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# The Impact of COVID-19 on Climate Action: What can be learnt?

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## OVERVIEW

2020 was anticipated as the monumental year for addressing climate change, protecting biodiversity, the Sustainable Development Goals and long-term prosperity of humanity. It is also the year when nations were to submit new or revised national climate action plans that are much more ambitious than before. Like many countries however, Uganda witnessed crisis after crisis resulting into the trilemma of: the worst locusts' outbreak in the last 70 years, floods with record high water levels in Lake Victoria amidst COVID 19. The intersecting COVID 19, economic and climate crises were situated in already weak economic infrastructure owing to the closure of the Rwanda border and bans of some Ugandan products in neighbouring Kenya.

The containment measures put in place to address the pandemic have presented an enormous challenge to not only the economy but also climate action. This policy brief analyzes the impact the pandemic has had on climate action and makes some recommendations towards a green recovery.

## KEY ISSUES:

- > Like COVID-19, climate change is a risk multiplier with potentially a greater exponential negative impact on livelihoods
- > Since crises do not happen in siloes, we cannot deal with them singly or in isolation.
- > COVID 19 and Climate Change will need combined efforts to address the compounded vulnerability and uneven distributional consequences to communities.
- > The pandemic has presented an opportunity to incorporate resilience at the heart of macroeconomic fundamentals to advance a genuinely green and resilient economy
- > Uganda's recovery packages should be anchored in low carbon development pathways as they have the potential to deliver on both economic recovery and climate action. In this regard, the NDCs are a good starting point

## Introduction

Uganda has made tremendous strides in regard to climate action. Having signed and ratified the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Kyoto Protocol (KP) and the Paris Agreement thus committing itself to the adoption and implementation of policies and measures designed to mitigate climate change and adapt to its impacts, Uganda has developed consistent policies and National Climate Change Policy (NCCP) 2015 and Uganda Vision 2040. The Government has also taken steps to integrate climate change into the National Development Plan, as well as in sectoral policies, plans and programmes and has produced climate change mainstreaming guidelines. The Third National Development Plan (NDP III) 2020/21 – 2024/25, in addition to mainstreaming climate change in all programmes, has a fully-fledged programme on climate change. To further enable the implementation of the climate change policy, Uganda passed the Climate Change Bill 2020.

There have also been specific interventions on the ground and

local levels across sectors including but not limited to: the 10-year Climate Smart Agriculture Program (2015-2025); Building Resilient Communities, Wetland Ecosystems and Associated Catchments in Uganda (2017-2025) and several projects on irrigation, clean energy, Climate Resilient Agricultural and Pastoral Production through the farmer/Agro-pastoralist Field School approach, energy for rural transformation among others.

To further ambition, Uganda is in the process of updating its Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and at the same time developing the Long-Term low emission and climate resilience Strategy (LTS). The LTS once finalized will provide a long-term climate vision under which Uganda can set its 5-year NDC priorities defined in more concrete terms for climate action across sectors.

However, the impact of COVID 19 has negatively affected climate action and the ability to meet planned targets and milestones.

# Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Climate Action



DEFORESTATION

POSTPONED

## 1. Postponement of critical conferences

In light of COVID-19, the UN Climate Change secretariat, in conjunction with other organizing partners decided to put Africa Climate Week, which had been planned to take place 20 to 24 April 2020 in Kampala, on hold. Planned to be hosted by Uganda, the meeting was intended to share ways for governments to implement the Paris Agreement in Africa and to serve as a platform for national governments and non-Party stakeholders to engage, build partnerships and explore solutions that can deliver climate action and support at scale.<sup>1</sup> Similarly the Uganda Water and Environment week UWEWK2020 that had been scheduled for the end of March was postponed until it virtually happened in September 2020. The aim of UWEWK 2020 was to explore “The role of water and environment resources in the achievement of the third National Development Plan (NDP III) goal and targets.”<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Delay of development of key policy documents

In 2015, Cabinet directed the Ministry of Water and Environment to initiate the legal framework on climate change.<sup>3</sup> Started in 2016, the Bill was passed in April 2021 having been delayed by among others the irregular parliamentary sessions arising out of COVID-19 containment measures.<sup>4</sup> Similarly in line with Article 4.9 of the Paris Agreement that requires five-year updates of the NDCs, Uganda started the process of updating its NDCs to ensure raised ambition toward a low carbon, climate-resilient economy. This is happening concurrently with developing Uganda’s Long-Term Strategy (LTS) on climate change. The NDC updating process which was supposed to be completed by December 2020, delayed, with the official launch held on the 18 November 2020 amidst restrictions in public gathering as per the COVID-19 Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). Through its impact on restricting stakeholder consultations, the pandemic has greatly affected the process which is still yet to be finalized.

