

Three critical geography activities on COVID-19

These activities accompany John Huckle's article in *Teaching Geography*, Summer 2021.

John's free ebook *Critical School Geography* can be downloaded [here](#).

Each of these activities focuses on one of the sustainable development goals (SDGs); one Earth Charter principle; and related cognitive (C), socio-emotional (SE) and behavioural (B) objectives from [UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goals, Learning Objectives](#) (numbering of objectives taken from that document). All three should be introduced by exploring the related SDG and Earth Charter principle. Why should global citizens pursue this goal and this principle? What progress are they making? What obstacles need to be overcome?

Activity One COVID-19 and the global corporate food industry

This activity relates the origins of COVID-19 to a global corporate food industry that impacts on local habitats and wildlife farmers; invades reservoirs of biodiversity; and leads to the release of disease vectors. It introduces the need to regulate the industry in order to conserve habitats and biodiversity and so lessen the incidence of pandemics of animal origin. The focus is a story-boarding activity.

Activity Two COVID-19 and health inequalities

The pandemic served to further reveal and magnify health inequalities in the UK. This activity uses two reports (*Poverty 2020/2021* and *Building Back Fairer*) to reveal the inequalities and prompt debate on how they should be overcome. The focus is on group discussion of the reports' recommendations, particularly those relating to children and young people, and how society can 'build back fairer' (the 'next normal').

Activity Three COVID-19, economic restructuring and the prospects for recovery based on a green new deal

This activity examines winners and losers from the pandemic, focussing on billionaires and their links to the financial sector. It introduces financialisation, financial flows and whether the huge amounts the government is spending on supporting the economy will feed through into the real economy and a green recovery. Students are encouraged to realise that a green new deal could take a free market, socially democratic, or socialist form. The focus is on tracing the impacts of the pandemic on financial chains and debating the merits of three different forms of green recovery ('building back greener' or the 'next normal').

Calling these 'activities' is something of a misnomer. They are mini curriculum units with activities embedded within them. They will occupy several lessons and you should feel free to revise, modify and update them with reference to the age, ability and interests of your students.

Activity One COVID-19 and the global corporate food industry

Purpose To relate the causes of diseases of animal origin, such as COVID-19, to capital investment by the global corporate food industry that displaces local wildlife farmers and reduces biodiversity.

To consider the implications of COVID-19 for biodiversity conservation, public health, future food supplies and diets.

SDG SDG 15 [Life on Land](#)

Objectives **C5** The learner understands that realistic conservation strategies work outside nature reserves to improve legislation, restore degraded habitats and soils, connect wildlife corridors, sustainable agriculture and forestry, and redress humanity's relationship to wildlife,

SE2 The learner is able to argue for the conservation of biodiversity on multiple grounds including ecosystem services and intrinsic value.

B3 The learner is able to work with policy-makers to improve legislation for biodiversity and nature conservation and its implementation.

[Earth Charter](#) EC principle 5. Protect and restore the integrity of Earth's ecological systems, with special concern for biological diversity and the natural processes that sustain life.

Key concepts planetary boundaries, ecological footprints, global capital flows, ecological imperialism, commodification, pandemics, alienation, social justice, global governance, global citizenship.

Preparation

Read chapter six of *Critical School Geography*, particularly pages 252 and 253. The activity is based on the article by [Wallace et al](#) cited there and a further article by [Montgomery and Macdonald](#) 'COVID-19, Health, Conservation and Shared Wellbeing'. Note the general theory of neoliberal disease emergence on pages 8 and 9 of the Wallace et al article. Activity sheet one is based on this. Read about the link between COVID-19 and the ecological and climate emergencies [here](#).

Catrell's article in *Teaching Geography* 'The COVID-19 pandemic: geography matters' (45.3, 2020, pp. 97-100) provides useful background information.

Familiarise yourself with the arguments surrounding [biodiversity and human health](#).

Read about [the findings of the WHO team](#) that visited China to investigate the origins of COVID-19.

Note the [five actions to halt and recover from biodiversity loss](#) that include cutting the share of animal calories in human diets by 50% except in regions in which the share is already estimated to be low.

You should preview three You Tube videos: [The History Leading Up to COVID-19](#) (10 minutes); [Humans to Blame for the Coronavirus Pandemic? How Deforestation Gives Rise to Pandemics](#) (8 minutes) and [COVID-19: China's dilemma over the wild meat trade](#) (4 minutes).

Duplicate one copy of Activity Sheet One for each group of three or four students. Cut the copies into seven strips, shuffle these, and put each set into an envelope.

Consult with your science colleagues to discover how students have covered biodiversity and COVID-19 in science.

