

On the 24th of June, the Representative Office of the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) in Central Asia, its regional analytical platform CABAR.asia and the OSCE Academy in Bishkek organized an international online discussion, devoted to “Implications of COVID-19 on Climate Change”.



The discussion on “Implications of COVID-19 on Climate Change” brought together experts and academics from different countries. How has the coronavirus impacted on climate change? How will the economies catch up with less effect on the environment? These are the questions the experts tried to answer during the event.

Chair of the event - Dr. Mirza Sadaqat Huda, the OSCE Academy’s Postdoc Research fellow opened the discussion and gave the floor to the first speaker Dr. Rahat Sabyrbekov, who is also the OSCE Academy’s Postdoc Research fellow.

*Giving the perspective of the pandemic and green recovery, **Rahat Sabyrbekov** stressed on three things.*



Rahat Sabyrbekov

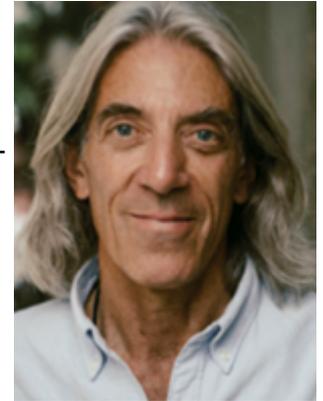
“First, the impact of COVID-19 on global emissions. The spread of the virus has led to global economic shutdowns and resulted in unprecedented fall in CO2 emissions. It is considered to be the largest fall of emissions after the World War II. Hence, there are some optimistic views about this decrease, but what we see is that the emissions are going to grow up again. While we witnessed many benefits of the shutdown in the form of cleaner air and restoration of biodiversity, the economies are being re-opened to provide jobs and incomes. Now there are discussions on how to re-open the economies and how we can remain low carbon emission levels? There is no global consensus on this, but it is important to see that COVID-19 has shown that the cutting global emissions swiftly is possible.

Second, economic policies and climate change in pandemic era. Many governments try to maintain the momentum and implement so-called “Green Recovery” plans, which lay green foundations for re-opening of economies. Many see the current situation as the golden opportunity to combat the climate change. For example, the EU has announced 1 billion euro Green Recovery Package. Most likely, the Green Recovery will create more jobs. But there is another opposing way how the governments see the recovery. For example, the US, Mexico, South Africa have relaxed environmental regulations due to the pandemic to revive the economies.

Third, can green recovery policies in post-COVID-19 period stop climate change? It may possibly slow down if right policies are implemented. As some experts claim, there are needed clean physical infrastructure, building efficiency retrofits, investment in education and training, natural capital investment etc. Many claim, that there are some trade-offs in this situation. If in the beginning there were trade-offs between lives and economy, now it is shifting to trade-offs between economy and climate. But I think that there are no questions on this, these trade-offs between economies, human health and environment (at least in a long-run) are not real”.

The second speaker, Dr. Troy Sternberg, British Academy Post-doc Research fellow in the School of Geography, Oxford University, gave an overview of how the governments and the societies need to respond to the challenges caused by COVID-19 and gave an overview on sustainability of Chinese investment in Kyrgyzstan.

“We came to the time when the role of government changes to protect the lives and health of people. Since it is about survival, we start to reexamine the social contract, the bargains between people and the government under which we live. I think it creates an opportunity to re-examine the structures we have, set up in how we work and what we expect of each other (the government and people). The chance to rethink and reimagine how society works led me in the Kyrgyz contest, to think of Chinese and other foreign investments, considering the Belt and Road Initiative, many mines within the country etc.



Dr. Troy Sternberg

Coming to the mining, as we see there were some problems between the community and the mines. At that time one of the main problems were about the environment and jobs. The environmental issues in that area are not going to be the same issue as before. This was a local struggle, but now the coronavirus gives us the same impact around the country. With the borders closed, what is happening in Central Asia and Mongolia- lots of Chinese workers have not come back to the countries.

So, I really think that this is the time in Kyrgyzstan just to step back and see what type of business investment, engagement and infrastructure people want. This is the time to let the government know how you can protect your environment in many good laws. One of the issues I see is how they are enforced. So, here we have time when interaction and deal between citizens and government has shifted. If mining etc. changes because of COVID-19, it can be used as an opportunity to restart the different forms for more sustainable way, which suits Kyrgyzstan. Particularly in the countryside. There are customary ways to live sustainably in Kyrgyzstan. Maybe the foreign investment and foreign direction happened in Kyrgyzstan many times, can be changed as the result of COVID era, with act, with more sustainable use of environment. COVID can be an opportunity to improve investment and environmental interaction in Kyrgyzstan”.

