



Florida High Schools Model United Nations

FHSMUN 43: We the Peoples of the Twenty-first Century United Nations

UNITED NATIONS ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME

COVID AND CLIMATE CHANGE¹

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"Both the coronavirus crisis and the climate crisis reveal that our world is inextricably interconnected, and it's as strong or as fragile as those connections. We have to strengthen those connections. It is our only choice. The sun is going to rise again."

— Mary Annaïse Heglar, climate justice writer, 2020²

Introduction

"As the climate emergency intensifies, the transition towards climate stability becomes increasingly critical. Progress will depend on countries and their ability to cover ground on their commitments under the Paris Agreement and eventually, their collective contributions to keep the global average temperature well below 2°C."³

Over the past year and a half, the world has been facing a pandemic that has had unprecedented effects in all sectors of life, from the economy to public health to education. The coronavirus has resulted in major setbacks in progress towards building a better life for all citizens of the world, but it has also presented a unique opportunity for the future of sustainable development worldwide. The Covid-19 pandemic was an awakening to how fragile human life can be, but the climate crisis stands to cause even more damage than the Covid-19 crisis with longer lasting effects. It is imperative that the nations of the world act now against climate change in order to recover from the coronavirus pandemic in a more sustainable, inclusive, and resilient manner.⁴ While recognizing the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the climate crisis, member-states need to consider whether they want to work towards a future of disaster response

¹ Date of Publication: _____, 202_.

² Heglar, Mary, "What Climate Grief Taught Me About the Coronavirus," 2020, <https://newrepublic.com/article/157059/climate-grief-taught-coronavirus>.

³ UNEP, "Climate Action Note," 2021, <https://www.unep.org/explore-topics/climate-action/what-we-do/climate-action-note>.

⁴ Stern, Nicholas and Bhattacharya, Amar, "Our Last, Best Chance On Climate," 2021, <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2021/09/bhattacharya-stern-COP26-climate-issue.htm>.

spawned from the climate crisis, or a future of preventative mitigation and collective, sustainable growth.

Scale of the Problem

While facing both a global pandemic and a major climate crisis that affect each other, it can be hard to remember each is also separate and can have their own harmful effects on member states. Pandemics present a considerable health crisis that can in turn have significant effects on the economies of nations. Climate change stands to do sizable damage to the infrastructure and environments of nations. Each crisis is different and must be handled in a way that best suits the resources available to the nation and its people.

Pandemics

Global pandemics and economic depressions are major risks to nations alongside any environmental disaster. The current Covid-19 pandemic presents an unprecedented socio-economic crisis alongside the major health crisis currently affecting every continent. The pandemic has the potential to devastate the economies of every country it touches as it closes businesses and results in widespread unemployment. With a staggering number of over 230 million people affected by the Covid-19 virus and the death toll approaching 5 million worldwide, the human population continues to suffer a major loss.⁵ On the economic side, the World Bank reported 97 million people pushed into poverty in 2020 and the International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates 205 million people will be unemployed by 2022.⁶ School closures and distance learning are straining education systems in developing countries with the Human Development Report Office (HDRO) reporting the out of school rate jumping roughly 60% in low human development countries and roughly 67% in medium human development countries since the start of the pandemic.⁷

The Covid-19 pandemic is also affecting environments around the world, though not always in a negative manner. The biggest threats to the environment from Covid-19 trace primarily to management of the waste produced from treating patients. During the start of the lockdown Wuhan, China produced an estimated 240 metric tons of medical waste each day and the USA reported a significant increase in trash due to the domestic use of PPE such as face masks.⁸ The lockdown caused by the pandemic also saw more people ordering products from home increasing the use of packages and subsequently, the need for waste recycling. Waste recycling was restricted in many nations however, due to

⁵ UNDP, "Covid-19 Pandemic," 2021, <https://www.undp.org/coronavirus>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ HDRO, "Covid-19's Impact on Education," 2021, <https://data.undp.org/content/out-of-school-during-covid-19/>.