Possible procedure

1. Introduce [SDG 15](#) and Earth Charter principle 5. To what extent do students understand the need for forest and biodiversity conservation?
2. Introduce COVID-19 and explore students' existing knowledge of its origins and impacts. Show the video on the history of pandemics. Use Figure 1 from the Montgomery & Macdonald article to prompt discussion of the video. Note its recommendations regarding early detection; early dissemination of information; and early counter measures. Who can and should carry out these recommendations?
3. Show the video 'Humans to Blame for the Coronavirus?'. Explain the distinction between vector borne and zoonotic diseases and discuss the links the scientist interviewed makes between such diseases, deforestation, and our food supplies. The argument that intact forests and biodiversity protect human health should be examined (objective SE 2).
4. Ask the students to form groups of three or four. Give out the envelopes and slips of paper. The students have to arrange the slips in order to tell a 'story' about the origins and impacts of zoonotic diseases like COVID-19. One 'answer' is B G E D A F C, there are others. The important thing is that the students debate in what way the 'story' should be told. Who has told stories about COVID-19 during the pandemic? Have the stories been truthful? Comprehensive? What have the stories in the media included and left out? What may the slips of paper have left out? All 'stories' are partial and reflect the views of the 'story teller'. Scope here to talk about narratives, myths, conspiracy theories and false news.
5. Relate step three to the outbreak of COVID-19 in China and the World Health Organisation's subsequent investigation. Note China and the WHO seem to reject theories related to the wild meat market in Wuhan, preferring an explanation linked to the import of frozen foods. Discuss why China is anxious to locate the origins of the virus elsewhere.
6. Now turn to measures to combat COVID-19. Focus specifically on the wildlife trade and whether or not China should ban the wild meat trade. Show the third video and introduce Montgomery and Macdonald's argument that preventing the illegal trade and

further regulating the legal trade and food markets may be the better options. Link discussion to social justice, a dimension of sustainable development, and objective C5.

7. Introduce [the Earth Charter](#) and principle 5 in relation to students' involvement in the global corporate food industry. To reduce pressure on distant reserves of biodiversity (critical ecological capital) should they eat a more [planet friendly diet?](#) A [report on the food system's impact on biodiversity](#) states that agriculture is the main threat to 80% of the 28,000 species known to be at risk of extinction. It advocates a shift to plant-based diets; reversing the rising global trend to meat consumption; and farming in a less intensive and damaging way while accepting lower yields. The food system causes around 30% of all greenhouse gas emissions and changed diets could tackle the ill health suffered by three billion people who either have too little or too much to eat. How do students feel about what they have learnt?
8. Finally, what do students know of organisations involved in biodiversity conservation that are seeking to influence policy makers (objective B3). Introduce them to a range of organisations that they might support, for example their local wildlife trust; a [people's manifesto for wildlife](#); [compassion in world farming](#); WWF; etc. England's strategy for wildlife and biodiversity, [Biodiversity 2020](#), and its [obesity strategy](#) are examples of national policy making while the [UN convention on biodiversity](#) is an example of international strategy.

Possible extension

[The Economics of Biodiversity: the Dasgupta Review](#) claims that our current economic system is unsustainable; that it endangers the prosperity of current and future generations; and calls for a sustainable alternative.

Collectively, however, we have failed to manage our global portfolio of assets sustainably. Estimates show that between 1992 and 2014, produced capital per person doubled, and human capital per person increased by about 13% globally; but the stock of natural capital per person declined by nearly 40%. Accumulating produced and human capital at the expense of natural capital is what economic growth and development has come to mean for many people. In other words, while humanity has prospered immensely in recent decades, the ways in which we have achieved such prosperity means that it has come at a devastating cost to Nature. Estimates of our total impact on Nature suggest that we would require 1.6 Earths to maintain the world's current living standards.

Students might consider the [headline messages](#) from the review and their implications for policy makers, global citizens and education. Do students consider that they are receiving an environmental education that helps them explore the issues the review raises and enables them 'to achieve tangible impact, for example by focusing on local issues, and collaborating with scientists and community organisations'?

Activity Sheet 1: Creating a story about the COVID-19 pandemic

<p>A pathogen is a disease causing organism, such as a bacteria or virus. Pathogens of animal origin that cause diseases are called zoonoses. The virus that causes COVID-19 is a zoonose. In complex forest ecosystems with high biodiversity, the population growth of such pathogens is kept in check.</p>	B
<p>In frontier areas on the edge of forests, investment in land by large agricultural corporations leads to deforestation and pushes wildlife farmers further into the forest margins. This investment may require a flow of capital from overseas and the crops and livestock produced are often traded on world markets. Palm oil, soya and beef are examples of such products and are used in many of the foods that we eat.</p>	G
<p>As wildlife farmers move further into the forest pathogens from forest species are more likely to infect the animals they are rearing or the farmers themselves. These farmers depend on the money they get from selling wildlife in urban markets where there is an increased demand for 'exotic' meats.</p>	E
<p>When the wildlife farmers take their animals or meat to urban markets, pathogens spread to the urban population. Local governments may need to close markets and impose lockdowns on urban populations. National governments may consider banning wildlife farming.</p>	D
<p>Globalisation or the increased connectiveness of the world's people and places means that pathogens now spread around the world more quickly and they have more opportunities to infect people and evolve new variants. The transmission of disease is easier than it was in the past. Governments may lockdown their populations; ban or quarantine visitors from overseas; and invest more in public health and vaccine development in order to control and eradicate the disease.</p>	A
<p>When a pandemic spreads to a country, it impacts on the people, the economy, politics and culture. Poor and disadvantages people are most affected. Some businesses fail while others prosper. Politicians have to make difficult choices about protecting public health and/or protecting the economy. False ideas about the pandemic may circulate on social media. All these impacts shape the geography of a place or country and the changing geography shapes the ongoing impacts.</p>	F
<p>There is an urgent need to conserve forests; ban the illegal trade in wildlife; regulate the legal wildlife trade more tightly; strengthen food inspection in markets; monitor emerging pathogens; and keep vaccine development ahead of evolving variants. These goals require international co-operation; international institutions like the World Health Organisation; and the support of global citizens who have a shared interest in sustainable development that protects human health and conserves the rest of the natural world.</p>	C

Activity Two COVID-19 and health inequalities

Purpose To examine and explain inequalities in mortality rates from COVID-19 across England and Wales by reference to pre-existing poverty and health inequalities.

