

# “It’s Mind Blowing” – Governments support fossil fuels in face of climate destruction

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Climate change, clean energy, energy poverty, global health inequities, policy action

## SPEAKERS

Marina Romanello, Maggie Fox

### **Maggie Fox** 00:00

Hello and welcome to One World, One Health where we chat with people working to solve the biggest problems facing our world. I am Maggie Fox. This podcast is brought to you by the One Health Trust with bite-sized insights into ways to help address challenges, such as infectious diseases, climate change, and pollution. We take a One Health approach that recognizes that we are all in this together and everything on this planet — the animals, plants, and people, and the climate and environment — are all linked.

A new report on climate change is more than a little frightening. It says people in every country around the world have not just (put) their health but their very survival at risk because of climate change. The report from The Lancet Countdown on health and climate change finds extreme drought affected 48 percent of the world's land area. Heat waves, extreme colds, and droughts are killing people directly and putting more people at risk of famine. Countries have the money to cut emissions to the equivalent of zero, but governments and companies are instead spending trillions of dollars on fossil fuel subsidies and investments that are making climate change worse.

The report says — the world's largest oil and gas companies have increased their projected fossil fuel production levels since last year, even though 2023 was the hottest year on record, and 2024 will probably end up being even hotter.

In this episode of One World, One Health, we're chatting with Dr. Marina Romanello, Executive Director of The Lancet Countdown: Tracking Progress on Health and Climate Change, and a climate change and health researcher at University College London. She says, “Investment in clean energy can save both lives and economies if the world just get behind it.” Marina, thank you so much for joining us.

### **Marina Romanello** 01:45

Thank you so much, Maggie, it's great to be here with you. Thank you for the invitation.

**Maggie Fox** 01:50

Marina, this is a startling set of reports. Can you tell us just a little bit about what you found?

**Marina Romanello** 01:57

The 2024 report of The Lancet Countdown is the latest in a series of reports that the Lancet Countdown has been publishing since 2017 with indicated data. In this latest report, basically what we're finding is the most concerning findings in 8 years of monitoring the links between health and climate change. It's a year in which we see two-thirds of all of the indicators in which we're monitoring the hazards, the exposures, and the impacts of climate change on health, have reached concerning new record highs in the latest year of data showing that climate change is now threatening the health and the lives of people all around the world at record high levels.

**Maggie Fox** 02:37

You've been doing this, as you say, for years, but were you surprised at how bad things have gotten?

**Marina Romanello** 02:43

Well, not exactly surprising, I wouldn't say, because we've been monitoring this for many years now, and we've been sounding the alarm year after year, our reports have become graver and graver as time went by.

So, I couldn't say it's a surprise particularly, when you at least see insufficient action being taken by world leaders globally. But if not surprising, it's (definitely) very concerning, and the findings that we had (while) writing the report were a really painful process because the findings were so extreme, in this case, both in terms of the impacts of climate change, but also in terms of exposing how we keep on investing in fossil fuels, we keep on financing fossil fuel expansion despite there's very clear harms to people's health.

**Maggie Fox** 03:27

It's stunning to see how many governments are still pouring money into fossil fuels, they're not listening.

**Marina Romanello** 03:35

I know it's mind-blowing. We pull our hair out every year. Look, one of the findings that shocked us the most this year is the enormous volume of public finance that still gets poured into subsidizing fossil fuels, which makes them more accessible and affordable. That has had to do with the fact that we have delayed so long the transition to healthy, clean renewable energy, which today is a lot cheaper than fossil fuels. And as a result, we have kept countries very dependent on fossil fuels. Our energy grids are hugely dependent on fossil fuels. And with the spike in fossil fuel prices that followed the war in Ukraine and the global energy crisis, what that has meant is that countries globally had to pour enormous amounts of funding to keep energy affordable. So that's the cost of not having transitioned. It's weighing down our governments and 1.4 trillion US dollars as a net total were allocated to subsidizing fossil fuels in 2020 to 1.4 trillion. It's an enormous amount. It's a record high.

**Maggie Fox** 04:41

So, it creates this impression that alternative energy is too expensive and that fossil fuels are still cheap when the precise opposite is true.

**Marina Romanello** 04:50

Exactly. It makes fossil fuels artificially cheap but at a huge cost to our finances. Imagine what we could do if that 1.4 trillion US Dollars allocated globally to net fossil fuel subsidies were instead redirected to promoting a healthy future, strengthening our global health systems, to providing the means for countries to deliver that just transition to a healthy low carbon future. It's less than countries were asking for in the last cop to support their transition and some that remained undelivered and uncommitted to.