⁸ Tanjena Rume, and S M Didar-Ul Islam, "Environmental effects of COVID-19 pandemic and potential strategies of sustainability," *Heliyon* vol. 6,9 (2020): e04965, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7498239/>.

government worry over the spread of Covid in waste facilities.⁹ Finally, the amount of disinfectants used in roads, commercial areas, and residential areas saw a major increase since the start of the pandemic. The threat of pollution by using these disinfectants coupled with the discovery of Covid-19 in many wastewater treatment centers presents an unique challenge on how to effectively minimize spread of Covid-19 and pollution to the environment simultaneously.¹⁰

On the other hand, Covid-19 has shown the world that there is an opportunity to do better through its positive impacts on environments around the world. The UNEP reported a 5.4% drop in CO₂ emissions in 2020 and a slightly smaller drop in all GHG emissions for the year.¹¹ Much of this decrease in emissions is due to lack of travel during the beginning of the pandemic with a decrease in air travel having some of the most significant effects on reduced GHG emissions. Water pollution also saw a substantial decrease as a result of the pandemic lockdowns. With decreased tourism, industrial and agricultural water use, rivers such as the Ganga and Yamuna reached a significant level of purity while the Grand Canal of Italy turned clear and saw reappearances of several aquatic species.¹² These positive impacts on the environment show that environmental healing is possible with decreased human activity and that if we continue to work towards sustainable development, member states can prevent future damages to the global climate.

The Climate Crisis

While the Covid-19 pandemic presents an immediate crisis to the world, the climate crisis is one that has been happening for decades with increasingly harmful effects as the years go by. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports that the world is currently heading for a global temperature rise exceeding 3°C by the end of this century. This report also estimates a significant increase in severity and frequency of extreme weather events such as floods, droughts, wildfires, and hurricanes in the near future.¹³ As global temperature rises, it does not do so equally across the globe, resulting in large variations of temperatures through different regions of the world. These temperature variations increase the severity and frequency of extreme weather phenomena such as hurricanes. One example would be Madagascar, which has experienced 35 cyclones and floods, 5 severe droughts, 5 earthquakes and 6 epidemics

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ UNEP, “Emissions Gap Report 2021,” 2021.

¹² Tanjena Rume, and S M Didar-UI Islam, “Environmental effects of COVID-19 pandemic and potential strategies of sustainability,” *Heliyon* vol. 6,9 (2020): e04965, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7498239/>.

¹³ Masson-Delmotte, V., P. Zhai, A. Pirani, S.L. Connors, C. Péan, S. Berger, et al., “Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis. Contribution of Working Group I to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change,” 2021, IPCC, Cambridge University Press. In Press.

between 1990-2010.¹⁴ On the surface of the ocean, extreme temperatures result from 90% of global heat and 1/3rd of GHG emissions leading to warmer and more acidic waters affecting marine life and their ecosystems.¹⁵ In the Amazon rainforest, the first 9 months of 2020 saw a 13% increase in wildfires as compared to 2019 with similar trends in forests across the globe.¹⁶ These are just some of the many threats to the environment caused by a warming climate which delegates must consider when working towards reducing environmental impact.

There is no doubt the environment faces the brunt of the effects of climate change, however, nation states will face significant challenges such as resource loss, environmental driven displacement, infrastructure damage, economic crises, and new diseases. Sea ice loss in Greenland and Antarctica is slowly increasing sea levels, posing serious threats for low lying coastal areas as their populations face possible displacement when their homes are underwater.¹⁷ In addition, emerging diseases pose a serious threat to humanity as shown by the Covid-19 virus. The coronaviruses are zoonotic, meaning they are transmitted between animals and humans, and zoonotic diseases account for 75% of all emerging diseases.¹⁸ To prevent future outbreaks it is important we address the threats to ecosystems and wildlife.

An Opportunity for the Future

The future of the global environment may seem bleak in the face of the climate crisis, but there is still time for action. As we move forward in the Covid-19 pandemic, we must put sustainable development first. One way to focus on sustainable development is to develop and utilize cleaner forms of energy. From trying to reduce carbon emissions to producing materials with high rates of recycling and little waste byproduct, it is not that easy being green.¹⁹ Developing countries have often complained that protocols and initiatives put in place to reduce environmental degradation do little to benefit them; instead, they perpetuate inequality by limiting their capacity for economic growth because they are not allowed to industrialize as quickly — or as dirtily — as their western counterparts have done throughout time.

When examining how to address issues concerning sustainable consumption and production, economics plays a crucial role: nation-states and the corporations that call them home will see little incentive to spend capital and resources in order to improve their environmental standing unless there is some kind of net positive benefit for them to do so. For example, although the amount of carbon emissions related to energy

¹⁴ UNEP, “Climate Action Note,” 2021, <https://www.unep.org/explore-topics/climate-action/what-we-do/climate-action-note>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ UNEP, “‘Business as Usual’ Could Lead to Catastrophic Global Sea-level Rise, Says New Study,” Sep. 11, 2019, <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/>.