To introduce *UK Poverty 2020/21* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation) and *Building Back Fairer* (the COVID-19 Marmot Review); consider the recommendations these reports make; and link them to the concepts of sustainable development and global citizenship.

SDG SDG 3 [Good health and well-being](#)

Objectives C2 The learner knows facts and figures about the most severe communicable and non-communicable diseases and the most vulnerable groups and regions concerning illness, disease and premature death.

SE3 The learner is able to encourage others to decide and act in favour of promoting health and well-being for all.

B4 The learner is able to publicly demand and support the development of policies promoting health and well-being.

[Earth Charter](#) EC principle 11. Affirm gender equality as prerequisite to sustainable development and ensure universal access to education, health care, and economic opportunity.

Key concepts Health inequalities, spatial inequalities, capital flows, development and under development, deindustrialisation, regional policy, austerity, building back fairer, universal basic income/services, sustainable development, citizenship.

Preparation

The impact of austerity on young people is considered in chapter three of *Critical School Geography* along with intersectionality and the role of reduced inequality in improving happiness. Chapter seven deals with spatial inequality, poverty, and unequal development: chapter five with universal basic income in the context of automation and the changing nature of work.

Download the two reports [Poverty 2020/21](#) and [Build Back Fairer: the COVID-19 Marmot Review](#). Read the summary of *Poverty 2020/2021* which was used to prepare Activity Sheet 2.1. and the [Joseph Rowntree Foundation's response to the spring budget 2021](#).

Download [The COVID-19 Report: The Impact on Women in Coventry](#) (Women's Budget Group, 2020). From the executive summary print two copies of the summaries on poverty (pages 3&4); employment (4&5); unpaid work (5); debt and bills (6); loss of support services (6&7); BAME women (7) and disabled women (8).

Read Brian Beach's article [Basic Income and Services: Potential solutions for a post-pandemic UK](#).

You will need a data projector to show students some figures in the Marmot review and Josh Halliday's [article 'It's heartbreaking: inequality reaps high COVID toll in South Wales valleys'](#) (The Guardian, 8.02.2021).

You should find the interactive graphic in section four of [this report from the Office for National Statistics](#) (ONS). It shows deaths by English local authority area during the first phase of the pandemic, March-July 2020.

You should decide whether you are going to give out copies of the activity sheets or display them on the whiteboard. You will need facilities (mobile phones?) for groups of students to record podcasts.

Possible procedure

Stage one, health inequalities related to place and gender

1. Introduce students to SDG 3 and Earth Charter principle 11. Why should global society seek good health and well-being and universal access to health care?
2. Then explore what students understand by health inequalities – inequalities in health between different groups of people and different areas/regions/nations of the UK and world. The impacts of COVID-19 varied hugely and were determined by a complex web of existing inequalities across gender, age, race, income level, social class, disability, and place (relevance of intersectionality). In what ways did COVID-19 mortality rates reflect existing inequalities? Did COVID-19 widen existing inequalities? For whom, where and how? Discuss students' personal experiences and existing knowledge of COVID and their views on whether the NHS and government performed well or badly during the crisis.
3. **Focus on the varying mortality rates across England and Wales** during the first wave of the pandemic. Use [the ONS webpage](#), section 4 to examine mortality rates (COVID-19 deaths) in different local authority areas between March and July 2020. Where are the areas of low and high mortality? What explains the differing mortality rates? What explains the spread of the disease? Its decline? Which areas had the highest/lowest deaths? What happened in our area?
4. **Focus on place.** Display [Halliday's article](#), note its date, and read it to the class. Ensure they can locate Merthyr Tydfil and Rhondda Cynon Taf and can understand devolution, socio-economic deprivation, former industrial areas and deindustrialisation, closed community, economic driver, and widening health inequalities. What explanations does

Halliday give for the high mortality rates? (deprivation, deindustrialisation, unemployment, chronic health conditions, government policy mishaps, need to work rather than self-isolate). Relate the contents of the article to poverty, spatial inequality, core and periphery, under-development, capital flight, lack of investment, [continuing austerity](#) and regional policy. Eight of the ten most deprived towns in Wales are in the [South Wales valleys](#). What do students consider should be done for such areas? Refer to EC principle 11 and the government's '[levelling up](#)' agenda. What is necessary to realise this principle 11?

