

Emissions Gap Report 2020 Frequently Asked Questions

Emissions Gap Report 2020 – what is it?

- An annual report from the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) on global progress on climate action.
- The ‘Emissions Gap’ is the gap between what we have pledged to do and what we need to do to keep global warming well below 2°C and pursue 1.5°C, as agreed to in the Paris Agreement on Climate Change
- Our global team of leading scientists look at different scenarios, including pledged commitments that countries made to reduce or minimize their emissions under the Paris Agreement. These pledges are known as nationally determined contributions, or NDCs.
- Every year, UNEP’s Emissions Gap Report looks at the projected volume of emissions in 2030 and what this implies for global temperatures by the end of the century.

What are the headlines?

- The year 2020 is on track to be one of the warmest on record, with wildfires, droughts, storms and glacier melt intensifying.
- Despite these growing warnings from nature, the world is still heading for a catastrophic temperature rise in excess of 3°C this century.
- This would make large parts of the planet uninhabitable and cause mass extinctions of species. The cost to protect our homes, cities, people from extreme weather will rapidly escalate, and no country will be immune.
- The 2020 Emissions Gap Report finds that a brief dip in carbon dioxide emissions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic will make no significant difference to long-term climate change.
- But hope lies in a green recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, which could help put the world close to the pathway to the 2°C target of the Paris Agreement – although more work would be required to reach the 1.5°C goal.
- Another hope lies in the growing number of countries announcing net-zero emission goals for around the middle of this century.
- Everybody – from governments to businesses to individual consumers – needs to work together to resolve a growing crisis that will dwarf the impacts of COVID-19 in both scale and longevity.

What's the bottom line?

- Every year for 11 years, this report has shown the gap between where greenhouse gas emissions are heading against where they should be. This gap is still not closing.
- In 2019, total greenhouse gas emissions, including land-use change, reached a new high of 59.1 gigatonnes of CO₂ equivalent (GtCO₂e).
- To have a likely chance of hitting the 2°C target, emissions need to be 41 GtCO₂e in 2030. For the 1.5°C target, the figure is 25 GtCO₂e.
- Based on policies in place pre-COVID, 2030 emissions are predicted to reach 59 GtCO₂e, implying a 3.5°C temperature rise this century.
- Even if all unconditional NDCs were fully implemented, emissions are predicted to reach 56 GtCO₂e in 2030, implying a 3.2°C increase this century.
- Carbon dioxide emissions are predicted to fall up to 7 per cent in 2020 as result of the pandemic. However, long-term, this dip means only a 0.01°C reduction of global warming by 2050.
- The levels of ambition in the Paris Agreement must be roughly tripled for the 2°C pathway and increased at least fivefold for the 1.5°C pathway.

What can we do to catch up?

- By using a green pandemic recovery to get a head start, and pushing on with real systemic change, planned and tracked through stronger NDCs and net-zero commitments, we could hit the 2°C target of the Paris Agreement and be in with a fighting chance of attaining the 1.5°C goal.
- The report finds that a green pandemic recovery could cut up to 25 per cent off the emissions we would expect to see in 2030 based on policies in place before COVID-19.
- A green recovery could put emissions in 2030 at 44 GtCO₂e – within the range of emissions that give a 66 per cent chance of holding temperatures to below 2°C.
- This far outstrips emissions savings that would be delivered under unconditional NDCs, although more will be needed to achieve the 1.5°C goal.
- Measures to prioritize under a green recovery include:
 - direct support for zero-emissions technologies and infrastructure,
 - reducing fossil fuel subsidies,
 - backing nature-based solutions – including large-scale landscape restoration and reforestation during the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration,
 - investing in actions to enable lower-carbon consumption – such as replacing domestic short haul flights with rail, incentives and infrastructure to enable cycling and car-sharing and policies to reduce food waste.
- A growing number of countries have committed to net-zero emissions goals by mid-century, including major players in the G20 – which collectively account for over three quarters of all greenhouse gas emissions.
- At the time of report completion, 126 countries – covering 51 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions – had adopted, announced or were considering net-zero goals.
- The net-zero goals announced, if taken in isolation, would reduce the expected global temperature rise this century to around 2.6-2.7°C if implemented.

- However, to remain feasible and credible, these commitments must be urgently translated into strong near-term policies and action and reflected in NDCs.

Are governments doing enough?

- No. So far, the opening for using recovery measures to accelerate a green transition has largely been missed.
- Around one-quarter of G20 members have dedicated shares of their spending, up to 3 per cent of GDP, explicitly to low-carbon measures.
- For most, however, spending has been predominantly high carbon, implying higher emissions, or neutral, having no discernible effects on emissions.
- Unless this is reversed, the Paris Agreement goals will slip further out of reach.

Does the report tell us anything else about what we can do to limit climate change?

- Yes. Each year the report does a deep dive into specific sectors. This year it looks at the potential of the shipping and aviation sectors and lifestyle change to cut emissions.
- **The shipping and aviation sector accounts for 5 per cent of global emissions and growing.**
 - If current trends continue, combined international emissions from shipping and aviation will likely consume between 60 and 220 per cent of allowable CO₂ emissions by 2050 under 1.5°C scenarios.
 - Improvements in technology and operations can improve the fuel efficiency of transport, but projected increases in demand mean this will not result in decarbonization and absolute reductions of CO₂.
 - Both sectors need to combine energy efficiency with a rapid transition away from fossil fuel. Additional policies are required to drive changes in technology, operations, fuel use and demand.
- **Stronger action must include facilitating, encouraging and mandating changes in consumption behaviour by the private sector and individuals**
 - Around two-thirds of global emissions are linked to private households, when using consumption-based accounting. The mobility, residential and food sectors each contribute about 20 per cent of lifestyle emissions.
 - The combined emissions of the richest one per cent of the global population account for more than twice the poorest 50 per cent. The elite will need to reduce their footprint by a factor of at least 30 to stay in line with the Paris Agreement targets.
 - Governments must enable and encourage consumers to avoid high-carbon consumption.

The three things to remember:

- The Emissions Gap Report 2020 shows that we are still far behind on climate action, but that a green pandemic recovery can put the world back on track.
- Countries must invest recovery funds in a way that supports social and economic, recovery by backing a healthy climate and environment, turn net-zero commitments into concrete and urgent action, and tie everything together in updated NDCs.

- If countries heed the warning, we can get on track for the 2°C target of the Paris Agreement and be in with a fighting chance of attaining the 1.5°C goal.

Do you know what your country's commitments are? Do you know which actions are the biggest opportunities for your country to take?

Read the report, be informed, and urge those with decision-making powers to act now.