POLICY BRIEF

Recovery Through Reform:

Assessing the climate compatibility of Canada's COVID-19 response in 2020

Vanessa Corkal
Estan Beedell

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This brief is one of three International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) policy briefs in its Recovery Through Reform series, which assesses how efforts to achieve a green recovery from COVID-19 in Canada rely on—and can contribute to—fossil fuel subsidy reform.

1.0 Introduction

The economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have prompted international calls for a green recovery that foregrounds equity along with ambition to deal with the climate and biodiversity crises. In his State of the Planet speech in December 2020, UN Secretary-General António Guterres was straightforward in his remarks: "The state of the planet is broken… nature needs a bailout" (United Nations, 2020).

Governments around the world are leveraging unprecedented amounts of capital to respond to the pandemic and bailing out struggling industries. Trends on energy-related spending indicate that despite the green push, the world's largest economies have still favoured fossil energy over clean energy: as of the end of December 2020, 53% of all public money committed to energy-intensive sectors, including buildings and transportation, was for fossil energy (Energy Policy Tracker [EPT], 2020).

This brief focuses on 2020 fiscal commitments by the Canadian federal government in key energy-related sectors in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, drawing on data from the Energy Policy Tracker.[1] We specifically examine commitments for electric vehicles,

[1] See www.energypolicytracker.org.

public transit, building retrofits, hydrogen, and fossil fuels. These sectors provide a snapshot of Canada's spending trends to illustrate how climate compatible the federal response has been so far. Trends in Canada are then compared to flagship policies in key jurisdictions with recent progressive climate policy announcements, including France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. The brief ends with broad recommendations on how Canada can better align its recovery funding with climate action and fossil fuel subsidy reform through Budget 2021 and beyond.

2.0 Canada's Fiscal Commitments for Energy So Far

The EPT, an effort by multiple international research institutions, documents publicly available data on government money commitments for energy production and consumption, including in the buildings and transportation sectors (EPT, 2020).[2] In classifying government spending, the EPT divides measures into "fossil," "clean," and "other" energy.[3] As the EPT covers both federal and provincial investments, this brief hones in on federal policy trends. EPT data tells us that from March to December 2020, the federal government had committed at least CAD 14.7 billion to "clean" energy, compared to CAD 3.6 billion for "fossil" energy and CAD 4.7 billion for "other" energy.[4] **However, less transparent and available data is available for "fossil energy" commitments in Canada, making it significantly harder to track.** Later, in 2021, Canada announced a further CAD 14.9 billion for public transit, rural mobility, and active transportation projects (Infrastructure Canada, 2021).

2.1 Climate-Related Spending

At first glance, the ratio between clean and fossil energy commitments by the federal government appears encouraging. The CAD 14.7 billion figure in 2020 reflects a number of major climate-related announcements made by the federal government in fall 2020. These include the updated federal climate plan, *A Healthy Environment and a Healthy Economy,* which covers around CAD 15 billion in total spending across all sectors (Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2020). Flagship energy-related announcements so far have included:

- CAD 2.6 billion for a residential retrofit and energy-efficiency program and CAD 1.5 billion for green and inclusive community building retrofits and builds as part of the new climate plan (Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2020)

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[2] The EPT does not track investments to other sectors, such as agriculture and nature and conservation.

[3] "Fossil" refers to policies that support consumption and production of fossil fuels. "Clean" refers to policies that support transition from fossil fuels and production or consumption of energy that is low carbon and has low environmental impacts. "Other" refers to policies that encompass multiple energy types, policies for nuclear, biofuels, or other energy types outside the two main categories (EPT, 2020).

[4] EPT data in this brief reflect figures publicly available on the EPT website to December 31, 2020, using data captured on January 4, 2020. Policies on the EPT are "classified according to different criteria. One of the key criteria is a policy's environmental profile that depends on 1) which energy types it benefits, and 2) whether it has any environmental conditionality attached. Throughout the Tracker, information is split across five categories: "fossil unconditional"; "fossil conditional"; "clean unconditional"; "clean conditional", and "other energy"" (EPT, 2020). For details on the methodology, see https://www.energypolicytracker.org/methodology/.