5. **Focus on gender.** During the pandemic, women were more likely than men to be furloughed and lose their jobs; to carry [the burden of home schooling, extra childcare](#) and domestic drudgery; and to experience pressurised work in the health and social care sector. Domestic violence against women increased during the pandemic and half of them considered that [gender inequality had increased](#). Introduce the Women's Group report from Coventry and provide each group with two copies of a different section from the executive summary. Answer questions on the summaries to ensure comprehension and then ask students to consider to what extent COVID worsened pre-existing gender inequality. Each group is to report back and as inequalities emerge they should be related to one another as many women suffer from multiple disadvantages.

Stage two, the case for universal basic income and services

6. Remind students that during the pandemic many, but not all people who could not work were paid an income under the government's furlough scheme. Draw on [Beach's article](#) to explain universal basic income and services and the case for providing them in a post-pandemic UK. What do students see as the advantages/disadvantages of UBI linked to UBS? Can the state afford them? What type of government is likely to consider introducing them? How do they relate to the changing nature of technology, automation, and the future of work? How might they contribute to sustainable development? To the 'next normal'?

Stage three, poverty, austerity and COVID-19

7. Give out copies or display Activity Sheet 2.1. Ensure students understand the role of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and that some consider its definitions of poverty and destitution to be too broad and to overestimate the problem. Use the sheet to continue to explore why certain people, social groups, and geographical areas were more affected by the pandemic than others. Essentially many of the working poor had to work (key workers or not qualifying for government support schemes) - they could not afford to stop work and isolate, and feared reprisals from employers if they stopped work. Living conditions prevented many poor people from isolating and many were clinically vulnerable. Consider the Foundation's recommendations. Is it realistic to expect 'good jobs' for all who need them given automation? Is UBI/UBS an alternative?
8. Explain the Marmot review of health inequalities carried out in 2010 and the subsequent review *Build Back Fairer* that sought to ensure that we recover from COVID in ways that

reduce the health inequalities it exposed. Display the review and focus attention on page 4. Social, environmental and economic inequalities in society are damaging health and wellbeing; health improvement has stagnated over the past decade, we need to build a fairer society based on social justice, reduced inequalities and a wellbeing economy – responding to both the climate crisis and health inequity. Is the report echoing the Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s report? Who is likely to welcome these reports? Will the government implement the reports’ recommendations?

9. Now move to Box 1 on page 5 of *Build Back Fairer*. Review its key content particularly the ideas that COVID arrived after a period of austerity when the health of UK society had stopped improving; that life expectancy follows a social gradient; shows marked regional differences; and that ‘large funding cuts’ had affected some areas more than others. Link these ideas to austerity after the financial crisis of 2008 and its impact on health and [local authority spending on social services](#). See Box 2, page 6, point 3. Make it clear that in 2021 [local authorities continued to face austerity and spending cuts](#).
10. Next move to page 14 Area Deprivation and COVID -19. Deprived areas had a higher mortality rate. Ask students to suggest reasons. Then page 15. Some regions had higher mortality rates – again ask for reasons. Page 16 the impact of living conditions – why do they matter? Page 17&18 impact of occupation – why does it matter? Page 20 compares BAME groups – why higher rates? Refer back to Activity Sheet 2.1 and then invite students in groups to prepare a short podcast focussing on the health inequalities revealed by the pandemic and the reasons behind them. Play back the podcasts and debate their merits.
11. Turn to page 21, the summary and recommendations regarding inequalities in risk of mortality from COVID-19. Go back to page 7, Box 3, lessons learnt. To what extent do these lessons and the Joseph Rowntree recommendations (Activity Sheet 2.1) reflect the need to move towards sustainable development? Help students to put the reports’ findings in the contexts of SDG 3 and the case for UBI and UBS. Would UBI and UBS lessen inequalities and answer the recommendations made in the reports? To what extent and why?
12. Next turn to page 33 which summarises the report’s findings on children and young people and makes recommendations. Clarify any recommendations the student do not understand and relate them to EC principle 11. Ask the students to form groups and discuss the recommendations using Activity Sheet 2. If implemented, what differences would they make to their lives? Which of the recommendations would be addressed by UBI and UBS? Get groups to report back and summarise conclusions.

Stage four, the spring budget 2021

13. Finally, focus on the spring budget 2021 and its likely impact on health and geographical inequalities. [Public reaction](#) to the government’s proposed one percent pay increase for NHS staff is one way of introducing this. The [Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s analysis of the budget](#) suggests the choices made by the Chancellor on social security, housing and the economy did not pass its five tests and risked pulling people into poverty. [The IPPR](#) welcomed the extensions of job and business support schemes which served to prevent

