

UNEP key messages on COVID-19

This document serves as an outline for UNEP's insight on the environmental dimensions of the COVID-19 pandemic and the interconnected nature of all life on this planet. By no means exhaustive, this is a living document that will be updated as UNEP's strategy to respond to the crisis evolves.

1 UNEP stands in solidarity with those impacted by the global pandemic

- We stand in solidarity with millions of healthcare professionals keeping us safe, and partners both within and outside the United Nations (UN) system including the World Health Organization (WHO) colleagues who are working around the clock to tackle the global pandemic.
- Our thoughts are with millions of people suffering as a result of the greatest crisis humanity has faced since World War II.
- As the UN Secretary General has noted, the COVID-19 pandemic is more than a health crisis. It is a human crisis which is attacking societies at their core.

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The pandemic is aggravating pre-existing vulnerabilities in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), the most unequal region in the world, and can undermine the rights of millions of people, especially those living in poverty, minorities, the elderly, indigenous communities, women and children.

2 COVID-19 does not provide a silver lining for the environment

- Visible, positive environmental outcomes are temporary and come on the back of tremendous human suffering and economic distress as billions of people live in lockdown and millions fall back into poverty.
- Over the years we have seen several examples of situations where emissions dropped briefly in times of economic downturns, only to climb again thereafter.
- Without fundamental shifts in global energy production, we have no reason to expect this temporary reduction will translate into a sustained, long-term trend.
- COVID-19 provides us with an opportunity to both revisit our relationship with nature and rebuild a more environmentally responsible world.

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The COVID-19 pandemic is not an excuse to weaken environmental regulations and enforcement in Latin America and the Caribbean.

3 The global health emergency requires a sound environmental response

- It is important that we do not lose sight of environmental sustainability within response plans and actions. The unprecedented health crisis is generating additional medical waste which, if not managed properly, poses a critical threat to human health and the environment.
- Many types of additional medical and hazardous waste are generated, including infected masks, gloves and other protective equipment, together with a higher volume of non-infected items of the same nature.
- It is important that we prioritize the management of medical waste such as materials contaminated of SARS-CoV-2 in line with the requirements of Multilateral Environmental Agreements such as the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm Conventions which have urged governments “to treat waste management, including medical, household and other hazardous waste, as an urgent and essential public service to minimize possible secondary impacts on health and the environment.”

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- The progressive closure of dumpsites is an imperative in the Latin American and Caribbean region, where about 145,000 tons of municipal waste (30 per cent of total generation) end up in dumpsites, are burned or are otherwise inadequately disposed of. These practices create serious health and environmental risks. It is essential to accelerate the phasing-out of dumpsites and replace them with effective management practices and sound waste-disposal methods.
- In many countries of the region there is lack of facilities to ensure the sound management of healthcare waste. More basic capacity and understanding of best practices to deal with medical waste is urgently needed, according to a UNEP’s [regional policy brief on waste management](#).
- Special attention to waste prevention and recycling should be promoted during the post-COVID-19 recovery phase, considering the practical socio-economic and environmental benefits of this approach. Recycling rates in LAC countries are generally below 10 per cent, so there is an enormous potential to increase the circularity and efficiency in the recovery of valuable resources.
- Several countries affected by other emergencies in the region were already unable to use best practices in treating healthcare waste within the public health system and are now additionally coping with infectious domestic waste.
- The immediate priority is the implementation of emergency measures to address the current health and humanitarian crisis and the economic fall-out from the lockdown. Environmental actors have a role to play in mitigating the environmental impacts of those emergency measures and in generating environmental benefits from the response, according to a UNEP’s regional [policy brief on the humanitarian response](#).

- It is likely that the humanitarian response will gradually evolve from a primary focus on water, hygiene and health, to energy, emergency livelihoods, temporary employment and others. Environmental activities can be developed within these sectors as a win-win approach.

4 Almost all recent pandemics originate in animals, but human activity is spreading the disease

- Zoonoses are defined as “those diseases and infections naturally transmitted between people and vertebrate animals”, according to the WHO.
- Emerging zoonotic diseases are rapidly increasing in incidence and geographical range.
- UNEP’s [Frontiers report](#) in 2016 found that 60 per cent of all known infectious diseases in humans and 75 per cent of all emerging infectious diseases are zoonotic.
- Other notable zoonotic diseases include SARS (sudden acute respiratory syndrome); Rift valley fever, Zika virus and Ebola.
- The transmission pathways of diseases such as COVID-19 from animals to humans are not entirely clear. Yet never before have so many opportunities existed for pathogens to pass from wild and domestic animals to people, causing zoonotic diseases or zoonoses.
- We need to invest in better understanding of the science of disturbance and risks, towards a global mapping of encroachment, illegal trade and wet markets, among other practices that are pathways for potential future zoonoses.

