

Parliamentary Web Dialogue

COVID-19: A turning point for environmental protection?

HIGHLIGHTS¹

SUMMARY

On 22 May 2020, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (PA) held a web-based seminar on the topic “*COVID-19: A turning point for environmental protection?*”, as part of its efforts to promote inter-parliamentary dialogue on relevant security developments pertaining to the ongoing COVID-19 crisis. The Parliamentary Web Dialogue, which was attended by more than 100 participants, enabled OSCE PA members and renowned experts to explore the interlinkages between environmental degradation and public health, foster dialogue around the need to better protect our environment in order to enhance human security, and consider opportunities for targeted “green” policy interventions in response to the crisis.

Web Dialogue participants included parliamentarians and staff from Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russian Federation, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and the United States, as well as a range of OSCE delegates and experts.

Opening the event, **OSCE PA President George Tsereteli** stressed the importance of parliamentary dialogue to overcome the current crisis. He underlined how, already prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, environmental protection had been a top priority for many citizens in the OSCE region. Consequently, he called for an inversion of the usual trend according to which the environment takes a backseat to economic recovery in times of crises. In concluding, President Tsereteli urged parliamentarians to recalibrate the current development model to better protect the environment and address climate change, while ensuring economic growth in the OSCE region. Welcoming the participants, **the Chair of the OSCE PA Committee on Economic Affairs, Science, Technology and Environment, Doris Barnett**, emphasized the profound link between the environment and public health. She stressed that the pandemic should serve as an opportunity to pause and reflect, to rethink old habits, and to ponder on how we should move forward. In this context, the Chair highlighted the need to make globalization more fair, solidary, sustainable and safe. Recalling the Ottawa (1995) and Stockholm (1996) Declarations, she prompted PA members to renew collective efforts in promoting environmental good governance and develop environmentally sound recovery policies.

¹ **DISCLAIMER:** The Highlights from the OSCE PA Web Dialogue are not intended to be official conclusions, nor an exhaustive list of all issues raised during the discussion, but rather a collection of interesting points noted by the International Secretariat for possible future reference. As such, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly makes no claims nor warranties of any kind, expressed or implied, about their completeness and reliability.

EXPERTS' KEY POINTS

Dr. Francesca Dominici, Co-Director of the Harvard Data Science Initiative, Clarence James Gamble Professor of Biostatistics, Population and Data Science at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health

- Numerous scientific studies² have linked traffic and particle pollution (or particulate matter or PM) exposure to health issues including non-fatal heart attacks, irregular heartbeats, aggravated asthma, decreased lung function, increased respiratory symptoms such as airway irritation, coughing or difficulty breathing, dementia, and premature death.
- Already prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, studies³ have shown that relaxing regulations that govern air pollution could lead to an additional 80,000 deaths per decade in the U.S. alone. In April 2019, the American Lung Association released *The State of the Air Report*⁴ which found that approximately 43.3% of the U.S. population lives in counties that have unhealthy levels of particle pollution and/or ozone levels.
- While the understanding of the COVID-19 epidemiology is still evolving, a dangerous connection between the pandemic and air pollution has been identified: most of the pre-existing “conditions” that increase the risk of hospitalization and deaths among COVID-19 patients are the same diseases caused by short- and long-term exposure to air pollution (i.e. PM_{2.5})⁵.
- Long-term exposure to PM_{2.5} adversely affects respiratory and cardiovascular systems and increases mortality risk. In addition, it exacerbates the severity of COVID-19 infection symptoms. The Harvard research found that a 1 unit increase in long-term average exposure to PM_{2.5} is associated with an 8% increase in the COVID-19 mortality rate.
- Low-income and minority communities seem to be particularly at risk, as they usually live in more polluted areas. Notably, in the U.S., the death rate from COVID-19 for predominantly African American counties is six times higher than that in predominantly white counties.
- While researchers continue to investigate whether there is a direct link between exposure to air pollution and adverse outcomes or more difficult recoveries from COVID-19, early indications suggest that such a connection exists. Recent studies conducted by the Universities of Siena, Aarhus and Cambridge confirmed that that nitrogen dioxide (a key contributor to ground level ozone pollution, commonly known as smog), nitrogen oxide and ozone are significant predictors of COVID-19 related deaths (after accounting for population density).
- Air pollution kills - Breathing polluted air clearly increases the risk of heart attack, pneumonia and, if infected by COVID-19, death.
- All citizens have the right to breathe cleaner air. OSCE governments should impose tighter regulations to ensure cleaner air, thereby contributing to minimizing the COVID-19 death toll and related hospitalizations.