Another speech was given to Timur Idrisov, the Senior Advisor at the Ecological Organization “Little Earth” in Tajikistan.



Timur Idrisov

Timur Idrisov was short and clear on his points: “The pandemic created a positive illusion by becoming better air quality in some parts of the world. Indeed, the vehicle and air traffic reduction from January-April was due to the lockdowns. Moreover, the carbon emission could decline between 4,4-8% by the end of this year. However, people should not believe that COVID-19 would somehow solve climate change, especially in the long-term run. Despite the reduction of CO₂ [carbon dioxide], it will not affect the general situation because emissions that have already accumulated in the atmosphere. Therefore, we need an urgent fundamental shift and they are not happening yet. It is vice versa the governments are protecting the oil companies. Instead of going from one crisis to another, we must build more sustainable system and it is green recovery: calling for carbon neutrality; biodiversity/ecosystem restoration; waste and circular economy; renewable and energy efficiency; sustainable agriculture; sustainable transport/mobility; and focusing on long term solutions”.

The last floor for the presentation was given to Dr. Farkhod Aminjonov, founder and expert on energy security in the Central Asian Institute for Strategic Studies in Kazakhstan. Aminjonov is an Assistant professor in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Zayed University.

It takes time to conduct the proper analyses about the impact of COVID-19 on the environment. Although it is important to draw some colorations within these two topics, [pandemic and climate change]. Dr. Aminjonov focused on how the lockdowns shape or reshaped the economic policies and social behavior and how it has a linkage with climate change in the Central Asian region.

Unfortunately, the previous crisis has failed to adopt sustainable economies and the reduction of CO₂ emissions in the current pandemic [Coronavirus] will be temporary. Eventually, there will be a rise in greenhouse emissions in the world. The classic example of the 2008 financial crisis



Dr. Farkhod Aminjonov

(when carbon dioxide declined to 1.4%), the jump of CO₂ was up to 6% in 2010. Regarding Central Asia, it would be naïve to believe that the government would immediately transform into a greener economy and gave up on drivers of their economy (e.g oil, gas, coal). However, with the proper agenda, clearly highlighted problems to economic policies and environment can help to understand the importance of sustainable development. He mentioned four important points about the impact of COVID-19 in Central Asia.

1. The COVID-19 threatens the local efforts to meet climate commitments due to the loss of economy during the lockdown. For instance, Kazakhstan who signed the Paris agreement and has a goal to reduce 25% of its CO₂ emissions has been facing economic difficulty. Dropping prices in oil and gas is a barrier to reach green economy initiatives. Since the government should invest its 2% GDP and now it is a question does the country want to perceive it.
2. Renewable energy is not the energy of the future anymore; it is the energy of the present. We [Central Asia] have to make a transition to clean energy; however, it is very expensive. In the region, the renewable energies are 4-5 times higher and the question can we afford it? The investment is up to USD 90 billion (in Kazakhstan) and the pandemic which is affecting the revenues of the CA countries causing a major risk to make the transition to renewable energy.
3. Disaster risk management. International Organization for migration made a study on transboundary water objects in central Asia and the conclusion was that the countries in the region are incapable of making pro-active measures on disaster risk management. There are reactive measures that the government applies during the crisis (such as floods, breaking dams, landslides). Although pro-active measures could save money and the lives of the citizens. Furthermore, COVID-19 has challenged the governments' reaction to the mechanism and reveal limitations overly centralized the decision-making process. Every single actor should take the efforts: government, private sectors, citizens, and households.
4. Luckily, the virus spread in the region was early spring and imagine if it would be in the winter. Due to the fact, that almost all residential areas of Central Asian countries use coal to warm their houses. In addition, people would be forced to sit at home and it was causing more consumption of the coal would affect the environment and their health.

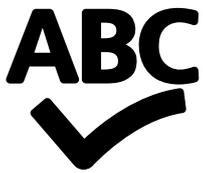
Next on the agenda was a session of diverse and informative questions and answers.

Numerous event participants from various fields of activity and countries could interact with speakers by asking urgent questions related to the coronavirus pandemic, climate change, and the further development of Central Asia.

IWPR Central Asia Regional Director **Abakhon Sultonnazarov** also attended the meeting. After an interesting Q&A session moderator of the event **Mirza Sadaqat Huda** concluded the expert meeting, thanking all the participants, experts, and organizers for taking part in the online discussion.

The IWPR Representative Office in Central Asia thanks and acknowledges the OSCE Academy in Bishkek’s help in the organization of the event. Joint events with international partners and experts from the Central Asian region in order to promote stability of peace and harmony in the region.

Watch the full video recording of the expert online meeting:



If you have found a spelling error, please, notify us by selecting that text and pressing *Ctrl+Enter*.