¹⁸ UNEP, “Zoonotic Diseases,” UNEP Factsheet, 2021.

¹⁹ Just ask Kermit the Frog.

production by nuclear energy is far lower than that of a coal- or gas-fired power plant,^{20,21} the cost per kilowatt-hour for such electricity is higher than that of a fossil fuel powered plant given certain economic conditions.²² Though this is but one example, it is an example of how high-cost, high-reward situations in environmental policy are not as readily accepted as ones with lower costs and dubious, if any reward.

However, as stated previously, emissions of greenhouse gasses from industrial activities have gotten the world into the predicament it faces now; encouraging countries to continue to emit such gasses will not solve the problem. One manner of addressing the problem can come from actionable policy. Consider, by way of example, the idea of implementing a Pigovian-type of tax²³ on emitters. By taxing emissions at a flat rate per ton, it incentivizes producers to find new, more environmentally friendly ways to produce their goods because the subsequent emissions reduction acts as a tax cut. In some instances, such as a carbon tax that was approved in Australia, this type of scheme is used as an intermediary before shifting to a full cap-and-trade mechanism. Australia's carbon tax, which was introduced during the summer of 2012, put a price of 23 AUD on every ton of carbon emitted; by 2015, the scheme was due to evolve into a full emissions trading scheme.²⁴ However, this indirect form of taxation is not always popular with consumers, who may face increased costs when purchasing goods produced by industries that produce large amounts of greenhouse gas emissions – a nonscientific poll conducted by the *Melbourne Herald Sun* showed nearly 82% of respondents were opposed to the introduction of a carbon tax in Australia, or with lawmakers who do not support government intervention in the market – Australia's tax passed in the lower house of parliament with 74 members of parliament in favor and 72 against.²⁵ However, following a general election, the tax was repealed in 2014 before fully coming online,²⁶ illustrating how changes in domestic governments can have unexpected impacts on environmental policies.

Gender effects

²⁰ National Renewable Energy Laboratory (U.S.), "Life cycle assessment harmonization results and findings," 21 July 2014, http://www.nrel.gov/analysis/sustain_ica_results.html.

²¹ U.S. Energy Information Administration, "How much carbon dioxide is produced per kilowatt-hour when generating electricity with fossil fuels?" 29 February 2016, <https://www.eia.gov/tools/faqs/faq.cfm?id=74&t=11>.

²² International Energy Agency and Nuclear Energy Agency, "Projected costs of generating electricity," 2015, <https://www.iea.org/Textbase/npsum/ElecCost2015SUM.pdf>.

²³ A Pigovian tax taxes negative externalities, or deleterious side effects of doing something positive, such as manufacturing products; in this instance, the emission of greenhouse gases such as CO₂ is considered a negative externality of production.

²⁴ "Carbon tax gets green light in Senate," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 November 2011, <http://www.smh.com.au/business/carbon-tax-gets-green-light-in-senate-20111108-1n4rp.html>.

²⁵ Hudson, Phillip and Matt Johnston, "Protesters disrupt Question Time after carbon bills pass lower house," *Melbourne Herald Sun*, 12 October 2011, <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/more-news/carbon-tax-bills-pass-lower-house-of-federal-parliament/story-fn7x8me2-1226164570957>.

²⁶ Department of the Environment and Energy (Australia), "Repealing the carbon tax," <https://www.environment.gov.au/climate-change/repealing-carbon-tax>.

An often-underreported aspect of dealing with effects of climate on society is the disproportionate impact that may befall women and girls. In developing countries where women and female-identifying persons are in charge of domestic jobs, like food preparation and cultivation, laundry and the like, environmental problems impacting their abilities to carry out those tasks can often have ripple effects that cause difficulty in other spheres as well. It is also worth noting that in societies where women are responsible for agriculture and water-gathering (among other domestic jobs), they often have a greater skill base and knowledge set with respect to a local area's environmental needs and concerns, thereby making them invaluable resources in the fight against environmental degradation. UN estimates suggest, depending on the region of the world being discussed, women are responsible for between roughly half and four-fifths of all food production in the developing world.²⁷ However, whether or not they are heard — or listened to — despite their oversized role in providing for communities often depends on how progressively a society views the role of women, and whether they are seen as equals to men or as subservient.²⁸