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- The natural capital of LAC is a safeguard for the region’s future. From reducing the risks of disasters and emerging zoonotic diseases, to providing ecosystem services that are critical for the livelihoods of millions of people, biodiversity will continue to be one of the most important assets that the region has in the path to a sustainable recovery.
- Over the last 30 years all the countries in the region have been adopting and implementing policy frameworks for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. Protecting those policy achievements is the best way to ensure that the region’s natural capital will be a pillar to build back better.
- The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) estimates that restoring degraded lands in the region has the potential of generating 23 billion USD in economic benefits in the next 50 years. The estimated Nature’s Contributions to People (NCP) are valued in 6,844 USD per capita per year in Mesoamerica, 33,492 USD per capita per year in South America, and 4,090 USD per capita per year in the Caribbean.
- Many local, afro-descendant and indigenous communities in the region have developed sustainable livelihoods for centuries or millennia. As part of the COVID-19 response and recovery plans, governments can develop specific schemes for the protection of these communities.

- These initiatives could include mechanisms to promote participatory governance of their territories, and strategies to prevent illegal activities (such as illegal mining and logging) and encroachment in these lands.

5 The health of our planet plays an important role in the spread of zoonotic diseases

- COVID-19 recovery calls for an ambitious line of enquiry into zoonotic diseases and ecosystem health.
- Our continued erosion of wild spaces, of our primary forests and our ecosystems has brought us uncomfortably close to “reservoir hosts,” i.e. animals and plants that harbor diseases that can be transmitted to humans.
- We need to reclaim our forests, stop deforestation and invest in managing protected areas and our land better.
- Encroachment by croplands onto wildlife habitats is a major factor in bringing people into dangerous conflict with wildlife. Wildlife must be seen as a competitive land-use option that allows us to keep ‘wild’ spaces, ‘wild’.
- We need to support Member States in the effective implementation of sustainable management of wildlife trade as globally agreed through the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). Where trade does exist, we need to follow [WHO guidelines](#), which have recommended hygiene precautions when visiting wild-animal markets.
- We need to address illegal wildlife trade, the fourth largest global crime.

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- All the economies of the 33 countries in the region depend heavily on natural resources. The interaction of communities with natural ecosystems is relevant in terms of potential exposure to the risk of transmission of emerging diseases and zoonoses.
- Land-use change in tropical and semi-tropical areas occurs more rapidly than in other regions, threatens social development, animal and human well-being, and ecosystem integrity. Land-use change remains the most important threat to biodiversity in Latin America and the Caribbean.
- The prevention and response strategies deployed by the countries of LAC in the face of these events are diverse, as are their impacts. Policies to respond to the zoonotic threat are limited by different factors, including the insufficient information available and a weak inter-institutional coordination that hampers decision-making processes.
- The region must prioritize measures to strengthen the production, integration, analysis, dissemination, and use of information for policymaking. Through South-South cooperation, coordinated networking and the use of open data platforms, gaps can be reduced and all governments can be better prepared to face environmental challenges.

- The estimated loss of habitat from the transformation of natural systems in LAC is significant: 88 per cent of the South Atlantic forest, 70 per cent of the South American Rio de la Plata grasslands and 72 per cent of tropical and dry forests in Mesoamerica. These transformations, mostly ongoing, have led to a decline in the diversity and population sizes of native species (IPBES, 2018).

6 We cannot postpone climate action because climate change is not on hold

- If the world has seen a scary future through the COVID-19 lens, the future of our planet if the global temperature rises three degrees Celsius takes us to an entirely different level of uncertainty than the one presented by the current crisis.
- Such a world will exacerbate the vulnerability of an already-fragile human health. For example the warming of permafrost in the Arctic Circle could release dangerous dormant diseases, and higher temperatures can increase transmission of vector-borne diseases such as malaria and dengue fever.
- According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), heat stress is projected to reduce total working hours worldwide by 2.2 per cent and global GDP by 2.4 trillion USD in 2030.
- As was clearly outlined by UNEP's [Emissions Gap Report](#) in 2019, the reality is that we must cut global emissions 7.6 per cent every year of the next decade if we are to limit temperature rise to 1.5 degree Celsius as per the Paris Agreement. This requires every country in the world to step up climate action five-fold, and there is no negotiating with this ask, which is the foundation of the future we want.
- As we are learning, in a pandemic, there are no individual solutions, just global solutions. And the same is true for climate change.

