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Pandemic policy must be climate policy

The early Covid-19 response focussed on 'flattening the curve'. The same logic should be applied to climate action today

While the world focuses on the Covid-19 crisis, climate change continues to advance. The consequences are devastating and becoming more so – and that includes for the pandemic response itself.

There is no doubt that natural disasters are increasing in frequency and intensity as a result of climate change. This year alone, Australia grappled with its most destructive bushfires on record. East African countries have been battling the worst outbreak of desert locusts in decades. The Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji, and Tonga were hit by a category 5 tropical cyclone. Europe has blistered under a record-breaking heat wave. My country, the Philippines, has faced intense flooding, and typhoon season is far from over.

Such hazards, scientists warn, are likely to intersect with the Covid-19 outbreak and the public-health response, including by compounding stress on health-care systems, depleting emergency-response resources, and undermining people's ability to adhere to social distancing. They will exacerbate and be exacerbated by both the unfolding economic crisis and long-standing socioeconomic disparities, both within countries and across regions.

The recent typhoon in the Philippines illustrates the challenges ahead. Strong winds and severe flooding forced many to break quarantine and flee to cramped evacuation centres, where social-distancing protocols are virtually impossible to maintain. Distancing rules have complicated the rescue of some 200,000 people who are at risk from flooding or landslides. The number of people in need of aid – already significant during lockdown – has increased substantially. And already resource-constrained hospitals are expected to be overwhelmed further by a surge of patients with infectious diseases that are likely to proliferate as climate change progresses, such as dengue and leptospirosis.

The pandemic's impact on the environment

To be sure, Covid-19 has, to some extent, curbed humanity's impact on the environment. During the last three months, private cars stayed parked, factories curtailed operations, and power plants stopped burning coal. As a result, carbon dioxide emissions have fallen dramatically – even returning to 2010 levels. Urban air pollution has dissipated, with many revelling in the return of blue skies over chronically smoggy megacities, and in reports of wild animals wandering through empty city streets.

Such developments have fed the narrative that the pandemic is giving Mother Earth a much-needed break. But, even if true, the respite will be brief, and do little to change our long-term climate trajectory.

Because both the pandemic and climate change are global challenges, with no regard for political borders, international cooperation is essential.

In fact, the same researchers who reported that Covid-19 lockdowns had caused emissions to drop also reported that, when lockdowns have been eased, emissions immediately rose. They predict that the pandemic will reduce total emissions in 2020 by 13 per cent, at most, and only if some restrictions remain in place worldwide until the end of the year. Once we return to the pre-pandemic 'normal,' so will emissions.

Sustaining lockdowns – which disproportionately hurt the poorest and most vulnerable – is not the answer. A pandemic paralyses economies, exacerbates inequality, and ends (or upends) people's lives. It must not be viewed as a chance for the planet to 'breathe,' or an environmental blessing in disguise. It certainly isn't an automatic route to healthy and equitable decarbonisation.

A green recovery?

But this does not mean that the pandemic cannot spur progress. Securing a healthier, more sustainable, and more equitable future – unmarred by ever-more health crises and other disasters – can be achieved only with gradual, intentional, and planned decarbonization and inclusive resilience-building. Here, the Covid-19 recovery plans and economic-stimulus packages being proposed by governments, businesses, and international organisations are a good place to start.

The pandemic has revealed how woefully unprepared our health systems

are for shocks and stresses in all forms, whether the short-term surge in Covid-19 infections or the long-term health consequences of climate change. As governments invest in upgrading and strengthening health systems, they must incorporate climate-adaptation and mitigation objectives.

The same goes for investments, both public and private, in boosting resilience. As global health authorities and environmental advocates have argued, only when leaders and decision-makers ensure that all aspects of the Covid-19 recovery are 'healthy and green' can the post-pandemic 'new normal' be one that protects the planet and all its people.

Action needs to be global

Because both the pandemic and climate change are global challenges, with no regard for political borders, international cooperation is essential. The United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) that was supposed to take place in Scotland this November was postponed to 2021. But this should not be allowed to impede progress.

Instead, the delay should be regarded as an opportunity for leaders to do their homework and lay the groundwork for a conference that places health considerations at the centre of climate negotiations. The 2015 Paris climate agreement mentioned the word 'health' only once – in the preamble. COP26 must give rise to an even more ambitious plan combining climate and health imperatives.

'Flatten the curve' was the mantra of the early Covid-19 response. To avoid overwhelming health-care systems and buy time to increase their capacity, populations needed to take action to slow the spread of the virus. We should apply the same logic to climate action today, by flattening the curve of greenhouse-gas emissions and our broader ecological footprint, in order to buy time to build sustainable systems.

The difference, of course, is that, unlike health care, the planet's thresholds cannot be changed. We are the ones who must adjust. The pandemic won't save us, but it could be the catalyst we needed to save ourselves.

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