² <https://www.epa.gov/isa/integrated-science-assessment-isa-particulate-matter>

³ <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2684596>

⁴ The State of the Air 2020, American Lung Association, available at <http://www.stateoftheair.org/key-findings/>

⁵ “A national study on long-term exposure to air pollution and COVID-19 mortality in the United States”, Xiao Wu and Rachel C. Nethery, Department of Biostatistics, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Boston, <https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/covid-pm>

Mr. Tao Zhang, Deputy Managing Director, International Monetary Fund

- COVID-19 and climate crises are clearly interlinked, as the scale and nature of the economic policy decisions being made now will affect climate outcomes far into the future.
- Policymakers across the globe are now rightly focused on protecting public health, stabilizing economies, and helping those whose livelihoods are at stake. However, if recovery from the crisis is to be sustainable — if the world is to become more resilient — parliamentarians should do everything in their power to promote a “green recovery.”
- According to IMF⁶, the following points are critical to implement green recovery:
 - ✚ Develop a new, ambitious, medium-term climate plan for next year’s United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNCCC).
 - ✚ Use public support wisely - Green investment should be prioritized; the IMF estimates that transitioning to a low-carbon world requires \$2.3 trillion in clean energy investment each year. Financial lifelines to carbon-intensive companies should be conditional on commitments to reduce carbon emissions.
 - ✚ Put the right price on carbon - Existing carbon taxes and emissions trading schemes are not strong enough to change behavior as needed⁷. This would direct new investment towards low carbon technologies and contribute to newly enhanced revenue requirements.
 - ✚ Promote green finance - Targeted guarantees can mobilize private finance for green investment. Banks receiving public support could be mandated to better disclose climate risks in their lending and investment portfolios. Find better ways of pricing in climate risk⁸
 - ✚ Promote a just transition - Assist vulnerable households, workers, regions, and trade-exposed or fuel producing firms. Use carbon pricing revenues in broad tax reductions or public investments that boost growth and benefit all households.
 - ✚ All countries should work together to scale up global mitigation in an equitable and effective manner. Urgent need to go well beyond the Paris Accord to stabilize the climate.
- This is the time to act (especially with lower oil prices)! The decisions taken now will shape economies and the global system for decades.

Ms. Susan Gardner, Director of the Ecosystems Division of the UN Environment Programme

- COVID-19 has put the spotlight on the importance of conserving natural habitats - a healthy planet is critical to our ability to rebound from the COVID-19 pandemic and prevent future global disease crises.
- COVID-19 provides an opportunity to both revisit our relationship with nature and rebuild a more environmentally responsible world.

⁶ IMF Special Series Note: Fiscal Policies to Respond to COVID-19: “*Greening the Recovery*,” April 20, 2020.

⁷ The average price they impose on carbon is only \$2 per ton, but measures equivalent to a global carbon price of at least \$75 per ton by 2030 will be needed to keep global warming under 2 degrees Celsius

⁸ IMF analysis underscores that climate-related disasters have so far had little effect on equity markets.

