

COP26 + COVID19 - media factsheet

As the global COVID-19 pandemic continues to worsen, major sporting, cultural and political events are either being postponed or cancelled. The UN's climate body has announced it will not hold any physical meetings in Bonn and elsewhere up to the end of April 2020, and official missions have been suspended. Speculation is naturally mounting on whether October's COP15 UN biodiversity summit in Kunming, China and November's COP26 UN climate summit set for November could be cancelled or postponed.

What is the UK government saying?

18/3: "We continue to work towards hosting the event in Glasgow in November, which is eight months away. Given this is an evolving situation we are keeping the situation under careful review and are in frequent contact with the UN, Chile (as current COP Presidents) and other partners."

19/3: In a Wednesday briefing, UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said: "The reality is we are waiting to see right now quite what the timings are going to be on the coronavirus. It (@COP26) might be doable."

Is this the UK's decision to make?

The UK could decide it no longer has the capacity / wants to host COP. But a decision to cancel / move will have to be made with the UN's climate body (UNFCCC) - which represents nearly 200 countries. Ultimately the authority to move a COP rests in Bonn. If the UK pulls out then the COP could - in theory - go elsewhere. In 2019 Chile pulled out and Spain stepped in. In practice there is no formal cut off point for a decision, although the month warning Santiago gave Madrid was cutting it fine.

When will senior UN and UK officials next meet?

A virtual meeting is planned for early April where the situation will be reviewed.

Could COP26 take place via video link?

It's possible but likely impractical. Nearly 200 countries are involved in UN talks, with a large number of observer organisations participating, and playing a vital role scrutinising the process. Smaller meetings have been held remotely - but given the numbers involved and variable internet quality globally, it's a challenge. Impromptu diplomacy, a vibrant and vital civil society scrutiny and a myriad of side-meetings are the hallmark of UN conferences: go virtual and these would be lost.

If it's postponed, do countries still have to submit 2020 NDC / climate plans?

Yes. Countries made a commitment under the Paris Agreement to review and enhance their climate plans every five years. Some may find the COVID-19 crisis hits their planning and have to delay, but the obligation is on all nations to deliver what they signed up to in 2015.

Does this mean climate is taking a back seat?

The speed and ferocity of COVID-19 has evidently taken leaders by surprise and forced governments into vast, systemic changes. It's understandable that our politicians and societies deal with the most prominent shocks right now - in the space of two months our behaviour, supply chains and social safety nets have been thrown into disarray.

Evidently we need to create more resilient systems and structures in future to prevent and respond to these crises - we need to take action to prevent the causes of these disruptive events and provide safe and healthy places for people to live. What we know is that global shocks are increasingly dominating our natural environment, societies and economies. In future this is only going to become more of an issue as our polluting, exploitation and extractive behaviour begin to bite.

Will UK COP26 diplomacy continue?

COVID-19 is clearly reducing the scope for in-person international meetings, which the UK says it will seek to manage as far as possible through other means such as video and phone conferences. In the past week COP26 envoy John Murton and COP26 president Alok Sharma have been engaged in virtual diplomatic meetings with South Africa and India.

What do governments need to focus on?

The priority for all governments must be the health and welfare of their citizens in this deeply troubling time. This has to be the absolute focus of all world leaders and the UN, which can play a vital role in ensuring a global crisis is tackled at a global level.

Longer term, it is clear COVID-19 will very likely tip the global economy into a recession, the first comprehensive financial shock since 2008, and potentially the biggest disruption for many decades. A multi-trillion series of packages are already on the cards: Paris Agreement architect Laurence Tubiana has called on governments to be “innovative” and ensure the economic stimulus packages that will be necessary post COVID-19 are climate-compatible. South Korea’s ruling party has already announced a ‘Green New Deal’ package as the country starts to move on from the virus. The EU is planning a similar intervention.

COVID-19 is going to be a tragedy for many, especially in the developing world. As governments start to develop economic stimulus packages to reboot their economies, funding that goes into high carbon industries to combat the effects of the virus could end up compounding the climate crisis, creating unnecessary harm and risk. That is why it’s vital that economic stimulus is used to kickstart the economy but also direct it to a sustainable path.

Today there are many opportunities to invest in low carbon infrastructure projects that will create jobs and puts the world on a safer, fairer and more resilient path. After the 2008 financial crash governments missed the opportunity to build the economic response around these sustainable principles. Today the climate emergency is far better understood, and the measures needed to tackle it - like renewable energy and storage; electrification, public transport, energy efficiency and resilience - have clear financial advantages, as well as social and health benefits.

Key messages:

-It is way too early to talk about COPs postponement for now: so much about COVID-19 is uncertain and we need more detail and data on how countries tackle it in the next month. A lot can happen in 8 months.

-COP26 is a big deal. Countries have been working on new climate plans and preparing to launch them ahead of the meeting - it’s vital this work is recognised and momentum is kept up.

-The UN is equipped to react at relatively short notice and change venues. COP25 in 2019 shifted from Santiago, Chile to Madrid, Spain in the space of a month.

-Emissions are now at a record high, impacts are multiplying - climate change is not something we can postpone. The COVID-19 crisis is an example of how vulnerable countries, societies and economies are to existential threats.

-UK leadership this year is a priority. We know British ministers, envoys and officials are continuing to meet their counterparts virtually - this has not stopped and London says it’s continuing work.