- Approximately CAD 1.8 billion for emergency support for public transit under the Safe Restart Agreement (Office of the Prime Minister, 2020), in addition to CAD 14.9 billion for longer-term infrastructure investments announced in 2021 (Infrastructure Canada, 2021)
- CAD 2.5 billion for clean power and electricity, CAD 2 billion for large-scale building retrofits, and CAD 1.5 billion for zero-emission buses and charging infrastructure through the Canada Infrastructure Bank (Canada Infrastructure Bank, 2020)

These figures are promising announcements by the federal government and will be valuable components of Canada's climate action and economic recovery.

2.2 Fossil Spending and Support

Unfortunately, the totals from the EPT tell only part of the story. EPT data (as of the end of 2020) currently does not consider funds provided through the public finance institutions Export Development Canada (EDC) and the Business Development Bank of Canada (BDC), both of which have been primary vehicles for the provision of credit support during the pandemic. This occurs primarily through the government's Business Credit Availability Program and Reserve-Based Lending for small and medium-sized oil and gas firms (BDC, 2020; EDC, 2020a, 2020b). Transparency regarding these institutions is low, so it is difficult to assess the total levels of support provided to fossil fuels and high-carbon sectors. However, analysis from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) found that EDC provided around CAD 1.2 billion in bonding support, loans, and credit insurance for the oil and gas sector to early December 2020 (Bakx, 2020). The aviation sector (including Air Canada, Porter Airlines, and Transat) has also received substantial support, but the government has not provided a bailout (EDC, 2020c; Rastello, 2020).

The EPT also identifies around CAD 4.7 billion in federal commitments as "other energy," representing energy-focused investments where it is not yet clear what type of energy announced funding measures will be directed to. This includes the CAD 3 billion Net Zero Accelerator program and the CAD 1.5 billion Low-Carbon and Zero-Emissions Fuels Fund announced as part of the new climate plan (Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2020), both of which could represent substantial fossil fuel subsidies if funds are directed to the fossil fuel sector. Depending on how these funds are allocated, the ratio between "fossil" and "clean" energy spending by the federal government could shift significantly.

Of the CAD 3.6 billion in federal measures categorized as "fossil" in the EPT, some are fossil fuel subsidies. In large part due to these government responses to the pandemic, federal fossil fuel subsidies rose to CAD 1.9 billion in 2020, from CAD 600 million the previous year (Corkal, 2021). While some had clear job creation and environmental benefits, such as the CAD 1.72 billion for orphan and abandoned well reclamation, others, such as the CAD 320 million for offshore oil production in Newfoundland, had no clear strings attached.

Identifying fossil fuel-related spending through these and other non-sector-specific programs is difficult. A CBC investigation into federal spending found that transparency on COVID-19-related spending overall is low, with some departments not forthcoming with disclosure of information, while usual processes to monitor government spending have been delayed (Thompson, 2020).[5]

3.0 Canada's Spending Relative to International Peers

Comparing Canada's COVID-19 energy-related spending to its international peers can help assess the government's overall performance and identify areas where future spending can be better aligned with climate and equity goals. Here, we compare some of Canada's major energy-related commitments to flagship announcements in France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. Data is provided in USD to allow for easier comparisons. Table 1 illustrates fiscal commitments across three sectors: electric vehicles, building retrofits, and hydrogen. Levels of support for fossil fuels and high-carbon sectors are not listed in Table 1, as lack of transparent data from public finance institutions means that assessing accurate totals is not possible.

Table 1. Funding provided to key sectors (as of December 2020) (USD)

Sector		Canada	Germany	France	United Kingdom
Electric vehicles	Total	536 million	6.3 billion	1.3 billion	3.5 billion
	Per capita	14	76	20*	53
Building retrofits	Total	4.5 billion	2.2 billion	7.4 billion	5.1 billion
	Per capita	118	27	110	76
Hydrogen	Total	Unspecified	9.9 billion, emphasis on renewable	7.7 billion, renewable only	630 million
	Per capita	Unspecified	119	115	9

*Additional policies have been announced with dollar values forthcoming.

**Although Germany has no measures listed in the EPT for fossil fuel production, it has allocated USD 4.7 billion (USD 57 per capita) to compensate utilities operating lignite power stations as part of its coal phase-out plan (Wettengel, 2020).

Source: Author's calculations based on December 2020 data from the EPT (2020). Population data from Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques (INSEE), 2020; Office for National Statistics, 2020; Statistics Canada, 2020; Statistisches Bundesamt (Destatis), 2020.