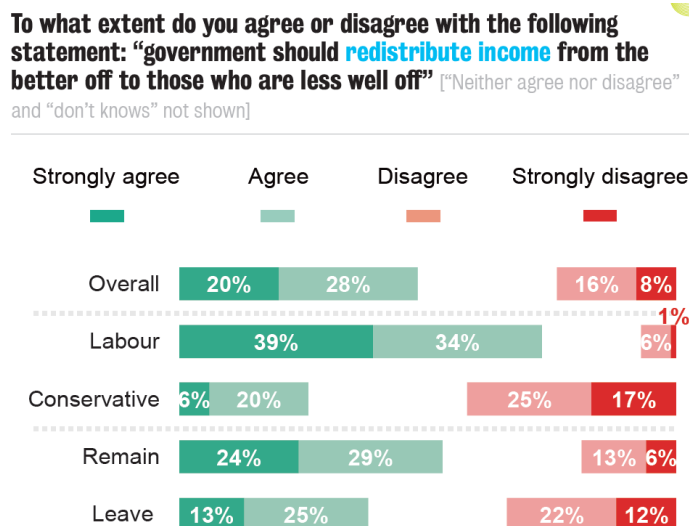
economic hardship, but noted a striking lack of support for public services, little public investment and no lasting boost to welfare for those hardest hit by the crisis. [The IFS](#) concluded: *No money to deal with post pandemic priorities. No policies to deal with the inequalities that have opened up over the last year between rich and poor, old and young, more and less well educated. This is a big hole in the chancellor's and the government's policies, a hole which needs to be filled and soon if we are not to suffer a much worse hangover from this crisis than need be the case*, There were measures in the budget to tackle [geographical inequality \(levelling up\)](#) but the stronger towns' fund was criticised as [failing to reverse the damage done by austerity](#). There was no mention of UBI or UBS.

14. Provide students with an opportunity to discuss what they have learnt during the four stages of this activity and their personal opinions on whether the different nations of the UK are likely to 'build back fairer' after the pandemic.

Possible extension

[Unequal Britain: attitudes to inequality in the light of COVID](#), a report from Kings College, showed that the need to tackle geographical inequality was a rare point of agreement among the public. It examines public perceptions of the extent and causes of inequalities related to COVID, exploring attitudes to a range of inequality types across political and cultural divides. While there is significant agreement on tackling geographical inequalities ('levelling-up') there is disagreement on other inequalities. Gender inequality is of low concern; meritocratic and individualistic thinking ('its their own fault') tempers calls for action on inequality; and appetite for social change does not reach across political and cultural divides (see Figure 40 from report, page 10).

Figure 40: Support for government redistribution to address income inequalities, by vote in 2019 general election and EU referendum (split sample: n=1,126)



Discussing the attitudes to inequality revealed by Unequal Britain is a way of following-up Activity 2 and further developing socio-emotional objectives and students' moral autonomy and political literacy.

Activity Sheet 2.1: Poverty and the COVID Pandemic

The **Joseph Rowntree Foundation** is an independent social change organisation working to solve UK poverty. It suggests that **poverty** occurs when a person's resources (mainly their material resources) are not sufficient to meet their minimum needs (including social participation).

Destitution is going without the essentials we all need to eat, stay warm and dry, and keep clean.

Before the pandemic

- Millions of people were living precarious and insecure lives
- Around one in five people were living in poverty
- Of the 14.5 million living in poverty, 8.4 million were working-age adults; 4.2 million were children; and 1.9 million were pensioners
- 2.4 million people were destitute
- Around 8% of those in poverty had been stuck in poverty for more than 5 years
- Incomes were falling and falling fastest for those with the lowest incomes
- In work poverty was rising – around 13% in 2018/19
- Rates of benefit were falling. They did not increase with prices between April 2015 and March 2020. 3 million claimed Universal Credit.
- 19% of households lived in the private rented sector and more than a third of these were in poverty. Housing benefit had not kept pace with rising rents and there was a shortage of homes for social rent from councils or housing associations.

During the pandemic

Workers in low-pay sectors, minority ethnic groups and lone parents who were already under financial pressure were adversely affected.

The Government responded to support jobs and increase some welfare benefits. Many people fell through the welfare net – failing to qualify for support payments.

Some benefit rates rose during the outbreak, for example the basic rate of Universal Credit rose by £20/week with 4.6 million claiming it in August 2020.

After the pandemic

The effect of the pandemic is uncertain but will depend on how it affects employment, earnings, benefits, housing costs and inflation, and the responses of devolved governments in each of these areas. We need to **build back fairer**. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation recommends:

- We need as many people as possible to be in good jobs
- We need to improve earnings for low-income families and ensure more people are in secure, good quality work
- We need to strengthen the benefits system
- We need to increase the amount of low-cost housing

Activity Sheet 2.2: Acting on the recommendations in 'Building Back Fairer'

Building Back Fairer makes recommendations on how the health and wellbeing of children and young people can be improved as society recovers from COVID-19.

- Which of the recommendations (no more than three) does your group consider most urgent?
- What do you think you should do to make sure they are implemented?

Prepare a poster highlighting your choice of recommendations and what you think you should do to increase the likelihood of politicians and others acting on them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

BOX 13. BUILD BACK FAIRER: IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

LONG TERM	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reverse declines in the mental health of children and young people and improve levels of wellbeing from the present low rankings internationally, as a national aspiration.• Ensure that all young people are engaged in education, employment or training up to the age of 21.
MEDIUM TERM	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reduce levels of child poverty to 10 percent - level with the lowest rates in Europe.• Increase the number of post-school apprenticeships and support in-work training throughout the life course.• Improve prevention and treatment of mental health problems among young people.
SHORT TERM	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reduce child poverty:<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Remove the 'two-child' benefit restriction and benefit cap.- Increase child benefit for lower-income families to reduce child and food poverty.- Extend free school meal provision for all children in households in receipt of Universal Credit.• Urgently address children and young people's mental health with a much strengthened focus in schools and training more teachers in mental first aid.• Increase resources for preventing abuse and identifying and supporting children experiencing abuse.• Develop and fund additional training schemes for school leavers and unemployed young people.• Further support young people's training, education and employment schemes to reduce the numbers who are NEET, and urgently address gaps in access to apprenticeships.• Raise minimum wage for apprentices and further incentivise employers to offer such schemes.• Prioritise funding for youth services.

