

The New York Times | <https://nyti.ms/3bbfsmn>

Think This Pandemic Is Bad? We Have Another Crisis Coming

Addressing climate change is a big-enough idea to revive the economy.

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April 15, 2020

This article is part of “The America We Need,” a Times Opinion series exploring how the nation can emerge from this crisis stronger, fairer and more free. Read the introductory editorial and the editor’s letter.

On the last Friday in March, I lost hope.

I have always believed in America: not in our inherent goodness — I am too black for that — but in our sheer animal will to survive. Crisis after crisis, our country has evolved to meet the moment, even if that meant changing the way we thought the world worked or striving to upend the imbalance of power. But on that Friday, I was on my couch working when the messages started to pour in. Friends sent me video after video of Republican senators debating stimulus measures to address the coronavirus crisis, standing in the Senate chamber, saying that the Green New Deal — a proposal that I helped create — was the reason millions of Americans would not receive the help that they need.

I was furious. Of the nearly \$2 trillion in aid proposed in that first version of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, known as the CARES Act, \$500 billion went toward a business-relief fund with little to no oversight. Fifty-eight billion of this was earmarked for airlines, and a lax definition of eligible businesses created a loophole for oil and gas. The bill included no climate protections, so the claim that it was being held up over Green New Deal provisions was absurd. And the changes proposed by Democrats — emissions reductions for airlines, limiting bailouts for fossil fuel industries, protections for airline workers — were modest.

The senators I saw did not mention those things. Nor did they mention that the airlines had requested \$50 billion after spending \$45 billion on stock buybacks over the past five years. They did not mention that emissions reductions requested would not be required until 2025 or that when they were, the reductions would be less than 3 percent per year. And no one stood up and asked why corporations should be exempt from loan terms when the rest of us are not. Why is it “opportunism” when we try to design policy that would address more than one problem at a time, but it’s “efficiency” when businesses do the same? (The final version of the CARES Act does not provide targeted funding for fossil fuels and reduced the aid for passenger airlines to \$25 billion. None of the climate policies mentioned were included in the final version of the bill.)

Covid-19 and the economic collapse it has caused have laid bare how connected our problems are. Congress and the Federal Reserve are not going to lay out trillions of dollars, over and over, in perpetuity. Refusing to include measures related to climate and environmental justice in economic stimulus packages related to the coronavirus is not neutral when there is no

guarantee of other opportunities to do so later. We need to design the stimulus not only to help the U.S. economy recover but to also become more resilient to the climate crisis, the next multitrillion-dollar crisis headed our way.

Pandemics like the coronavirus may occur more often when climate change is unabated. Warming and changing weather patterns shift the vectors and spread of disease. Heavily polluting industries also contribute to disease transmission. Studies have linked factory farming — one of the largest sources of methane emissions — to faster-mutating, more virulent pathogens. The same corporations that exacerbated the climate crisis are literally helping to create deadlier diseases, more quickly, in a world that keeps changing how they spread.

Similarly, the same populations that are bearing the brunt of the health and economic effects of the coronavirus are the same populations that bear the brunt of fossil fuel pollution — which, in turn, makes them more vulnerable to serious complications.

In three of the states with the highest number of Covid-19 cases — Illinois, Michigan and Louisiana — African-Americans made up 40 to 70 percent of deaths from the disease, far outpacing the percentage of black people in each state. Many of the black communities ravaged by Covid-19 are “front-line communities” — where residents live adjacent to heavily polluting industries. If you’re black or Latinx — and especially if you’re poor — it is difficult not to live in a front-line community. Oil, gas and petrochemical industries have concentrated so heavily in low-income, majority-black-and-brown areas that black people are 75 percent more likely to live near industrial facilities than the average American.

Metro Detroit, the epicenter of Michigan’s Covid-19 outbreak, is home to steel mills, waste-processing plants and the only oil refinery in the state — all in or near low-income, black and Latinx neighborhoods. The people most likely to die from toxic fumes are the same people most likely to die from Covid-19. It’s like we are watching a preview of the worst possible impacts of the climate crisis roll right before our eyes.



Emissions from the Marathon oil refinery in Detroit have been an ongoing concern for the neighborhoods within its range. Erin Kirkland for The New York Times

Leaders on both sides of the aisle have argued that folding policies to address climate and environmental injustice into coronavirus-related legislative packages would distract from efforts to provide immediate relief. But addressing climate change and environmental injustice will not diffuse efforts to address the virus and its economic fallout if we apply intersectional policies such as the Green New Deal. They are designed to address connected issues in a way that protects the most vulnerable while building a more just and sustainable economy.

Some states have already begun to connect the coronavirus to climate action. New York, for example, passed the Accelerated Renewable Energy Growth and Community Benefit Act on April 3. The legislation comes on the heels of the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act — sometimes referred to as New York's Green New Deal. And if New York's response is any indication, none of this appears to have detracted from efforts to stop the spread of the coronavirus.

Addressing climate change doesn't have to slow down the economic recovery, either. In fact, it can push it forward. No one knows the depth of the recession, but it is hard to see how we will put the 16 million people who have filed for unemployment back to work without significant public investment.

If history is any indication, rebounding from an economic disruption this large requires an equally large spike in demand and production. Outside of war, climate change is the only issue large enough to provide such a spike. Now is the time to create policies that provide immediate relief to communities, such as federal assistance to transition homes and businesses to renewable energy; give "green" fiscal aid to states; and fuel economic recovery with the creation of federally funded green jobs. But none of this can happen so long as our leaders keep convincing themselves that the greatest country in the world cannot walk and chew gum at the same time.

A climate-focused economic recovery — much less a coronavirus response that acknowledges the climate crisis — could require a new Congress and a new president, a tall order in an America this divided. But maybe it is time to stop acting as though politics is a force of nature when we are facing *actual* and deadly forces of nature. It's past time to elect leaders who are fit to handle the crises we face, instead of hoping for problems small enough to fit the leaders we have.

The Americans I know would like to survive, even if it means our country has to evolve — which many of us have been ready for long before the pandemic.

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