



COVID-19 & Green Recovery

Policy Brief
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The COVID-19 pandemic is wreaking havoc on children, families and communities around the world. To move from risk to resilience and build back better and stronger, recovery efforts must address key underlying causes of the pandemic: unsustainable economic development, climate change and a collective disregard for the natural environment. This brief focuses on the links between the pandemic, the destruction of the natural environment and climate change, and calls for systematic change to create a greener, more inclusive and resilient world for children.

Environmental health matters. The COVID-19 crisis is a timely reminder of the important interconnections between healthy and resilient natural environments, human health, well-being and economic prosperity.¹ When economic growth comes at the expense of the natural environment, human health and well-being suffer.² The sharp rise in zoonotic diseases (those that transfer from animals to humans) over the last 50 years coincides with unprecedented human encroachment on the natural environment.³ Deforestation, unsustainable agricultural and development practices, climate change, and the expansion of human settlements have led to a significant decline in natural ecosystems around the world,⁴ threatening children's right to a clean and healthy environment. Since 1990, 420 million hectares of forest have been lost to deforestation,

an area half the size of Brazil.⁵ The loss of carbon-absorbing forests and natural landscapes is accelerating climate change, which is in turn further escalating environmental degradation.⁶ Sadly, with no value for natural capital on balance sheets and in markets, there is little incentive to conserve, restore or regenerate it. This leads to further degradation and destruction of natural capital, damage to local livelihoods, biodiversity loss, and food systems that incentivise poor land-use mismanagement.⁷ Perversely, the secondary economic impacts of COVID-19 are contributing to the cycle of environmental degradation and destruction, with many rural areas facing increased pressure on natural resources as people lose their jobs and income in cities and return to rural homes, seeking income from illegal mining, logging and wild meat trade to survive.⁸

A green recovery from COVID-19 supports children's, families' and communities' recovery from the immediate impacts of the pandemic and builds longer-term social, environmental and economic resilience to future shocks and stresses. It recognises that we cannot mitigate future crises without addressing global climate and environmental impact and taking actions at all levels to eradicate poverty and inequality.

As natural ecosystems and biological diversity decline and the proximity between human settlement and animal habitat increases, greater opportunities arise for viral pathogens to spill over from wildlife to humans.² Research conducted by the EcoHealth Alliance found that 30% of outbreaks of emerging infectious diseases were linked to land-use change, like deforestation, and a further 15% were linked to agricultural changes.¹⁰ Ebola outbreaks in West and Central Africa were also found mostly to occur in deforestation hotspots.¹¹

As custodians and stewards of Earth, it is our responsibility to care for it now and into the future – for children and future generations. This requires us to better balance profit, people and the planet, creating a safe and just space for humanity to prosper.

Children’s well-being at risk. COVID-19 has global reach and impact, with significant secondary impacts on children potentially as deadly as the virus itself, affecting nearly every aspect of their lives, including physical and mental health, learning, behaviour, economic security, and protection from violence and abuse.¹² **Prior to COVID-19, 144 million – 1 in 5 children under the age of five – worldwide were stunted and 47 million children were classified as wasting.**¹³ The United Nations projects that without timely action, the number of children under five with severe acute malnutrition could rise by approximately 15% globally (7 million children) over the first 12 months of the crisis, with an increase of 20–25% in parts of Africa.¹⁴ World Food Programme estimates that the number of acute food insecure people in its 55 countries of operation could increase from 149 million pre-COVID-19 to 270 million before the end of the year.¹⁵ A survey across nine countries in Asia conducted by World Vision estimates that, as a result of the economic fallout from COVID-19, 110 million children may be going hungry, and 8 million children may be forced into child labour or begging in that region.¹⁶ Furthermore, the United Nations Population Fund predicts 13 million additional child marriages will occur in the 10 years following the pandemic (estimated at 150 million pre-COVID-19), with at least 4 million girls married in the next two years alone.¹⁷ Overall, the United Nations estimates that COVID-19 could push an additional 42 to 66 million children into extreme poverty,¹⁸ severely curtailing their rights to an adequate standard of living and access to sufficient nutritious food and social security as enshrined in the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the Child. Children’s

education is also being massively affected, with nearly 1.5 billion learners in 169 countries affected by school closures at the end of March.¹⁹ And, while many schools and universities have since re-opened, as of mid-November 2020, 23 countries maintain these closures, affecting more than 224 million learners or 12.8% of the world’s enrolled learners.²⁰

It is our duty to provide children with the best possible start in life and to help them live life in all its fullness – to improve health, nutrition and education outcomes for children and break the intergenerational cycle of poverty. This is important more than ever in a COVID-19 world.