[5] The EPT data also does not consider support provided through non-sector-specific programs such as the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS), whose purpose was to maintain employment. While the government lists recipients of CEWS online, the amounts provided are not public (Canada Revenue Agency, 2020). CBC analysis of publicly traded oil and gas producers shows that they had received over CAD 250 million by early December 2020 (Bakx, 2020). A separate investigation by the *Financial Post* found many companies receiving CEWS, including some oil and gas producers, continued to pay dividends to shareholders after receiving federal support (Ferreira & Carmichael, 2020). The government later stated it would hold accountable those companies using CEWS for non-intended purposes such as dividends or executive bonuses (Zimonjic, 2020).

3.1 Electric Vehicles

So far, Canada has committed around USD 536 million (USD 14 per capita) for electric vehicles (EVs), including investments in EV production at Ford's Oakville plant and new climate plan investments for charging infrastructure and the Incentives for Zero-Emission Vehicles program (Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2020; Government of Ontario, 2020). The government is also leveraging significant funding for zero-emission buses and charging infrastructure through the Canada Infrastructure Bank (CIB) (CIB, 2020).

By comparison, the United Kingdom's 10-point green plan committed USD 3.5 billion (USD 53 per capita) to accelerating the shift to EVs through improving EV charging infrastructure, providing grants to EV buyers, developing battery manufacturing, and piloting hydrogen and other zero-emission trucks (Prime Minister's Office, 2020a). Similarly, Germany has committed USD 6.3 billion (USD 76 per capita) for EVs, including consumer rebates, premiums for EV buyers, and support for infrastructure and batteries (Bundesministerium der Finanzen, 2020; "Germany Pledges," 2020). In addition to various measures in its Recovery Plan and conditions on the bailout for Renault, France has announced USD 1.3 billion (USD 20 per capita) for a household cash-for-clunkers program, new subsidies for EVs, and funding for battery production (Government of France, 2020a, 2020b). **Per capita, EV investments from France, Germany, and the United Kingdom are much higher than Canada's EV commitments.** With a high number of cars per capita, Canada will require more concerted efforts to spur the adoption of low-emissions vehicles.

3.2 Public Transit

The CAD 14.9 billion announced for public transit in early 2021 is an unprecedented and commendable investment. Canada also allocated a substantial amount of money for emergency support for public transit, namely CAD 1.8 billion through the Safe Restart Agreement (Office of the Prime Minister, 2020); similar investments were made in Germany and the United Kingdom (Bundesministerium der Finanzen, 2020; Department for Transport, 2020a, 2020b). This is much-needed support to ensure public transit can weather the COVID-19 crisis. More commitments will be needed to support and mainstream the use of low-carbon modes of public transportation, including through operational public transit funding as Canada recovers from COVID-19.

3.3 Buildings and Retrofits

Funding for energy-efficient buildings and retrofits has been taken up by numerous countries in the wake of the pandemic, including Canada, which so far has pledged at least USD 4.5 billion (USD 118 per capita) through retrofit programs for residential and community buildings in the new climate plan, and large-scale buildings through the CIB (CIB, 2020; Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2020).

Among the United Kingdom's commitments are a USD 3.8 billion plan for retrofitting buildings, expected to benefit up to 650,000 homes, and a Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme valued at USD 1.3 billion (USD 76 per capita) (HM Treasury, 2020a; Prime Minister's Office, 2020a). Germany has pledged USD 2.2 billion (USD 27 per capita) in its stimulus package for energy-efficient buildings and retrofits, while France set aside USD 7.4 billion (USD 110 per capita) for retrofits of public buildings and residential units (Bundesministerium der Finanzen, 2020; Government of France, 2020b).

Compared to France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, Canada's per capita investment for retrofits and energy-efficient buildings is relatively high, although our climate is also more challenging. That said, the speed at which these investments are made also matters, both for stimulating the economy and kickstarting a low-carbon transition. For example, Canada's residential retrofit commitment is over seven years, while France's commitment takes place over two years. **Sustained and additional investments will be needed to address the scale of the challenge and ensure buildings across the country are climate resilient** (Green Budget Coalition, 2020; Task Force for Resilient Recovery, 2020), particularly as demand for heating is higher in Canada's cold climate compared to many European countries.