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- The collective response to the immediate threat of COVID-19 should not weaken our ability to respond to the climate crisis. Rather, stimulus packages should be linked with, and reinforce, environmental sustainability and resilience, according to a UNEP's regional [policy brief on climate change](#).
- The transport and energy sectors account for two thirds of CO2 emissions and approximately a quarter of total GHG emissions in Latin America. These two key sectors must be decarbonized for the region's countries to meet their national emissions-reduction targets, as expressed in their nationally-determined contributions.
- The region could avoid 1,100 million tons of CO2 equivalent in 2050, if it decarbonizes its energy matrix and electrifies its entire transportation system, including maritime and terrestrial means, according to the [Zero Carbon report](#). The region could also save 30 billion USD in health expenses.
- Energy subsidies in the region represented 2 per cent of annual GDP between 2011-2013. The recent fall in oil prices represents an opportunity to gradually phase out fossil-fuel subsidies and redirect these resources to zero-emissions technologies like non-conventional renewable energy.

- The transition to 100 per cent electric transportation in the region would save 369 billion USD in 2050 through the reduction of fuel and operations costs, and could create 5,8 million new jobs, according to the Zero Carbon report.

7 We need to use the stimulus packages to “build back better” and address the current unsustainable patterns of consumption and production

- COVID-19 has revealed the vulnerability of global systems to protect the environment, human health and the economy. There is an increasing recognition of how multiple economic, social and institutional drivers exacerbate environmental risks, impacting on human health and increasing the burden on health services.
- Beyond direct health responses, the fiscal stimulus packages provide an opportunity for initiating a transformational and green recovery with the creation of green jobs.
- Fundamental to a transformational and green recovery will be early action on a longer-term agenda to address climate change, avoid habitat loss and fragmentation, reverse the loss of biodiversity, reduce pollution and improve waste management and infrastructure.
- Sustainable, resource-efficient, resilient and inclusive value chains are central to delivering the 2030 Agenda.

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- In 2015, one fifth of the region’s population (132 million people) were beneficiaries of conditional cash transfers, with an investment equivalent to 0.33 per cent of the regional GDP, according to ECLAC’s data. Several countries have implemented these programmes to protect the most vulnerable during the pandemic.
- These cash transfer programmes should incorporate actions to preserve the natural-resource base and create green employments, according to a UNEP’s regional [policy brief on social policy](#).
- Environmental-policy instruments, such as payments for ecosystems services, can include a pro-poor component to secure that marginalized people benefit from them; while social protection systems that are linked to food security and sustainable agriculture can create opportunities for a sustainable exit from poverty, as they strengthen resilience to climate change at a local level.
- The pandemic challenges us to rethink the systems that underpin the economy, and to use the stimulus packages to accelerate the shift that has already started towards a more resilient, low-carbon and circular economy.
- Investing in sustainable infrastructure could bring opportunities for recovery and inclusive growth through employment creation, income generation, and creation of assets and services, according to a UNEP’s regional [policy brief on circular economy](#).
- It is estimated that an increase in infrastructure investment equivalent to 1 per cent of GDP could result in an additional 1.3 million direct and indirect jobs in Brazil alone.

- Sustainable public procurement can harness existing expenditures towards green growth and the attainment of sustainability objectives, triggering green markets and new jobs as well.
- The COVID-19 crisis has impacted dramatically the small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which represent 99 per cent of all companies in the region and generate more than half of all jobs. There is a need to equip SMEs to design smarter, innovative, and diverse supply chains, which could strengthen the participation of local suppliers and reduce environmental impacts.
- Latin America could generate up to 6 million new jobs through activities such as remanufacturing, repairing and recycling, while installing new infrastructure and adopting technologies that will allow developing countries to get on the bandwagon of the fourth industrial revolution.
- The International Resource Panel (IRP) suggests that remanufacturing and comprehensive refurbishment can contribute to reducing GHG-emissions by between 79 and 99 per cent in appropriate sectors; and it can reduce new material requirements by 80 to 98 per cent.
- Latin America and particularly the Caribbean countries are heavily dependent on tourism. Tourism is among the sectors that have been more affected by the pandemic. Its recovery depends on the reactivation of tourist arrivals, linked to the reopening of borders.

8 UNEP supports countries in Latin America and the Caribbean in their plans to “build back better” and address long-term sustainable development policies

- UNEP gives technical advice to push for a sustainable response and recovery post-COVID-19 in the framework of several regional discussions taking place within the Forum of Ministers of Environment of Latin America and the Caribbean and the Council of Ministers of the Central American Commission for Environment and Development, among others.
- UNEP supports the region’s voice in key international negotiations around nature and biodiversity, climate change and the chemicals agendas, which are closely related to achieving a sustainable post-COVID-19 response.
- In the midst of the emergency phase of the pandemic, UNEP is repurposing funds in several countries and assisting various governments in the definition of the recovery-phase plans.
- UNEP has made contributions to the United Nations COVID-19 response plans in 6 countries of the region and is participating in the socio-economic impact analysis in 15 countries integrating the environmental dimension.
- To promote interagency engagement on COVID-19 recovery plans, UNEP is co-leading the regional Issue-Based Coalition on Climate Change and Resilience and provides inputs to country-level work through the Resident Coordinators and the UN Country Team.