

PERSPECTIVE

The pandemic is transforming the net zero equation



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COVID-19 has wreaked personal and economic tragedy the world over. Many have suffered the loss of loved ones; few have been spared its impacts entirely. The restrictions in place to limit its spread are the most draconian seen in peacetime.

At the Energy Institute we've been working remotely to provide support where it's needed, whether that's direct contact with older members living in isolation, or our 24/7 advice line for members who need help with personal, financial or legal issues.

I'm proud to work in a sector that's playing an indispensable role keeping energy supplies flowing. We're working with members to apply tried-and-tested health and safety practices to the new hazards created in the workplace by COVID-19. This includes guidance on social distancing and hygiene in conventional and renewable energy facilities.

A silver lining

Despite the current cloud of the pandemic, it could yet yield a silver lining. It was after the Second World War, as UK Prime Minister Winston Churchill worked to establish the United Nations, that he is believed to have said: 'Never let a good crisis go to waste.'

I find myself most weeks speaking in webinars on either the drastic steps required to get greenhouse gas emissions to net zero, or the implications of COVID-19 for our sector.

I'm in no doubt these are now one and the same conversation. For years, despite the scale of the climate challenge, policy makers have sought the holy grail of an energy transition that avoids abrupt discontinuity in our way of life. Yet today a discontinuity has been forced on us.

Analysis by the International Energy Agency (IEA) shows the shock to energy demand caused by the pandemic is set to be the largest in the post-war period. This poses existential challenges for many businesses. But it also means something else – that global

carbon emissions this year are forecast to be back to the level of a decade ago, a cut twice as large as the combined total of all previous reductions over the same post-war period.

This creates opportunity, but also risk. The IEA warns: 'As after previous crises, the rebound in emissions may be larger than the decline, unless the wave of investment to restart the economy is dedicated to cleaner and more resilient energy infrastructure.' So also says the UK Committee on Climate Change.

Our President, Steve Holliday, is part of a new group led by the Royal Academy of Engineering set up to advise the UK government on net zero. He is equally adamant: 'We must not squander this opportunity to rebuild our economies in a more sustainable way that averts future shocks to our way of life.'

For those shaping the energy system the message is clear – better to manage risk than manage a crisis.

Targeting net zero

As ever, the EI's aim is to be where energy professionals are, and where they're headed.

We continue to support those working to produce and manage conventional fuels safely and efficiently and we're also pivoting activities towards technologies that will reduce greenhouse gas emissions as quickly as possible.

We've ramped up our role in the low carbon energy system – as the established market leader in energy management, as the home for health and safety in wind energy, with new technical programmes in hydrogen, carbon capture, use and storage (CCUS) and methane, and sustainable energy conferences coming up in Bahrain, Hong Kong, London and Lagos.

By the time you read this, we will also have published our science-based target consistent with the Paris Agreement – essentially a road map on the way to eliminating well before 2050 the

impact of our own operations on the climate.

This won't be easy for any organisation but the experience of COVID-19 is transforming the net zero equation.

Technology is enabling the EI to operate as reliably as ever, extending access to energy expertise through a new series of EI LIVE webinars and training, which is increasing our reach and relevance to many more than before. With all things digital and remote being the new normal, the technology has challenged us to go faster and so far it's being well received.

I also expect this new norm to be sustained. Will we meet again at large conferences and other events? I believe so, as we are social beings at our core, but I think it will take time and the reasons for doing so might have changed.

Discontinuity has challenged us all. But it has also inspired us to innovate, to change our mindset, and to live life better. I think we must all build on those improvements going forward for the good it will create. ●