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Post-COVID-19 spending

The majority of countries have instigated some form of lockdown in order to slow the spread of SARS-CoV-2. Governments seem rather reluctant to discuss what will come next. Presumably this is because they are prioritising clarity of message over information dissemination. Clearly there is a balance to be struck between the provision of accurate and concise information about the current situation and the more speculative scenario exercises needed to plan for an exit strategy. Nevertheless, how long lockdowns continue and how governments go about helping the economy to recover matters a great deal and so inevitably there is much speculation anyway. A lack of government transparency therefore seems unhelpful and only fuels the sense of there being no light at the end of the lockdown tunnel. We are all wondering, when we do emerge into the light, what the world might look like. Much of the answer will depend on how soon restrictions lift and how and where governments choose to spend.

The issue attracting most interest at the moment is, understandably, how long lockdowns will last and the extent of the damage this might do to the economy. The narrative being that at some point the treatment (lockdowns and associated economic damages) could become worse than the disease itself (COVID-19). This is of course an immensely difficult question to answer, but if we stick with minimising lives lost as the metric of success for the time being, is there a risk that a deep recession will cost more lives than we save from maintaining lockdowns? The available evidence here is perhaps surprising. Although severe downturns in the economy have historically increased deaths in some groups, as we might expect, the net effect, at least in rich countries, has been a reduction in deaths during recession. This counterintuitive effect is surprisingly consistent across recessions, even quite severe ones. We also know that reductions in pollution are potentially averting many deaths as a result of lockdown (see Comment by Kai Chen), something that does not occur to anything like the same extent in a typical recession and is likely to further bolster reductions in lives lost.

Inevitably recessions hit the vulnerable and marginalised hardest, and so extended reductions in economic activity from lockdowns are also expected to hit low-income and vulnerable groups hardest. History does show, however, that this too is not inevitable

and nations and administrations with effective social care programmes have been able to reduce the impact of economic downturns on death rates in the past, indicating that such programmes must be a vital part of recovery planning. Clearly, we need to minimise the economic harms done by lockdown, but the evidence doesn't suggest there is a simple trade-off between lives lost to recession against lives lost to COVID-19 as it is frequently framed in the media.

More important than how long the lockdowns and reduced economic activity persist is how governments seek to stimulate recovery. This will have clear implications for how damaging the economic recession is to people's lives and how well we are able to respond to the other critical challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss which are no less pressing as a result of the pandemic. Lockdowns have given us some first-hand insight into what cleaner cities might look like and greenhouse gas emissions have fallen, though not by as much as people might think. These gains could catalyse action for cleaner cities and better active transport networks, but nobody would credibly argue that extreme recession is a desirable way to achieve these benefits. Such gains can only be sustainably achieved by changing our investments towards low-carbon infrastructure, transport and lifestyles.

The COVID-19 pandemic should be a wake-up call that our global economy is far less robust to shocks than we have become accustomed to believing. Although much could have been handled better in hindsight, most governments have shown real bravery and decisiveness in taking us into lockdown to save lives. However, this is just the start of the story, they must now show just as much bravery and decisiveness in structuring a recovery that moves us purposefully towards low carbon, cleaner, and more resilient infrastructure and lifestyles with appropriate social care provisions for those most harmed by lockdown. It will be tempting to grasp for old approaches to economic recovery, stimulating dirty polluting industries and consumption-fuelled growth, but if we are to find any benefit from this pandemic we must invest differently to prevent and prepare for the other challenges we still face. ■ *The Lancet Planetary Health*

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For more on the **effects of recessions on deaths** see <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-00210-0#ref-CR3>

For more on the **health benefits of reduced air pollution during lockdown** see [Comment](#) *Lancet Planetary Health* 2020; published online May 13. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196\(20\)30107-8](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196(20)30107-8)