Climate change is a threat multiplier. Poor and vulnerable communities, especially women and children, and those living in fragile contexts around the world are already facing a climate crisis. **In 2020, more than 500 million children live in areas of extremely high flood risk due to cyclones, storms and rising sea levels,²¹ and over 1.3 billion people live on degraded agricultural land.²²** Without significant action, it is estimated that by 2030 climate change will push more than 100 million people back into poverty;²³ by 2040, one in four children will live in areas of extreme water stress;²⁴ and by 2050, more than 143 million people will be internally displaced in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and Latin America as a result of slow onset impacts of climate change, including water stress, crop failure and sea-level rise.²⁵ Climate change also increases the risk of water and vector-borne diseases spreading and the emergence of new infectious diseases, like COVID-19.²⁶ A global temperature increase of 2–3°C, for example, would increase the number of people who are at risk of malaria by 3–5%, which, based on today’s world population, is 234 to 390 million people.²⁷ With 2 billion people currently either moderately or severely food insecure, and climate change set to negatively impact food production systems, 25 years of gains made in child health and against child mortality are at risk of being reversed.²⁸ If we do not urgently take measures to mitigate climate change and restore the natural environment, this crisis will only deepen, with those least responsible for causing climate change most affected.

World Vision and others working on the frontline of the climate crisis already see this playing out on the ground every day. In Ethiopia, one of the most drought-affected countries in the world, recurrent droughts and food insecurity have forced millions of people in rural areas to migrate to cities in search of food and work.²⁹ In Sumba, Indonesia, the combined impacts of climate-fuelled drought, deforestation, destructive farming practices and annual grassland burning has significantly degraded landscapes and led to food insecurity and malnutrition in poor and vulnerable households.³⁰ On the islands and atolls of Papua New Guinea, rising sea levels are destroying staple crops, leading to food insecurity and migration of communities to the mainland in search of work, leaving their ancestral homes.³¹ In the Amazon, deforestation, fires and climate change threaten the livelihoods and unique cultures of indigenous peoples³² – societies and communities who support around 80% of the planet's biodiversity, despite accounting for 6% of the human population.³³ Similar devastating stories can be found around the world, with the impacts of climate change, infectious diseases, economic shocks, environmentally destructive agricultural practices, biodiversity loss and toxic air pollution exacting a heavy toll on poor and vulnerable children, their families and communities.³⁴ In the coming years, these trends will increase vulnerability, pushing millions more children and their families into humanitarian crisis.³⁵

The climate crisis is a common concern of humankind, inextricably intertwined with human rights. It is an issue of justice that requires actions that target the most vulnerable communities, are child-centred and inclusive, and protect and restore the environmental assets that support the livelihoods and food security of those most affected.

A greener, more inclusive and resilient world for children. The climate crisis combined with COVID-19 is a critical point in history – a time where we are at a tipping point where the planetary boundaries necessary for the long-term survival of our species and the planet are being crossed.³⁶ If we fail to act, crises like COVID-19 could become the new normal. A green recovery is needed so that children, families and communities can recover from the immediate impacts of the pandemic and longer-term social, environmental and economic resilience to future shocks and stresses is built. A green recovery recognises that we cannot mitigate future crises without addressing global climate and environmental impact and taking actions at all levels to eradicate poverty and inequality.

As a model for recovery, it can help us achieve complementary goals of child well-being, economic prosperity and environmental sustainability – creating inclusive, greener and resilient economies, where no child is left behind, and where the Earth is cared for.

We can achieve a green recovery by considering a range of strategies to build a holistic recovery. This includes: (1) strengthening and expanding social protection programmes so that children and families can meet their basic needs and a portion of assistance can be leveraged for dual financial and environment benefits; (2) creating solutions that reflect the needs of vulnerable children, families and communities by strengthening participation and social accountability mechanisms; (3) investing in food security and sustainable food systems so that communities have access to sufficient nutritious food now and into the future; (4) working with nature rather than against it by employing nature-based solutions (such as regenerative agriculture) to realise dual economic and environmental benefits; (5) building community capacity to prepare for and respond to future shocks through community-centred disaster risk management; and (6) supporting the full realisation of global goals (i.e. Paris Climate Change Agreement, United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, and United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration) so that there is global and systems-level change.