As a UN report bluntly states, "the threats of climate change are not gender-neutral."²⁹ Because of entrenched patriarchal structures in both developed and developing countries, women often do not have the same opportunities to be in leadership positions, either within their own households or at local, regional or national government levels, where policies can be enacted to address or mitigate the impact of climate change or other environmental trauma. Take, for instance, the example of deforestation. In much of the developing world, wood-burning stoves are still primary sources of heat both for food preparation and for keeping warm. As deforestation occurs and women & girls must travel farther afield to acquire this fuel, they are not able to spend as much time on other things, be they other domestic responsibilities or, especially for younger persons, educational endeavors.³⁰

Involving women in the processes both of mitigating the effects of and adapting to climate change is crucial to ensuring success in overcoming the challenges we face. A successful example of a multidisciplinary approach to addressing gender inclusivity and environmental issues is the Green Belt Movement (GBM), which originated in Kenya in 1977.³¹ Led by Wangari Maathai, the GBM sought not only to educate women on environmental issues and how they could affect eco-friendly changes in their daily lives,

²⁷ UN WomenWatch, "Fact sheet: women, gender equality and climate change," 2009, http://www.un.org/womenwatch/feature/climate_change/downloads/Women_and_Climate_Change_Factsheet.pdf.

²⁸ UNDP, "Gender and environment and energy," 2017, http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/ourwork/womenempowerment/focus_areas/women_and_environmentalchange.html.

²⁹ UN WomenWatch, "Women, gender equality and climate change," 2010, http://www.un.org/womenwatch/feature/climate_change/.

³⁰ —, "Fact sheet: women, gender equality and climate change," 2009.

³¹ The Green Belt Movement, "Our history," 2017, <http://www.greenbeltmovement.org/who-we-are/our-history>.

but also to liaise with governments, intergovernmental organizations and nongovernmental organizations to make sure women's voices were included in their deliberations and policymaking on environmental issues.³² The GBM promotes the replanting of trees to fight deforestation, recycling and reuse efforts in the developing world, more awareness of development on the surrounding environments, among other goals.

UNEP Action

The UNEP stands by the billions suffering due to the Covid-19 pandemic, but also stresses the duty of nations to build back better following the pandemic to increase resilience against future crises in its Covid-19 Response.³³ Developing short-term and long-term medical waste management solutions is the first part of the response plan as we move out of the pandemic. Education, research, and investment into different aspects of sustainable development is among the second part of the response plan. Better understanding of zoonotic diseases, raising awareness of the links between the environment and health, and supporting stronger commitments from nations under the Paris Accords are all essential in the future of the fight against climate change. The third part of the UNEP's Covid-19 response plan deals with creating new green jobs, transitioning towards clean energy, and incentivising nature-based and carbon-neutral strategies for the future. The final part of the UNEP's response plan deals with environmental governance. As the pandemic affects in-person meetings, the UNEP looks towards the virtual option to both reduce spread of the virus and environmental impact by reducing travel emissions.³⁴

Conclusion

Addressing the issues of climate change in light of the Covid-19 pandemic is a key focus of the UNEP going forward. The pandemic has shown the world that healing the environment is possible but it is important we don't lose the progress we have made going forward. Transitioning to cleaner energy initiatives, educating the public on the importance of the environment, researching zoonotic disease responses, and including women in the conversation are all essential to building a better future following the pandemic. With a globally united effort, nations can work to be on the right track towards the 2030 agenda as they recover from the socio-economic crisis brought upon by the Covid-19 pandemic. Through work like this, the international community and the UN System can ensure a more effective response to these issues, thereby improving living conditions for countless generations to come.

Guiding questions

³² Ibid.

³³ UNEP, "Working with the Environment to Protect People: UNEP's COVID-19 Response," 2021.

³⁴ Ibid.

Resolutions and Related Documents:

United Nations General Assembly resolution 74/115, (A/RES/74/115), “International cooperation on humanitarian assistance in the field of natural disasters, from relief to development”, December 16, 2019.

United Nations General Assembly resolution 73/230, (A/RES/73/230), “Effective global response to address the impacts of the El Niño phenomenon,” December 20, 2018.

United Nations General Assembly resolution 63/217, (A/RES/63/217), “Natural disasters and vulnerability,” February 18, 2009.