3.4 Hydrogen

The hydrogen industry has skyrocketed to among the top buckets for potential low-carbon investment for policy-makers over the past year. In Canada, it is not yet clear what level of public money will be directed toward hydrogen. However, the Hydrogen Strategy for Canada focused on both fossil fuel-based hydrogen with carbon capture ("blue hydrogen") and renewable hydrogen ("green hydrogen"). It emphasizes the former in the short term, particularly as a way to transform the oil and gas industry (Bein & MacDonald, 2020; Natural Resources Canada, 2020). Canada's newly announced Low-Carbon and Zero-Emissions Fuels Fund is expected to have substantial support for hydrogen.

In contrast, Germany and France are putting their emphasis on green (renewable) hydrogen. This reflects policy signals from the European Union (EU) Hydrogen Strategy, which aims for 40 gigawatts (GW) of capacity from renewable hydrogen by 2030 (European Commission, 2020b). France has announced over USD 7.7 billion for renewable hydrogen, while Germany has pledged USD 9.9 billion, including to develop trade partnerships (Bundesministerium der Finanzen, 2020; Government of France, 2020b; Martin, 2020).

By 2030, renewable hydrogen is expected to be competitive with fossil hydrogen using carbon capture ("Hydrogen Economy Outlook," 2020). With significant amounts expected to be spent on hydrogen by the federal government, it is crucial that these investments are made wisely. **Whether through tax breaks, direct spending, public finance, or other mechanisms, government should carefully consider whether support for fossil fuel-based hydrogen will help or hinder a transition to net zero.** Canada should consider whether its approach to hydrogen will allow the country to effectively compete with rapidly emerging international markets for renewable hydrogen and whether its approach is compatible with emerging low-carbon standards in potential export markets.

3.5 Support for Fossil Fuels and High-Carbon Sectors

Unfortunately, no country is leading the way for limiting support for fossil fuels and high-carbon sectors, or ensuring support is accompanied by robust climate conditions. Government responses since the onset of COVID-19 reflect recent research that G20 countries continue to make slow progress on phasing out support for fossil fuels (Geddes et al., 2020). Support for fossil fuels and high-carbon sectors without climate conditions undermines governments' other climate policies and delays a just transition. Canada's strong fiscal and governmental capacity means that government should be prioritizing just transition implementation for these sectors, so that affected workers and communities can fully participate in the low-carbon economy (Canadian Labour Congress, 2020; Stockholm Environment Institute [SEI] et al., 2020; Unifor, 2020).

As mentioned, Canada's support to high-carbon sectors during the pandemic has included both direct spending and credit support through BDC and EDC. Since the start of the pandemic, Germany and the United Kingdom have both provided support (mainly credit), including bailouts in some cases, for the fossil fuel, aviation, and auto sectors (EPT, 2020). However, France, in two notable cases, made significant efforts to implement climate conditions and enact complementary policies. First, a bailout was provided for Air France–KLM, which prohibits some domestic flights in cases where the rail journey would be under two and a half hours ("Air France," 2020). Second, although the French government bailed out auto manufacturer Renault, they included climate conditions[6] and introduced strong measures for job creation in the EV sector, including for EV battery manufacturing (Government of France, 2020a). Canada can learn from and build on these examples if additional support is provided to high-carbon sectors.

One of the most promising announcements made regarding support for fossil fuels came from the United Kingdom, which announced it would end direct public support for overseas fossil fuel projects. The ban will include export finance, aid funding, and trade promotion for new crude oil, natural gas, or thermal coal projects, with very limited exceptions (Prime Minister's Office, 2020c). **The British announcement is a major policy shift that sets a new bar for similar public finance institutions, including EDC, to meet.** The United Kingdom has also made positive steps for greening the financial system: the chancellor of the Exchequer announced that the United Kingdom would issue its first sovereign green bond in 2021 and make climate risk disclosure mandatory for major companies from 2025 (HM Treasury, 2020).

[6] In exchange for government-backed loans, the government asked Renault to abide by certain conditions, including scaling up EV production and abiding by their air pollution commitments (Government of France, 2020a).

