



FROM THE EDITOR

A sustainable route out of the emergency?



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Editor

It's all about what happens next now, ie once the global coronavirus crisis is over, or at least stabilised somewhat. Although no-one really knows when either of those two events will occur. How will government plans to climb out of the emergency affect a global energy industry already in the midst of a transformation from fossils to a more balanced, renewables-led structure?

The crisis has affected all parts of society, never mind the energy industry and its customers, of course. Population lockdowns and business closures have cut energy use in many sectors – electricity loads are down, in some places with the result that the proportion generated from renewables has risen significantly and grid operators are having to deal with changed consumption patterns.

Transport system use is down to the point where railway stations and airports resemble ghost towns – and fuel suppliers are delivering corresponding reduced volumes of diesel and kerosene. Road vehicle transport is also down to below half of pre-lockdown levels.

The situation is complicated by additional, major problems within the oil and gas world, where the industry seems unable to respond to tumbling global demand and oversupply, with resulting on-the-floor prices. The industry is trying to cope with a shock 'like no other in its history,' according to the International Energy Agency. Reports of temporarily negative oil prices in the US, as producers are

prepared to pay consumers to take oil away that they can no longer store, are evidence of strange days indeed.

Less fossil fuel use means lower carbon emissions, of course, and reduced air pollution. Emissions data for this year are predicted to show a recognisable spike downwards and the skies above many cities are clearer than they have been for decades. (It is also suggested that poor air quality is an important determinant of how many people die after exposure to COVID-19 – dirty air affects lung function, after all.)

But lower emissions and pollution levels may be just short-lived effects. Once again, it's what happens next that is exercising many minds. There is no shortage of opinion flying around about how governments could, if they chose to, align their post-coronavirus support programmes to progressive sustainability policies and goals. Or just stimulate the bounce-back of the pre-virus status quo?

As we report opposite, the crucial COP26 climate change conference – the most important climate event since Paris in 2015 and originally due to be held in Glasgow in November – has been postponed to next year, despite November still being half a year away. The optimistic suggestion is that the postponement will allow countries more time to make recovery plans that include strengthened commitments to a low carbon economy.

Speaking on the postponement, climate economist Nicholas Stern put it this way: 'There is an opportunity in the recovery from the COVID-19 crisis to create a new approach to [economic] growth that is a sustainable and resilient economy in closer harmony with the natural world. That will be the challenge and opportunity of COP26 next year.'

Estimates gathered and analysed by the *Carbon Brief* website suggest that global carbon emissions could be down by around 5% or 6% this year, more than any annual fall recorded previously due to economic crises or war, and following years of slow growth.

Yet, global carbon emissions would need to be reduced by 7.6% per year – *every year for a decade* – to limit warming to the lower of the two Paris Agreement goals, 1.5°C above pre-industrial temperatures. If it takes an emergency with the global reach and severity of the coronavirus pandemic to take us some of the way there, then meeting the latter target by deliberate means is clearly a very considerable challenge.

These are very early days, but the International Energy Agency (IEA) and others have started to point the sustainable way forward. To avert a carbon-intensive recovery, governments should support only the more sustainable parts of the road and air travel industries, and think big on both new renewables projects and energy efficiency. There's a lot to achieve.

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