**How Will Climate Catastrophes Be Handled in the Face of Coronavirus?**

*Governments must focus on pandemic response while also preparing for looming natural disasters*

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As the year got underway, climate change was widely viewed as the most serious threat to global prosperity. The annual risk perception survey of the [2020 *Global Risks Report*](https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-global-risks-report-2020), published by the World Economic Forum in partnership with Marsh & McLennan, saw climate-related risks dominate the rankings in terms of both likelihood and impact.

Since then, climate change has fallen down the agenda as COVID-19 has risen up it. Although decision-makers were apparently blindsided by a virus, it does not mean their assessment of the risk posed by climate change was wrong. If anything, the pandemic has increased the threat.

**Increasing vulnerability to climate impacts**

Consider extreme weather, ranked the No. 1 global risk in terms of likelihood. While the chance of catastrophic floods, heat waves, storms, or wildfires is unaffected by the pandemic, vulnerability to these events has increased massively. Governments, companies, and households are stretched to a breaking point: they are all less able to cope and less able to recover.

The cycle of COVID-19 spread and country-level response is increasingly familiar. Exponential growth in infections overburdens health services and a de facto or de jure national emergency follows, as governments seek to “flatten the curve” through restrictions on movement, triggering job losses and sharp economic contraction. Governments can only hope that they come out the other side before the next climate-related disaster hits.

**Near misses and gathering storms**

There have already been some notable near misses. For example, Australia’s worst [bushfire season](https://theconversation.com/some-say-weve-seen-bushfires-worse-than-this-before-but-theyre-ignoring-a-few-key-facts-129391) in history drew to a close just as the first cases of coronavirus emerged earlier this year. What if COVID-19 had taken hold a month or two earlier, as attention and resources were focused on tackling the fires? How much worse would things have become if the outbreak of a deadly respiratory disease coincided with a choking bushfire smog estimated to have killed hundreds and hospitalized thousands?

In the United Kingdom, intense heat waves followed by thunderstorms and flash floods coincided the country’s domestic coronavirus resurgence during the summer months. Across Europe in recent years, heat waves have contributed to wildfires and caused spikes in death rates, causing particular problems for the elderly and those with underlying respiratory and cardiovascular problems — precisely those most vulnerable to COVID-19. Hope among Europeans that the summer months will bring respite from the virus have been misplaced as it has spread rapidly in warmer countries.

India’s outbreak is further behind Europe’s and based on current trajectories, the spread of COVID-19 has not yet peaked. It remains to be seen how bad things will get in India, but a chronically [underfunded health system](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS1473-3099(20)30300-5/fulltext), densely populated cities with many living in slums, and the [worst air pollution](https://edition.cnn.com/2020/02/25/health/most-polluted-cities-india-pakistan-intl-hnk/index.html) in the world (known to increase [COVID-19 mortality](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/apr/20/air-pollution-may-be-key-contributor-to-covid-19-deaths-study)) will not help. India’s monsoon weather and disastrous floods would make recovery even harder, and recently [Bangladesh suffered extensive flooding](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/07/bangladesh-underwater-heavy-rains-floods-200714133251746.html), covering more than one-third of the country in July.

In the US, The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration had predicted [an “extremely active” Atlantic hurricane season](https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2020/08/06/hurricane-outlook-extremely-active/). Indeed in August, Hurricane Laura resulted in half a million residents being told to evacuate due to an expected [“unsurvivable” storm surge in Louisiana.](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-53921285) The year’s wildfire season is also just beginning, with Northern California already recording its first fire-related tornado and San Francisco being blanketed in toxic smoke.

Climate change and coronavirus demonstrate why governments must have a long-term commitment to risk management

Now is the time to act

Against this backdrop, the United States government must remain keenly focused on the pandemic response while preparing for these looming threats — this at a time when the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s [workforce is already stretched](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/03/climate/fema-staff-shortage-coronavirus.html).

FEMA is taking proactive steps to confront these challenges. In addition to conducting its normal hurricane readiness activities, it has set up a second command center at its headquarters to focus on nonpandemic risks and is redeploying staff from existing disaster sites around the country.

The responsibility to prepare for duelling disasters goes beyond just FEMA. The entire U.S. government must be prepared to mobilize its resources should the need arise. A number of federal agencies fully engaged in the pandemic response must take similar actions as FEMA to ensure they will be capable of mustering additional assets. Agencies not currently responding to the pandemic need to dust off their response plans to ensure they also are ready for what could be a busy period ahead.

State and local governments must be prepared, too, as the federal government will unlikely be able to make up their shortfalls, especially given the potential 50-state impact of COVID-19.  
  
The best way to ensure that agencies at all levels of government are ready is to test their response plans. Exercises would normally be happening now, but many have been disrupted by the coronavirus. FEMA cancelled its [National Level Exercise 2020](https://www.fema.gov/nle), a major cybersecurity exercise involving federal, state, and local agencies that had been scheduled for the spring. Though large-scale exercises may now be infeasible, all government agencies should be looking for opportunities to test their plans before the next crisis strikes.

From one crisis to the next

The challenges faced by the U.S. show how even the best-resourced governments are struggling to prepare for the threat of a climate-coronavirus double punch.

Consider Japan, which has developed one of the most advanced disaster risk management frameworks in the world, combining resilient infrastructure with early-warning systems, well-drilled emergency plans, and strong governance. Yet even Japan’s resilience looks set to be tested. With this year’s typhoon season that began in June and continues through October, Japan has been on the brutal receiving end of a COVID-19 outbreak resurgence as severe floods displaced millions to evacuation centers, which caused the government to declare a national emergency. Health officials warn the healthcare system could [collapse](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-52336388).

COVID-19’s resurgence in Japan could be a sign of things to come for many countries, as governments find themselves caught in a cycle of loosening and tightening lockdowns in response to recurrent outbreaks until we reach herd immunity or create a vaccine. Consequently, avoiding a climate-coronavirus double punch may require more than simply getting through the next storm or rainy season. Governments may need to navigate several more hazardous seasons with coronavirus lurking in the background. They should plan accordingly.

Climate change and the pandemic demonstrate why governments must have a [long-term commitment to risk management](https://www.mmc.com/insights/publications/2020/apr/national-resilience-report.html). Public-sector leaders should ensure they have dynamic plans and strategies that guide their preparedness and response efforts not only for the current crises, but also for evolving risks in the future. This will require decisive action now, as well as sustained implementation, testing, and constant re-evaluation to be successful. Governments must also prioritize their budgets to mitigate these risks. Upfront investments in risk reduction will yield future dividends in the form of enhanced resilience. While these efforts will take significant time and resources, the cost of inaction is simply too great.