4.0 Recommendations

With much of the government's spending in 2020 done in response to the direct impacts of the pandemic, the past few months have begun a shift toward stimulus-focused announcements, including those for climate action. After the momentous events of the past year, government is now in a stronger position to move beyond the reactive responses from the start of the pandemic, to plan for stimulus that truly helps us build back better. There has been a vast array of literature on the benefits of green stimulus, and international examples have already set the bar high (Hepburn et al., 2020; The Lancet, 2020). In 2021 and beyond, Canada must firmly pivot its fiscal commitments to climate-compatible, green, and equitable recovery. With Budget 2021 around the corner, we offer the following broad recommendations to government:

4.1 Apply Strict "Green Strings" to All Stimulus Investments, Including From Public Finance Institutions

The importance of applying standards and conditions ("green strings") to government's COVID-19 spending became ever more apparent when it was reported that many companies receiving support had continued to pay dividends to shareholders (Ferreira & Carmichael, 2020). Evidence from the 2008 financial crisis shows that executives and stock markets benefited from government spending, with little benefit to workers (Kedward, 2020). However, it is possible to mitigate these shortfalls by putting conditions on spending from the get-go and by developing accountability mechanisms to ensure conditions are adhered to.

Beyond financial conditions, "green strings" can also help ensure COVID-19-related spending maximizes its potential to advance climate action and a just transition while being economically efficient. We urge the government to apply all seven principles from the report Green Strings: Principles and Conditions for a Green Recovery From COVID-19 (Corkal et al., 2020), which includes transparency on spending and support for just transition for workers and communities. **"Green strings" principles should be applied by all government departments and public finance institutions.**

4.2 Actively Phase Out Subsidies and Public Finance for Fossil Fuels

In his State of the Planet speech, UN Secretary-General António Guterres yet again urged countries to end fossil fuel subsidies and finance alongside the implementation of robust carbon pricing and stronger efforts to rapidly green financial systems (United Nations, 2020). Canada has a longstanding commitment to phase out inefficient fossil fuel subsidies by 2025 as part of the G20 and G7 (G7, 2016; G20, 2009). The federal government must seriously examine whether fiscal responses to COVID-19 help or hinder this goal, and more importantly, whether the urgency to address climate change warrants more substantive and ambitious efforts to shift public money away from fossil fuels.

A key measure Canada should adopt is including fossil fuel subsidy reform in its updated Nationally Determined Contribution under the Paris Agreement. Subsidy reform can assist Canada in achieving its emission reduction targets (Merrill et al., 2019) and is a critical measure to implement so as not to undermine other positive policies, such as carbon pricing.

In addition, Canada must ensure that no new subsidies for fossil fuels are introduced as part of COVID-19 stimulus unless there is no other viable alternative. The government must also take stronger action to phase out public finance for fossil fuels, particularly from EDC. Additional recommendations on fossil fuel subsidies can be seen in Corkal (2021).

4.3 Measure Ambition Against International Standards, not Domestic Precedence

Canada recently released the most ambitious climate plan in our nation's history, including a new emission reduction target range of 32%–40% by 2030 below 2005 levels (Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2020). However, in comparison to leading regions, we have a long way to go. To take just a few examples, Denmark announced an end to fossil fuel production by 2050, the EU agreed to set aside 37% of its recovery fund for a green transition, and the United Kingdom will end overseas public finance for fossil fuels (Buttler, 2020; HM Treasury, 2020; Taylor, 2020). On emission reduction targets, the United Kingdom has set a 68% target and the EU a 55% target for 2030 (both compared to 1990 levels) (European Commission, 2020a; Prime Minister's Office, 2020b).

As policy-makers unveil further recovery-focused actions, they must ensure Canada meets or exceeds the climate ambition of its international peers. Levels of investment must be sufficient to incentivize widescale change; many groups have made recommendations to this effect, such as the Green Budget Coalition and Task Force for a Resilient Recovery. Investments to transition high-carbon sectors must also go beyond buildings, transportation, and energy production to address those that have historically received less attention for emissions reductions, such as agriculture. Canada must also implement concrete measures for a just transition to support affected workers and communities. It is imperative that decision-makers implement and build on international best practices to rapidly decarbonize and build back better—for the future of our economy, our communities, and our planet.

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Head Office

111 Lombard Avenue, Suite 325
Winnipeg, Manitoba
Canada R3B 0T4

Tel: +1 (204) 958-7700
Website: www.iisd.org
Twitter: @IISD_news

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