

THE INTERCONNECTEDNESS BETWEEN COVID-19 AND INTERNATIONAL

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There is a link between human health and that of animals and the environment but this phenomenon has been worsened by the increased rates of environmental degradation combined with high levels of urbanisation. International environmental law (IEL) has not been able to fully adopt an approach which ties these interconnectedness between humans, animals and the environment. IEL have mostly been piecemeal and reactive in nature.

Both global health and climate change are collective action problems, but both have similar problems: they require a lot of research to be done and individual action of the states. While the governments have taken unprecedented measures to limit the spread of the virus, the same has not been seen being done for climate change.

Now if we look at how mitigating climate change a few months ago would have been a huge issue due to economic growth and governments not willing to prioritize mitigating climate change also due to minimal budgets for climate finance; and now if we see during the emergency that the response of the governments were sudden and at such speed and scale, which has also shown its effect on the environment.

Now imagine what could have been done if climate change would have been taken seriously. By the month of April, the United States and Japan approved an additional fiscal package of \$483 billion and \$83 billion respectively. Also in the same month the Group of Twenty(G20) added global fiscal support which was \$8 trillion. The UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) says that an annual investment of \$2.4 trillion is needed in the energy system alone until 2035 to limit temperature rise to below 1.5 °C from pre-industrial levels. Here, we could trace the disparity in global response with regards to the pandemic and climate change. If a pandemic could compel nations to impulsively discharge fiscal support then why not the same for the climate change as it too does have adverse impact on the long run.

COVID AND IEL

There have been different approaches from various nations to tackle the issues created by the pandemic. The United States Environmental Protection Agency (US EPA) has suspended some environmental law requirements in response to the outbreak. While the Australian authorities such as the New South Wales Environment Protection Authority (NSW EPA), Environment Protection Authority Victoria (VIC EPA), and Western Australian Department of Water and Environmental Regulation (WA DWER), which all of which have placed the onus on the businesses for continued compliance. So you can see a stark difference with one providing relaxed obligations while the other strongly placing the onus on businesses to respond and manage compliance. Also, in the US recycling programs have been halted, industries have reverted to single use disposable plastic bags, Starbucks as well have announced a temporary ban on reusable cups.

The impact of pandemic has mostly been positive towards the protection of the environment whether through improved air quality or reduced greenhouse gas emissions. But only at the cost as severe consequences in the form of a tragic economic slowdown, human distress, increase in the amounts of medical and hazardous waste generated. Of course, a global health crisis is not the answer to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, but the phenomenon should make us ponder over the negative impact human activity has on the planet. Hence, this is no one's

model of environmental response. Any positive environmental impact in the wake of this pandemic, must therefore be in changing our production and consumption habits towards cleaner and greener. Only long-term systemic shifts will change the trajectory of CO₂ levels in the atmosphere. So, in the aftermath of the crisis, there is a real opportunity to meet that demand with green packages of renewable energy investments, smart buildings, green and public transport, etc.

Due to the pandemic, differences in the environment could also be observed. There are Satellite images published by NASA and the European Space Agency that show a reduction in nitrogen dioxide emissions from January to February in China, due to the economic slowdown during quarantine. Research also shows a reduction by 25% in carbon dioxide emissions in China. Findings by the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA) show that China's carbon dioxide emissions (which also come from fossil fuel combustion) have reduced by 25% because of measures taken to contain the coronavirus. Not only in China but also observing Italy's condition, data showed a similar drop in nitrogen dioxide emissions; satellite data has shown a drop in nitrogen dioxide emissions in the country's northern region; and waterways in Venice appear cleaner because of a drastic reduction in tourist boat traffic (though, much to the chagrin of animal lovers, the photos circulating of dolphins frolicking in the canals were actually taken nearly 800km away in Sardinia). India has also seen a reduction with this being called the lowest average level of nitrogen dioxide pollution ever recorded in spring. Similar certainty towards the environment was traced in India too as a nationwide curfew on 22 March had observed the lowest level of nitrogen emissions to be ever recorded. And as North America (one of the world's major polluters) enters a major economic downturn, it's likely we'll see similar effects there.

THE WAY FORWARD

A 2017 study conducted by researchers at the Lund University Centre for Sustainability Studies in Sweden (LUCSUS) in partnership with the University of British Columbia showed that there are three personal choices we can make to quickly cut a lot of greenhouse gas emissions: reduce air and car travel, as well as meat consumption. The Paris Agreement's target of limiting global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels by 2030, the goal might have already taken a hit, and it is crucial to abide by it and move forward. To do this significant changes are required. Part of this is going to have to come from within the airline and transportation industries through innovation. Potential for the fuel economy to gain from redesigning aircrafts to be more efficient.

Some airlines are making headway through research into innovations like biofuel and electric-powered aircraft. "There's still a lot of potential fuel economy that could be gained from redesigning aircraft to be more efficient," said Colin Murphy, deputy director of The Policy Institute for Energy, Environment and the Economy at University of California, Davis. "If you're using waste oil, biofuels typically get about 60% greenhouse gas reductions compared to conventional petroleum," he added. The amount of land needed to grow new sources of biofuel – renewable fuel derived from organic materials – could pose a problem, however. And while there's potential for electric-powered aircraft, Murphy notes that limited battery technology means this will never be a viable solution for long-haul flights.

Moreover, there is a need to identify the potential challenges that might rise again in the future. Unforeseen circumstances in the future could rise again where Environmental Impact Assessments are overlooked while building hospitals, shelters, etc, or there are temporary scrapping of plastic bags to avoid spreading the virus. Also, due to the pandemic there will be delays as the UN Climate Change had spoken on not holding any physical meetings for the next few months. This could well prolong for many more months. 2020 was a year for the development of IEL with the Conference of Parties (COP) 26 scheduled in Glasgow where there was to be discussions on raising climate ambitions. However, this virus could also be a changing point where nations finally start to rethink the existing legal structures and see where there are needs for improvement. Though the virus has paused overall economic activities, the shutdown has been credited with giving hope of how a low-carbon economy may be achieved. What the Covid crisis exposes is that we can do things differently. We must not go back to the status quo, we cannot do that. Policies which are being implemented shall be more inclined towards sustainable development covering all the issues faced by various stakeholders whether it's environmental, social or even political.