Activity Three COVID-19, economic restructuring and the prospects for recovery based on a green new deal

Purpose This activity relates winners and losers from the pandemic to financial flows within the UK's system of financialised capitalism. It enables students to consider government debt; debate the prospects for recovery; distinguish between neoliberal, socially democratic and socialist green new deals and debate which is preferable.

SDG SDG 9 [Industry, innovation and infrastructure](#)

Objectives **C5** The learner is aware of new opportunities and markets for sustainability innovation, resilient infrastructure and industrial development.

SE2 The learner is able to encourage their communities to shift their infrastructure and industrial development toward more resilient and sustainable forms.

B1 The learner is able to identify opportunities in their own culture and nation for greener and more resilient approaches to infrastructure, understanding their overall benefits for societies, especially with regard to disaster risk reduction.

[Earth Charter](#) EC principle 7. Adopt patterns of production, consumption, and reproduction that safeguard Earth's regenerative capacities, human rights, and community well-being.

Key concepts Capitalism, recession, monopoly, financialisation, economic geography, economic restructuring, core/periphery, financial flows, green new deal, neoliberalism, social democracy, socialism, democratic planning

Preparation

Financialisation features of pages 10, 294 and 333 of *Critical School Geography*. Curriculum unit nine considers increased government borrowing in the context of taxation and international tax reform. Sustainable development is considered on pages 256–260 and there are references to a green new deal throughout the text.

You should read Martin Sokol & Leonardo Pataccini's article [Winners and Losers in Coronavirus Times](#): financialisation, financial chains and emerging economic geographies of the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020. Pay particular attention to the introduction, section three on financial chains, and the conclusion.

[Trading Economics](#) provides data on current UK economic indicators.

You should preview [this video on financialisation](#) (5 minutes).

You should read an article from Love Money on [the biggest billionaire winners and losers of 2020](#), Make a copy of this article and cut it into around 30 individual billionaires for distribution around the class.

You should also read Grace Blakeley's [The Future Will Be Planned](#), 2020. She makes the case for democratic public planning and argues for a green socialist solution to the COVID-19 induced recession based on a socialist, rather than neoliberal or socially democratic green new deal. If you are not familiar with the arguments for a green new deal, look at the web pages of the [green new deal group](#) and the [government's case for a green and resilient recovery](#).

You should read Activity Sheet 3.1 and decide whether you wish to distribute this or simply display it on the whiteboard. You should make sets of cards from Activity Sheet 3.2 and include two blank cards in each set (22 cards in total). Make sufficient sets for one set of cards for each group of four students.

Possible procedure

1. Begin by discussing students' personal experiences during the COVID-19 induced recession. Do they know of people who lost their jobs, were furloughed, did extra hours, found new jobs, were able to save money, experienced real hardship and used food banks, etc? The UK economy shrank by almost 10% in 2020, its largest annual contraction since the Great Frost in 1709. Are students optimistic or pessimistic about an economic recovery and the future? What are the reasons for their optimism/pessimism?
2. Who do students think are the winners and losers from the pandemic? Which individuals and businesses did well and which badly in 2020? Give out the billionaires you have cut from the [Love Money article](#). Ask students to read these, ask questions about what they do not understand, and then report back on their billionaire to the rest of the class. What do the changes in their fortunes in 2020 tell us about the impact of the pandemic? Then refer to UK households. Some were able to save during lockdown, others were unable to earn. [The Financial Conduct Authority](#) estimated that a third of households were financially vulnerable (over-indebted, low savings, low or erratic earnings) in February 2021. Refer to Activity Sheet 2.1 and [current economic indicators](#) such as the rate of unemployment.
3. Now move from individuals to corporations and governments. Which did well/badly from COVID-19? Pharmaceuticals, entertainment platforms, and home delivery firms are among those who did well. Airlines, tourism and hospitality are among those who did badly. Point out that [some corporations have huge cash reserves](#). Governments (states) impacted by the virus [performed more or less well](#). It was estimated that the [UK government would need to borrow £394 billion](#) in the financial year, 2020/2021 to pay for its furlough scheme, grants and loans to businesses, additional health and welfare costs, and to cover lost tax revenues. It also needed to borrow to 'pump prime' investment in recovery, 'levelling up' and future growth. Increased debt would need to be repaid via increased taxes, increased growth, or 'inflating it away' and you might introduce students to current debates over the prospects for recovery, the level of

government debt, how and when it should be repaid, and the measures outlined by the Chancellor in his [spring 2021 budget](#). Local government faced continuing austerity and a [funding crisis](#).