1 <https://unfccc.int/news/postponed-africa-climate-week-in-kampala>

2 [https://www.ircwash.org/sites/default/files/uganda\\_water\\_and\\_environment\\_week\\_2020\\_programme.pdf](https://www.ircwash.org/sites/default/files/uganda_water_and_environment_week_2020_programme.pdf)

3 <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/climate-change-bill-waiting-for-debate-says-mp-1833948>

4 The Speaker’s communication on Wednesday, 1 April 2020 at Parliament: we shall try to work quickly so that we close by 5.00 p.m. to enable Members to return to their homes and the staff to also reach their homes before 6.30 p.m. I would like to remind Members and the public to take the curfew seriously. Curfew is a curfew; so, you should be indoors by 7 p.m.

## 3. Deforestation

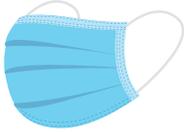
With restricted movements that came with lock down and containment measures, some illegal loggers took the opportunity to carry out deforestation. Between January and February 2020, the Ministry of Water and Environment backed by the Environment Police Protection Unit carried out operations in the districts of East Acholi to address the issues of rampant tree cutting. In Agago district, several suspects were arrested.<sup>5</sup>

## 4. Impact on biodiversity hotspots and protected areas

Uganda discovered commercially viable quantities of oil in the Albertine region which is one of the world’s biodiversity hotspots.

In the Albertine region, households have been increasingly converting forests and wetlands into agricultural fields, which have significantly reduced forest cover over the years. Natural ecosystems and the species in protected areas within the Albertine region are therefore at greater risk during the COVID -19 crisis. In Uganda’s protected areas, normal activities such as movement of tourists, wildlife research, and maintenance works bring additional eyes and ears towards conservation work, but their absence will result in a rise in illegal deforestation, fishing, wildlife hunting, and extraction of materials from protected areas for income generation. COVID-19 preventive measures such as lockdowns don’t allow movement of people to workplaces. Therefore, people near protected areas resort to exploitation of natural resources. The stoppage of ecotourism activities has left fragile ecosystems in protected areas at increased risk of illegal encroachment on the fragile ecosystems as neighbours seek alternative means of survival. COVID- 19 is also likely to reduce funding to conservation NGOs, which will further reduce conservation efforts in the region.

5 <https://www.parliament.go.ug/news/5034/use-tougher-means-stop-deforestation-mps>



### 5. Increased plastic use

There is fear that face masks could be Uganda's ticking environment disaster. Many of these facemasks, particularly the single-use surgical masks, are manufactured from long-lasting plastic materials and if wrongly discarded, they can persist in the environment for very many years. Thus, they can pollute water and harm wildlife that eat them, or they can become entangled in them.<sup>6</sup>



### 6. Increased car use:

Following lockdown, Uganda is witnessing increased car use as people enhance their safety measures. Traffic has increased with a likelihood of increasing carbon emissions.



### 7. Positive environmental impact

On a positive note, there has been an improvement in air quality especially in urban areas like Kampala; innovations around Plastic Recycling with a focus on Masks for inclusivity (the masks are designed with a transparent screen made from treated waste plastic fitted into a fabric usually cotton- to provide for sign language); Increased cycling and walking; Increased urban gardening among others.

## Conclusion

The pandemic has negatively impacted on climate action yet the impact of climate change on the economy and development continues to soar at unprecedented levels. This calls for concerted efforts and multi-layered responses to be able to address the compounded vulnerability and uneven consequences to Ugandan communities. The starting point should be to anchor the recovery packages in low carbon development pathways as they have the potential to deliver on both economic recovery and climate action.

## Way forward

While the Ugandan Government has taken commendable steps to contain the virus, and has decisively focused on health, economic and social issues through its 'rescue' aligned stimulus package, there is need to enhance efforts for environment and climate action. The rich policy and legal frameworks are a good starting point in this regard yet the transition to a green economy will itself require a paradigm shift in the use and management of the natural resources. This calls for catalytic investments in sectors with high green growth multiplier effects as illustrated in the NDCs. Moving forward, it will be important to leverage these and more opportunities as we build forward better.

1. The country should leverage and fast track the implementation of already existing policy and planning tools including the Green Growth Development Strategy
2. The Government should align its recovery strategies with the NDCs as a means of not only achieving the goals of the Paris agreement but also ensuring the recovery measures do not further exacerbate climate vulnerabilities

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/oped/commentary/facemasks-are-they-uganda-s-ticking-environment-disaster--3248950>

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