Figure 1: Essential elements of a green recovery

World Vision is not alone in this quest for a better future for children and the planet. Globally, the United Nations, governments, business leaders, economists and health experts are talking about how a green recovery could benefit not just human health and prosperity but also the planet.³⁷



When Super Cyclone Amphan hit Bangladesh in May it created a double disaster for those already affected by COVID-19, with whole communities under water making movement difficult, especially for children.
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World Vision's Response

For 70 years World Vision has been working alongside the world's most vulnerable children, families and communities to overcome poverty and injustice. We are recognised as global leaders in environmental restoration. World Vision's farmer-managed natural regeneration (FMNR) was selected by the United Nations as a key good practice contributing to 12 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).³⁸ Our 'ReGreen the Globe' movement was successful in being chosen as one of 20 innovations helping to conserve, restore and grow 1 trillion trees as part of the World Economic Forum's Trillion Trees Challenge.³⁹ We will partner with the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021–2030) to halt the degradation of ecosystems and restore them to achieve global goals. And our global adviser and ambassador, Tony Rinaudo, was awarded Laureate of the prestigious Right Livelihood Award in 2018 in recognition of his work to green drylands and improve the livelihoods of millions of people.⁴⁰

In our COVID-19 response and recovery efforts, World Vision is:

- providing children and families with urgent financial support to meet their basic needs and reduce negative coping strategies in line with the United Nations' call for urgent scale up of social protection programmes
- increasing household access to safe and nutritious food during the crisis in ways that promote sustainable land management (through climate smart agriculture and FMNR) to increase food security, sustainably increase

agricultural productivity and biodiversity, adapt and build resilience to climate change, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture

- supporting a sustainable economic recovery by helping to protect and rebuild livelihoods with programming to promote, rebuild and strengthen local markets in ways that consider climate risks and climate-smart outcomes
- strengthening the capacity of children, families and communities to understand and reduce risk; monitor signals and indicators of natural and human-made threats; and working with communities, governments and partners to respond and ensure a recovery that builds their resilience to future shocks and stresses
- creating an enabling environment for communities to advocate for essential services by improving relationships between communities, governments and service providers through our 'Citizen Voice and Action' model.⁴¹

Now, and in the future, it is important that this work continues to provide millions of vulnerable children, families and communities with the tools and resources to recover fully from COVID-19 and build a more resilient future. World Vision will do this side by side with the communities themselves and United Nations, government, private sector and community partners and faith leaders to trial, test and learn to maximise impact.

World Vision's Recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic presents us with the difficult yet critical task ahead: to respond to the current crisis while also preparing to mitigate future risks, not only from pathogens but also the environmental, social and economic shocks and threats they pose to planetary health.⁴² **Returning to business-as-usual cannot be an option.** Instead, we must act decisively and with resolve to build back communities, economies and societies inclusive of the poor, the vulnerable and the marginalised, in ways that are environmentally sustainable, building our collective resilience. We cannot afford to wait until the next crisis hits. Investing in a green recovery now will cost less and save lives and livelihoods as, in the long run, inclusive, sustainable and resilient economies are most robust.⁴³

National governments should:

- **Strengthen and expand social protection programmes to be inclusive and green** by rolling out digital mechanisms to reach more people and keep them safe during COVID-19; providing financial assistance to expand national social protection programmes to cover more vulnerable community members (especially vulnerable children) in the event of climate, environment or health shocks; and increasing the number of social protection programmes with dual financial and environmental benefits (e.g. public works programmes that support participants financially while also building environmental assets, such as water conservation infrastructure).
- **Strengthen participation of children and support child-led social accountability approaches** by empowering children to be aware of their rights and ensuring they can meaningfully participate in discussions and decision-making processes at all levels; supporting formal and informal education programmes to build environment and climate change literacy; and ensuring access to environmental education and information is reflected and embedded in decisions under the Action for Climate Empowerment of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change dialogue and associated decisions.
- **Invest in food security, sustainable food systems and environmental restoration to support the COVID-19 recovery and long-term resilience** of children, families and communities by supporting household food and nutrition security (e.g. kitchen and community gardens, household and community food storage systems, and access to income to purchase food); supporting livelihoods diversification to manage risk; expanding sustainable food systems (e.g. climate-smart and nutrition-sensitive agriculture, agroforestry, FMNR and indigenous practices);⁴⁴ investing in climate-risk information services (e.g. weather-based insurance); and conducting farmer-oriented research and development to address climate and environment related issues.
- **Prioritise nature-based solutions to climate change to realise economic and environmental resilience benefits** by enacting policies that value natural capital and increase uptake of approaches to food production and landscape management that build resilience;⁴⁵ investing in awareness-raising for ministries, departments, development organisations and private sector actors on low-cost regenerative agriculture and landscape restoration approaches that are rapidly scalable; increasing programme funding for nature-based solutions; and conducting greater research into low-cost scalable landscape restoration approaches, including indigenous land management practices.