- Clearly the economy and economic geography is being restructured as a result of the pandemic. It has accelerated trends that were already happening, for example [the decline of the high street](#), and has hastened the arrival of others, such as the need for [a green industrial revolution](#). Some argue that government support is [favouring large businesses over small](#) and point to the fact that this is all happening at a time when the UK's trading relationship to Europe has changed with Brexit. There is scope here for case studies of emerging growth zones such as [Net Zero Teeside](#).
- Show students the video on financialisation, Unpack its terms and content perhaps by showing it a second time and pausing as necessary. Refer to the definitions/explainers on activity sheet three and mention that some consider the UK a financialised and monopolistic variant of capitalism, dominated by finance and large corporations who are favoured by government or the state.
- To bring financialisation alive refer [to the top funds of 2020](#) and the level of returns that fund managers provided for investors. Make it clear that some funds lost money and that fund management is only one part of the financial sector's activity. Most people with pensions and life insurance policies have some exposure to such funds. To what extent can [green investment funds](#) aid a green recovery?
- Move on to financial chains and the figure on the activity sheet. This appears complex but becomes clearer once the actors are identified (firms, households, banks, state, central bank, financial markets) and individual flows discussed in relation to what happened in the pandemic. In tracing the flows listed at the bottom of page 18, students should be introduced to the role of central banks and [quantitative easing](#) and realise that flows of finance have geographical implications – they affect the fortunes of localities, regions and nations. Nations with strong currencies and good credit ratings are able to borrow and spend. Others are not. As Sokol & Pataccini outline, the pandemic is likely to widen the North/South global divide and that between the northern core and southern periphery in Europe, [pushing indebted countries deeper into crisis](#). [Gordon Brown](#) is among those who have argued for a global response.
- Explain to students that the pandemic saw the government shift [from neoliberalism \(free marketers\) to Keynesian social democracy](#) (state intervention). Borrowing to support the economy in recessions is a feature of social democracy, but as in the period following the financial crisis of 2008, there is a danger the money borrowed flows to financial markets and big corporations, so inflating asset prices, rather than into smaller enterprises and the real economy where investment has the potential to raise productivity; create worthwhile jobs; tackle regional inequality; reduce the balance of payments; and support the transition to a green economy. Blakeley argues that the state, banks and large enterprises have been working together during the pandemic ('an irrational and undemocratic form of planning') and that their interests in financialised, monopolistic capitalism ('an unsustainable system of social organisation

prone to crisis'), is preventing the transformation of the UK's political economy towards a more democratic and sustainable system. In short, she argues that the economic and political elite are seeking a slightly greener version of the 'old normal'.

9. Now focus on a green new deal or green recovery for the UK: a form of sustainable development that creates good jobs; reduces inequality; and protects the environment. Link such a deal to recommendations of *Poverty 2020/2021* and *Building Back Fairer* in activity two and to Earth Charter principle 7. Blakeley argues for public works and decarbonising projects to provide jobs; for the state to take shares in the companies it supports and then direct their activities in line with democratically decided goals; for the central bank to direct funds to sustainable businesses and research and development; for democratic public planning to shape financial chains and resource use. [Murphy and Hines](#) argue for green investment: green ISAs and green quantitative easing. Explain that neoliberals (free market capitalist economy), social democrats (welfare capitalist economy) and socialists (democratically planned socialist economy) will approach the green transition differently and propose different policies with different roles for the market, government, and citizens. You might compare [the government's case](#) for 'building back better' with a green and resilient economy; the [green new deal group's case](#) for a green recovery; and the [Scottish Socialist Party's case](#) for a green new deal.
10. Finally give out a set of cards you have made from activity sheet 3.2 to each group of four students. Explain any measures students do not fully comprehend and make it clear that the measures on the cards are only a selection of those associated with a green new deal. Discuss which of the measures is likely to be supported by neoliberals, social democrats, and socialists and then assign one of these economic positions to each group. Students then discuss and move cards around on the desk until they have one first preference, two second preference and three third preference cards that they favour. Each group is able to introduce no more than two measures/cards that they themselves propose and consider to reflect their economic position. Groups display their chosen cards on the classroom wall and then step out of role/assigned position to compare and contrast results. The activity concludes with a re-consideration of whether they are optimistic or pessimistic about the economy and the prospects for a green recovery from the pandemic.

Activity Sheet 3.1: Financialisation

Financialisation is shorthand for the growing power of finance over societies, economies and households. It is the key feature of contemporary capitalism and shapes the development and underdevelopment of localities, regions, and nations.

In 2019, financial services and insurance contributed 6.3% of the UK's GDP (down from 8.3% in 2007).

Financial services and related sectors, such as accountancy and law, employ more than 2.3 million people, most of them paid far more than the average Briton. The financial services sector contributed £75.6bn in tax in the year to March 2020, Brexit failed to secure a deal for financial services to trade in Europe and the future of the sector is uncertain with some firms moving to Europe.

Financialisation's actors include investment banks, pension funds, mutual funds, insurance companies, private equity funds, and hedge funds. They operate in financial markets.

Financialisation involves a process of capital accumulation in which profit making occurs increasingly through financial channels rather than through commodity production and trade (the real economy).