- Countries that are relaxing environmental laws as part of their COVID-19 response will cause long-term environmental damage.
- Despite the COVID-19 crisis, the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change remain the best road maps for future actions in this field.
- Transboundary management of ecosystems should be enhanced by fighting zoonotic disease transmission, improving support to ecosystem services and advancing the implementation of Multilateral Environmental Agreements.
- Opportunities for investing in nature should be expanded as part of the global socio-economic response to the COVID-19 crisis. This could be achieved by facilitating innovative financing and investments to safeguard nature and promoting investments that recognize the immense value of nature and ecosystem services.
- Awareness about the linkages between nature and health should be raised through targeted communication campaigns, innovative educational content and by greater sharing of science-based information.
- While the international community has failed to prevent the COVID-19 pandemic, it should learn from this experience to handle future similar crises and adequately protect the planet and the people living on it.

THE DEBATE

In the ensuing debate, over a dozen OSCE PA members exchanged views and national experiences on the interlinkages between the environment and public health, duly exploring opportunities for targeted “green” policy interventions in response to the ongoing crisis. Against this backdrop, the need for increased international co-operation and coordination was repeatedly underlined.

Highlights:

- Notwithstanding the severe health and economic implications of COVID-19, OSCE participating States’ should seize this juncture to reinforce their commitment to environmental protection, public health, and green economy.
- Contrary to what happened in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis, the current pandemic should provide momentum for developing and implementing green economy recovery plans throughout the region. For instance, OSCE participating States should consider declaring a “state of climate emergency” and appointing dedicated Ministers with expertise in environmental protection to take charge of elaborating on green recovery plans.
- The right of every citizen to breathe clean air is vital. OSCE governments should ramp up efforts to ensure better air quality, notably through the greening and electrification of transportation, and the decrease of greenhouse gas emissions.
- Clean energies which are environmentally friendly should be considered as financial and economic opportunities. The transition from fossil fuel to green energy is generally recognized as the single most relevant step towards cleaner air and the mitigation of climate change.

- States should minimize tensions related to food security caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. disruptions in domestic food supply chains, shocks affecting food production, and loss of incomes and remittances) and actively co-operate to prevent future similar crises.
- Bearing in mind that COVID-19 is a zoonotic disease, wildlife trade should be banned throughout the OSCE region, and beyond.
- If environmental protection is to be successful, dedicated efforts shall be deployed at global and local levels, including through transboundary collaboration. The EU funded Central European Green Corridors Project was hailed as a successful example of a transborder effort of decarbonization and electrification of road transport⁹.
- The commitment of the European Union with regards to the development of a sustainable climate plan, including the recently launched “Green Deal”, is deemed critical.
- The role of youth in the mitigation of the risks posed by climate change is crucial. Participating States should pro-actively engage young populations in this field.
- Sustainable development can only be achieved if economic, social, environmental and public health factors are duly balanced and given equal attention by policymakers.
- Intensified international co-operation and coordination is urgently needed to recover from the COVID-19 crisis, as well as to build resilience against similar future health crises and to mitigate the effects of climate change. For instance, international support should be provided to those countries which do not currently have the capacity to put into place ecologically sound measures.

In concluding the web dialogue, **the Rapporteur of the OSCE PA Committee on Economic Affairs, Science, Technology and Environment, Elona Gjebrea Hoxha**, noted that the severe health implications brought on by inadequate environmental protection should serve as a wake-up call for legislators. In doing so, Ms. Gjebrea Hoxha underlined the pivotal role of national parliaments in making sure that sound policies and laws are adopted and implemented to safeguard public health and prevent future similar crisis, including through direct public support towards green projects, green finance and higher carbon pricing. The Rapporteur concluded by underlining that national green recovery plans should be recognized as beneficial both in the short run, for example through technical innovation and job creation, and in the long run, by contributing to promote a more healthy, secure and resilient world.

⁹ The project establishes a network of 115 high power recharging points for electric vehicles from Munich to Zagreb, passing through Austria, Slovakia and Slovenia.