- **Build community capacity to prepare for and respond to future shocks** by investing in multi-hazard early warning systems; expanding support for child-centred and community-led risk management programmes; scaling up community-centred resilience building programmes; and providing timely and appropriate support to meet children's humanitarian needs in disasters.
- **Support the full realisation of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Paris Agreement, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015–2030), and the goals of the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021–2030)** by reducing global greenhouse gas emissions to limit global temperature increase to 1.5°C; supporting the mobilisation of US\$100 billion in annual climate finance to support developing countries to meaningfully adapt to the impacts that are already unavoidable; doing their fair share to restore 350 million hectares of degraded and deforested landscapes by 2030; and supporting the United Nations' push for legal recognition of the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment.⁴⁶

United Nations agencies should:

- **Drive global uptake of action on climate change and environmental issues** by partnering with national governments, non-governmental organisations and the private sector to ensure the Paris Agreement, SDGs, and Bonn Challenge (which is supported by the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration) are promoted and accelerated at all levels; establishing large-scale post-COVID-19 recovery programmes to improve social, economic and environmental outcomes for the world's most vulnerable children, their families and communities; and enhancing enforcement and governance systems of global environmental assets (e.g. forests and oceans), including capacity strengthening support to national government authorities.

Private sector actors should:

- **Support green, sustainable supply chains and strengthen markets** by supporting small and growing businesses as they emerge from the crisis to resume their essential services in ways that consider environmental and climate risks; promoting climate-smart business models; reducing food wastage; and strengthening or creating greener markets, supply chains and infrastructure (e.g. renewable energy, fuel-efficient cookstoves, composting, biogas, organic fertiliser, water harvesting and storage, sustainable waste management, and green building materials).

Faith leaders should:

- **Model leadership in caring for God's creation through environmental stewardship** by working with children, families and communities to discuss the links between God and caring for the Earth; developing community-based plans for 'Creation Care' and implementing them; and supporting local youth leaders to take forward their ideas for environmental stewardship with other leaders in the community, government and the private sector.⁴⁷

Donors should:

- **Scale up development and humanitarian resources for green recovery interventions** by increasing financial support to key multilateral environmental funds, such as the United Nations Environment Programme and the Green Climate Fund; creating funding platforms, such as the Trillion Trees initiative to trial new ideas and scale up proven models; developing dedicated funding streams to support community and child-centred green recovery interventions; and scaling up programmes that support integrated environmental, social and economic resilience at a systemic level.

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The use of digital technologies to transfer cash in hard-to-reach locations supports efforts during crises like COVID-19 and other environmental disasters, supports greater transparency and accountability, and helps children and their families, like this mother and son from Bangladesh, recover quicker.

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World Vision is undertaking the largest humanitarian response in its 70-year history to limit the spread of COVID-19 and reduce its impact on vulnerable children and their families, aiming to reach 72 million people, half of them children, over the next 18 months and raising US\$350 million to do so. Response efforts will cover 70 countries where World Vision has a field presence, prioritising scale up of preventative measures to limit the spread of the disease; strengthening health systems and workers; supporting children affected by COVID-19 through education, child protection, food security, and livelihoods; and advocating to ensure vulnerable children are protected. For more information, read World Vision's [COVID-19 Global Response Plan](#).



World Vision is a Christian relief, development and advocacy organisation dedicated to working with children, families, and their communities to reach their full potential by tackling the root causes of poverty and injustice. World Vision serves all people, regardless of religion, race, ethnicity, or gender.

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