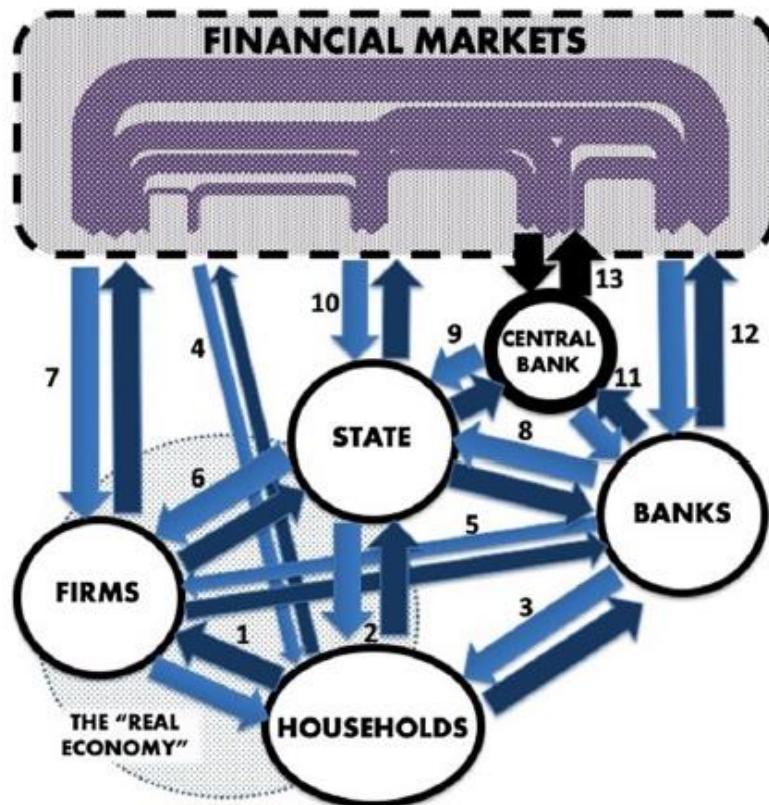
Financialisation refers to the increasing dominance of financial actors, markets, practices, measurements, and narratives at various scales, resulting in a structural transformation of economies, firms (including financial institutions), states and households.

Financialisation is linked to the liberalisation of the world economy; the changing roles of banks; the rise of derivatives and derivative trading; the increased importance of share value in shaping corporate decision making; increased pay and bonuses for top executives; falling investment in the real economy; growing inequality; and increased financial instability.

Firms, financial institutions, states and households in a financialised economy are interconnected through a network of 'financial chains'. Financial chains can be considered as channels of value transfer (between people and places) and as social relations that shape socio-economic processes and related economic geographies. Credit-debt relationships could be considered as prime examples of financial chains in a financialised economy.

In the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Chain 1 is disrupted, lockdown workers cannot produce or consume
- This has knock-on effects on chains 2, 3, 5, 6 and 7. Can you suggest what these are?
- The state seeks to stabilise the economy. It borrows from the market in return for government bonds (chain 10) or from the central bank as quantitative easing (chain 9)
- The central bank can also lend to the retail banks (chain 11), and intervene in the economy directly through quantitative easing (chain 13)



Note: chain 1: labour value / wages; chain 2: personal taxes / welfare payments; chain 3: bank lending to households / debt repayments by households; chain 4: investments by households / returns; chain 5: bank lending to firms / debt repayments by firms; chain 6: corporate taxes / state subsidies and bailouts; chain 7: investments / returns; chain 8: government borrowing from banks / repayments; chain 9: government borrowing from the central bank / repayments (or monetary financing); chain 10: government borrowing from financial markets / repayments; chain 11: bank borrowing from the central bank / repayments; chain 12: bank investments and borrowing via financial markets; chain 13: central bank interventions on financial markets (e.g. *quantitative easing*)

Source: Adapted from Sokol (2020).

Figure 1. *Financial chains.* [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Activity Sheet 3.2: Measures to support a green recovery from COVID-19

Set up a green investment bank to fund projects related to a green recovery.	Change the remit of the central bank (Bank of England) so that its lending has to support a green recovery.
Introduce green saving bonds or ISAs so that private savers can support a green recovery.	Fund local authorities so that they can give grants to householders and arrange a home insulation scheme in their area.
Set up green zones with lower rates of tax to attract green investment.	Provide free universal broadband so that all people can work and learn from home.
Shift taxation from income and profits to energy use, resource depletion, and pollution.	Provide support to workers' co-operatives that are innovating with new green technologies.
Increase fuel duty every year in line with inflation.	Introduce a frequent flyer tax.
Require new homes to be built to high energy standards.	Provide everyone with a free bus pass.
Expand the network of charging points for electric cars.	Introduce a universal basic income in the hope that it encourages more people to do voluntary work with environmental groups.
Encourage the City of London to become a major trading centre for carbon offsets.	Ensure that government support for private firms results in workers acquiring shares and being able to influence company decisions.
Create a young people's conservation corps and pay them a living wage to restore the countryside and urban green spaces.	Introduce a personal carbon allowance (carbon debit card) to limit emissions.
Increase foreign aid to fund green recovery projects in poor countries.	Provide more land for individuals and families to grow their own food.