**Maggie Fox** 05:23

Now, the president-elect of the United States says he is going to promote fossil fuel use even more! The Project 2025, the conservative blueprint for a new Republican administration, for this one says outright — the plan is to move back to the use of fossil fuels.

**Marina Romanello** 05:43

Right! And we see that in many countries, look, I'm Argentinian, my country is doing the same and that is hugely concerning because fossil fuels have become very profitable. With the high prices, they became very profitable. What we have seen is that oil and gas companies have expanded their oil and gas production plans in the last year alone because of that very profitable market. What this means is that we continue to invest and expand a sector of the economy that has no place in a healthy future.

We have legally binding commitments to reach net zero, to reach the goals of The Paris Agreement( a legally binding international treaty on climate change) and to enable a safer future that would avoid an enormous amount of economic and human losses, and that we know is cost-effective, it makes economic sense to avoid that enormous amount of damages, and still, we are investing in a sector of the economy that is undermining our future, that is costing our economies, is putting our survival at risk, and that is a dead sector in the end.

**Maggie Fox** 06:44

Now the health threats are very specific, it's not some vague threat. You've outlined some very specific threats — people are already dying, and you predict that more are going to die as a direct result of climate change?

**Marina Romanello** 06:58

Yes sadly! We've been monitoring this year as a result of the lagging action, because of the persistently growing temperatures and emissions. We're seeing that today; people are facing record threats from climate change. Just to give you some examples of what this looks like, we estimate that heat-related mortality has increased by almost 170 percent since the 90s, much more than twice what would have

been expected without temperature increase, and obviously, co-related deaths still exceed heat-related deaths, but the morbidity, the disease associated with heat exposure, is growing.

This is also affecting our economies. We've seen over 800 billion US dollars in economic losses because of the reduced labor capacity because of heat exposure — because workers cannot keep on working when temperatures are so high. We see also the impacts in terms of adverse birth outcomes, direct impacts on people's health through heat stress, heat stroke, and even to the extent that exercising outdoors, children playing outdoors, and enjoying the outdoors, are becoming impossible in many parts of the world, so the impacts are very deep for the physical and the mental health and the mental well-being.

We're also seeing the spread of infectious diseases that come with climate change. We saw an extreme outbreak of dengue last year — being the year in which we saw most dengue cases historically, and that comes hand in hand with a situation in which the climate is becoming so much more suitable for the transmission of dengue, a lethal disease. To give you an idea, the environmental suitability for the transmission of dengue by the vector that is most widespread in Europe has increased by almost 50 percent since the 1950s.

So, these impacts are weighing down our health systems, are affecting our health, allowing extra pressure also to our public health delivery, and ultimately affecting not only our health, and our survival, but also our economy, which many governments are rightly so worried about.

We're seeing it, for example, here in Buenos Aires, where I'm at, where I'm from, we've seen one of the worst dengue outbreaks in history. It's not the worst Dengue outbreak in history, last year was attached to a particularly hot spring and uncontrollable transmission of the disease, and that will become more and more frequent in new parts of the world. We can expect to see local transmission of dengue creeping up to northern latitudes, starting to see local transmission in places like Europe, in the States, and this is of enormous public health concern.

**Maggie Fox** 09:27

Is it too late already, Marina?

**Marina Romanello** 09:31

We'll it depends too late for what? — to avoid the impacts that we've already seen? Yes, it's too late! To avoid the deaths that have already happened because of climate change that we could have avoided? Yes, it's too late! For those people who have lost their lives due to extreme weather events that were made more intense, and more severe by climate change to them. It's definitely too late!  
Is it too late to act? Absolutely not!

We can still reduce our emissions to keep within our means today temperatures are as low as possible. Each fraction of the degree of temperature increases, each kilogram of carbon dioxide that we keep on pumping into our atmosphere makes the future so much more dangerous to us. So, we can still avoid

the most catastrophic outcomes, the most dangerous future, and keep the climate within limits that we can still adapt to that we can still protect ourselves from, and in the meantime, save millions and millions of lives every year. So, it's not too late to act.

**Maggie Fox** 10:29

So, there is some hope!

**Marina Romanello** 10:31

Look, despite all the bad news and even though emissions, particularly from energy and from the agricultural sector, keep on growing, we do see some very encouraging signs that we must build on and we must strengthen, but there are some incipient signs of improvement.

