**Why don’t we treat the climate crisis with the same urgency as coronavirus?**

It is a global emergency that has already killed on a mass scale and threatens to send millions more to early graves. As its effects spread, it could destabilise entire economies and overwhelm poorer countries lacking resources and infrastructure. But this is the climate crisis, not the coronavirus. Governments are not assembling emergency national plans and you’re not getting push notifications transmitted to your phone breathlessly alerting you to dramatic twists and developments from South Korea to Italy.

More than 3,000 people have succumbed to coronavirus yet, according to the World Health Organization, air pollution alone – just one aspect of our central planetary crisis – kills seven million people every year. There have been no Cobra meetings for the climate crisis, no sombre prime ministerial statements detailing the emergency action being taken to reassure the public. In time, we’ll overcome any coronavirus pandemic. With the climate crisis, we are already out of time, and are now left mitigating the inevitably disastrous consequences hurtling towards us.

While coronavirus is understandably treated as an imminent danger, the climate crisis is still presented as an abstraction whose consequences are decades away. Unlike an illness, it is harder to visualise how climate breakdown will affect us each as individuals. Perhaps when unprecedented wildfires engulfed parts of the Arctic last summer there could have been an urgent conversation about how the climate crisis was fuelling extreme weather, yet there wasn’t. In 2018, more than 60 million people suffered the consequences of extreme weather and climate change, including more than 1,600 who perished in Europe, Japan and the US because of heatwaves and wildfires. Mozambique, Malawi and Zimbabwe were devastated by cyclone Idai, while hurricanes Florence and Michael inflicted $24bn (£18.7bn) worth of damage on the US economy, according to the World Meteorological Organization.

Pandemics and the climate crisis may go hand in hand, too: research suggests that changing weather patterns may drive species to higher altitudes, potentially putting them in contact with diseases for which they have little immunity. “It’s strange when people see the climate crisis as being in the future, compared to coronavirus, which we’re facing now,” says Friends of the Earth’s co-executive director, Miriam Turner. “It might be something that feels far away when sitting in an office in central London, but the emergency of the climate crisis is being felt by hundreds of millions already.”

Imagine, then, that we felt the same sense of emergency about the climate crisis as we do about coronavirus. What action would we take? As the New Economic Foundation’s Alfie Stirling points out, a strict demarcation between the two crises in unwise. After all, coronavirus may trigger a global slowdown: the economic measures in response to this should be linked to solving the climate crisis. “What tends to happen in a recession is policy-makers panic about what the low-lying fruits are; it’s all supply chains and sticking plasters,” he tells me. During the 2008 crash, for example, there was an immediate cut in VAT and interest rates, but investment spending wasn’t increased fast enough, and was then slashed in the name of austerity. According to NEF research, if the coalition government had funded additional zero-carbon infrastructure, it would not only have boosted the economy but could have reduced residential emissions by 30%. This time round, there’s little room to cut already low interest rates or boost quantitative easing; green fiscal policy must be the priority.

There is a key difference between coronavirus and climate crisis, of course, and it is shame. “We didn’t know coronavirus was coming,” says Stirling. “We’ve known the climate crisis was on the cards for 30 or 40 years.” And yet – despite being inadequately prepared because of an underfunded, under-resourced healthcare system – the government can swiftly announce an emergency pandemic plan.

Coronavirus poses many challenges and threats, but few opportunities. A judicious response to global heating would provide affordable transport, well-insulated homes, skilled green jobs and clean air. Urgent action to prevent a pandemic is of course necessary and pressing. But the climate crisis represents a far graver and deadlier existential threat, and yet the same sense of urgency is absent. Coronavirus shows it can be done – but it needs determination and willpower, which, when it comes to the future of our planet, are desperately lacking.

1. What does the author say is the key difference between the coronavirus crisis and the climate crisis?
2. Why does Miriam Turner say we should see the coronavirus and the climate crisis as similar?
3. Why does Alfie Stirling say the coronavirus and the climate crisis are connected?