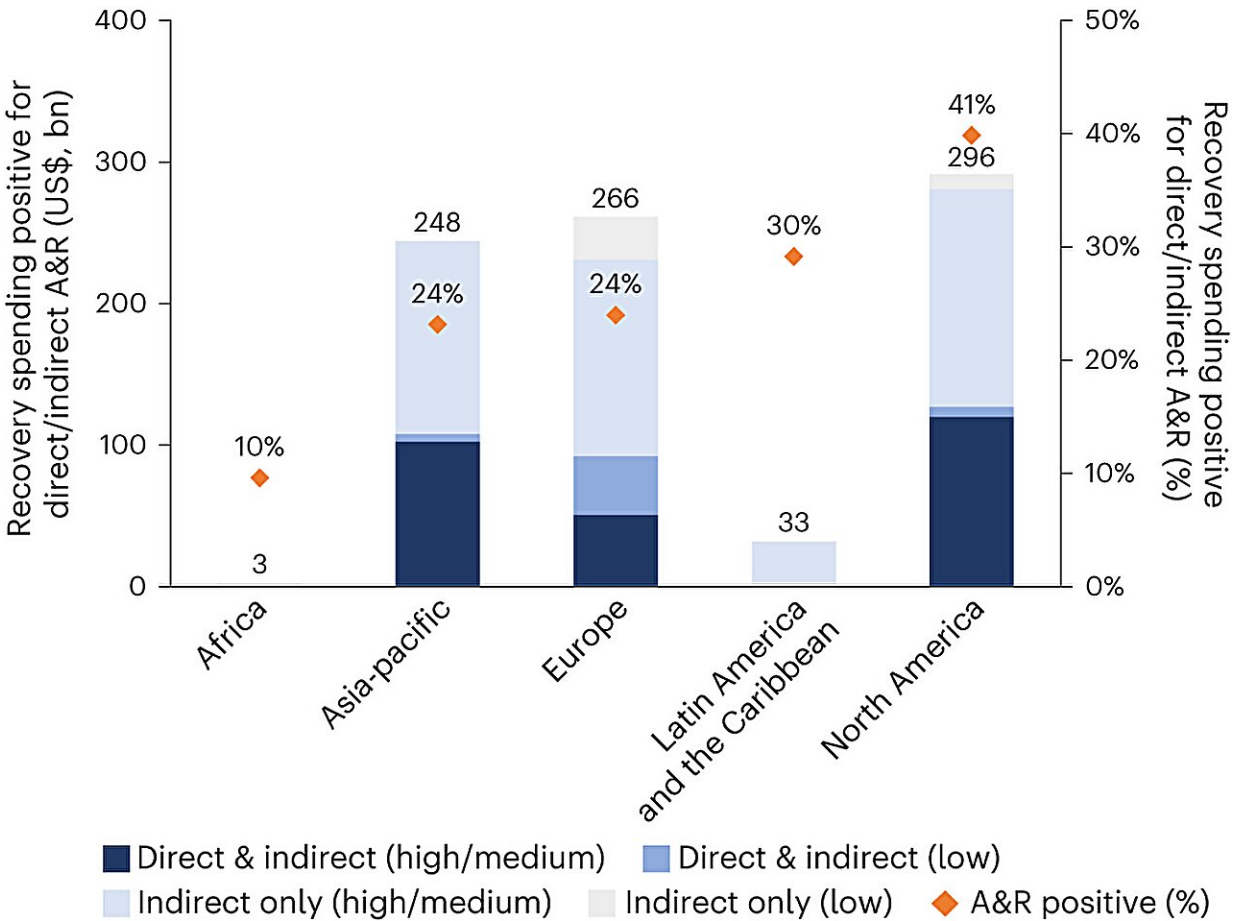


Research reveals 28% of COVID-19 recovery spending could harm climate adaptation

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Recovery spending (US\$, billion) by region, on policies that positively impact direct or indirect climate A&R, broken down by confidence level. Credit: *Nature Sustainability* (2024). DOI: 10.1038/s41893-024-01269-y

How to adapt to the impacts of climate change—and who should pay—was a key topic of debate at COP28. New [research](#) from the University of Oxford analyzes 8,000 government policies across 88 countries to reveal how COVID-19 recovery spending contributed to climate adaptation and resilience.

The research finds that only 10% of COVID-19 recovery spending was likely to enhance direct [climate adaptation](#)—though this rose to around 27% when potential indirect impacts were accounted for.

However, nearly 28% of recovery spending could have negative impacts for adaptation, for example by locking-in non-resilient infrastructure.

"Calls to mainstream climate adaptation and [resilience](#) are not new, but it's clear from our research that this is not yet happening. We had high hopes that governments would deliver on their promise to 'build back better' but our analysis shows that instead we have missed opportunities to invest meaningfully in adaptation and resilience," explains lead author Alexandra Sadler, Research Assistant in the Smith School of Enterprise and the Environment at University of Oxford.

The study, titled "The impact of COVID-19 fiscal spending on climate change adaptation and resilience" published in *Nature Sustainability*, introduced and applied the world's most granular taxonomy for climate resilience and adaptation financing. The authors analyzed COVID-19 government 'recovery' investment from March 2020 to December 2021, drawing on data from the Global Recovery Observatory at the Oxford Smith School.

The analysis found that only US\$279–334 billion (9.7–11.1% of the US\$3 trillion recovery spending) was allocated to direct efforts to adapt to current or expected climate change effects, such as disaster preparedness or green retrofitting.

The paper also explored whether government investment could produce 'triple benefits' for adaptation, climate mitigation (reducing emissions), and [economic recovery](#). It found that several policy types, including investment in natural infrastructure, green worker retraining, and clean energy infrastructure, provide such benefits.

"Building resilience to shocks, including climate change, makes obvious economic sense. Done right, it can bring immediate jobs and growth, as well as long-term protection against economic losses. Our study suggests we need a complete overhaul in how policymakers consider adaptation and resilience in their planning, including through education and better decision-making tools," says co-author Dr. Brian O'Callaghan, Lead Researcher and Project Manager at the Smith School of Enterprise and the Environment at the University of Oxford.

He continues, "While government rhetoric emphasized 'building back better' over the COVID-19 crisis, our research shows a disconnect from reality, marked by large spending differences between countries. In many cases, it is likely that we 'built back worse' on climate adaptation."

The paper further compared spending on [climate change mitigation](#) to that on climate change adaptation, finding that the spending was three times higher for mitigation.

"There is a dangerous and persistent myth that investing in adaptation to climate change means we have given up on emissions reductions—but this is false. Our research highlights that adaptation spending is still much too low," says Dr. Nicola Ranger, co-author and Executive Director of the Oxford Martin School Program on Systemic Resilience at the University of Oxford.

"We are already seeing the impacts of climate change in [extreme weather](#) across the world, and we urgently need to invest in resilience

now—alongside reducing emissions so these impacts don't get worse."

"The concerning potential impacts of government [spending](#) on climate adaptation and resilience become even more alarming within the broader context of an already significant imbalance in both expenditure and [political rhetoric](#), which we find heavily favoring mitigation over adaptation," concludes co-author Dr. Fulvia Marotta Postdoctoral Research Associate in the Smith School of Enterprise and the Environment at University of Oxford.

"This accentuates the urgent imperative to reassess priorities and establish a more equitable balance in our recovery plans."

More information: Alexandra Sadler et al, The impact of COVID-19 fiscal spending on climate change adaptation and resilience, *Nature Sustainability* (2024). [DOI: 10.1038/s41893-024-01269-y](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-024-01269-y)

Provided by University of Oxford

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