A clear area is — the adoption of renewable energies which is growing a lot more rapidly than we had forecasted a few years back, gives us a lot of hope that we might eventually displace the very harmful fossil fuels. We're seeing employment in the renewable energy sector growing, giving people healthier jobs, and more opportunities for better livelihoods. We're also seeing a lot of opportunities in terms of what countries are doing to protect people from climate change. We're seeing more and more health systems around the world starting to act, to assess climate risks and respond to them, preparing plans for reducing the impacts of climate change.

Just to give you one example of one of the signs that we find so encouraging, we've seen that because of action that has been taken to reduce air pollution coming from coal, coal, air pollution-related deaths have decreased by about 7 percent since the Paris Agreement entered into force since 2016, which shows us that we can save millions of lives every year, if we were to phase out fossil fuels and clean up our air in the process, particularly in places that are so highly polluted, like cities where we keep on burning fossil fuels through our road transport, etc.

**Maggie Fox** 11:58

What can an individual do?

**Marina Romanello** 12:00

The first thing is to be very mindful of the resources that we use. To be very mindful about optimizing our energy use, and improving our energy efficiency, so that we don't keep on adding pressure to our energy grids that are still very dependent on fossil fuels, that will also save us money, and our power systems and allow us to reduce energy poverty. So that's the first thing that we can do. Obviously if we can afford it, transitioning to renewable energy in our homes, and electric vehicles when we do not have access or cannot use public transport.

But just keeping in mind that walking, cycling, active travel and public transport use can be the most effective way of reducing our transport emissions can also keep us more active. That is hugely good for our health. It can allow us to have more physical activity and help us enjoy the outdoors a lot more; we can have healthier diets.

Unhealthy diets account for about 11 million deaths every year, that largely can be avoided by transitioning to healthier carbon diets that are a lot more focused on plant-based foods and reduce the overconsumption of red meat, of dairy that also contribute a lot to climate change and greenhouse gas emissions, and obviously be very mindful of our choices in terms of who represents us and what we demand from them. Ensure that we are demanding to our policymakers and encouraging them to take action to protect our economy, to ensure sustainable economies, to ensure a healthy future, and to ensure that we are protected from the hazards of climate change which are upon us.

**Maggie Fox** 13:32

And of course, this is all very unfair. Rich countries are polluting, and the people who are most impacted can't do much at all to affect the process.

**Marina Romanello** 13:43

By and large, the countries that contributed the least to climate change are the ones that today are being disproportionately affected, either because of where they're placed in the world or because they have the least means to protect themselves and respond to climate change impacts. One thing that we see that is very worrying is that even in the way that we are responding to what we call mitigation, that is the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, that is starting to contribute to increasing global health inequities because we're not going down the path of a just transition.

So we see things, for example, like the most wealthy countries taking the lead in the adoption of clean renewable energies, whereas low middle-income countries, the poorest countries, are lagging in the capacity to adopt these technologies that remain inaccessible, that is still by and large, being developed in high-income countries, and as a result, they are still exposed to the harms of energy poverty. We see, for example, that in the low human development index countries, the most vulnerable countries, over 90 percent of the energy people use in their homes still comes from the burning of biomass, a very unsustainable, very polluting, and very unreliable source of fuel. So that's a symptom of energy poverty, of not having access to the energy you need to hold healthy lives, to learn, to study, to work. Right?

So giving access to clean renewable energies, or guaranteeing that they can access clean renewable energies in the places that today suffer energy poverty would be enormously beneficial for development, enormous beneficial for just transition, and yet those technologies and by and large being concentrated in high-income countries that can now enjoy the benefits of cleaner air, of cheaper energy and of the transition to what will be the economy of the future, leaving the most vulnerable countries behind.

So when we talk about just climate action, a just transition is not just about who is responsible for reducing their emissions, but also, how are we going to guarantee that we don't leave the most vulnerable countries behind and that we can all go down this path of healthier sustainable development, together providing with enormous health co-benefits that come with climate action, also to the countries that are today lagging in the capacity to adopt these technologies.

**Maggie Fox** 15:53

Marina, this is eye-opening. Thank you for taking the time to join us.

**Marina Romanello** 15:58

Thank you so much, Maggie, thank you for having me, and I hope it has opened some eyes as well to other people engaged in the topic.

**Maggie Fox** 16:06

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