

What can we learn from Covid-19 about climate change?



As I write this more than 4 million cases of Covid-19 have been recorded across more than 170 countries including at least 279,000 deaths.

In 4 months, the Covid-19 pandemic is a global emergency, bringing devastation to millions of people around the world, impacting lives and jobs and has all but shut down economies worldwide. It is putting billions of people in lock-down, emptying our factories, offices, shopping malls, hotels, streets, and our skies.



But amongst all this tragedy pollution levels across the world have fallen. Blue skies have replaced our 'Shanghai grey' as they have over the smoggiest cities elsewhere. Wildlife is running around of its own accord, and birdsong outside of my window replaces the din of what was once daily life. With much of the world's population on lockdown, Mother Nature has never seemed more present - indifferent to our human anxieties, eager to return to the spaces from which we expelled her.

The danger posed by Covid-19 has a great deal in common with the emergency of climate change.

Both are affecting every country on earth.

Both are affecting different countries, and different communities, and different people in different ways e.g. wealthy people can simply go home and not worry too much about losing their jobs, while others are much more vulnerable. The same calculus applies, to climate change, which affects disproportionately energy poor nations.

Both show the importance of government. In China, we saw how important its authoritarian system and public structures were, in spite of all the weaknesses, in the rapid lock-down of 100s millions of people, severe travel restrictions, mandatory surveillance applications on our phones, rush to build new hospitals etc. Other governments, have been far slower to react, been unable to create or enforce a meaningful lock-down, arguably more worried about alarming human rights advocates and political correctness than saving lives.

So, what can be learnt from the way we are dealing with Covid-19 about how we should better deal with climate change?

As with Covid-19, the global community's response to climate change has been slow at best or even obstructionist at worst. The corollary with Covid-19 is that governments have shown a tendency to wait until it is too late to take meaningful action. Just as it has taken them too long to implement containment measures with the onset of Covid-19.

The problem is that it is very hard to see the success of preventative measures. Climate change is invisible. You cannot see greenhouse gases depriving our oceans of oxygen, or the immediate impact on our health.

A crisis like Covid-19 makes people re-think how we are thinking about the climate emergency, and actually all these changes in precipitation and weather patterns that bring forth droughts in one region and great floods in neighbouring regions actually add up to something.

With Covid-19, you have a case where staying in lock-down means you get it under control but then you get a lot of critics saying, 'you shut down the economy for nothing.' But had we not, you are talking about many more deaths. If you do things right, it means you are never proven right because you have prevented bad things from happening.

This is played-out with governments and people that are in climate denial. Maybe if enough people die, they will change their thinking!

This is one reason why if we are going to recover from this pandemic then we must do it in a way that pivots away from a hydrocarbon-based infrastructure creating new renewable economic opportunities and make businesses and doing business more sustainable..

Priority must be to protect people's health and well-being.

But there is no greater second priority than using this crisis to really accelerate the low-carbon green growth that is already ongoing, because climate change just like Covid-19 is threatening our health and well-being.

But do governments have the foresight and the political will to push such changes through? Are they going to feel adventurous when choosing where to spend public money when there is so much uncertainty and less cash?

We are already seeing that economies can adapt when there are enough incentives for them to do so.

This adaptability is reflected in the willingness and ability of businesses, from Brewdog, Dyson, Rolls-Royce, to Landrover and Pro2Pro repurposing to produce sanitizer and medical equipment.

Adaptability also applies at the government level. That while governments may have at first been slow to respond with financial stimulus packages, the wheels are now turning. Germany and France have said they will use Covid-19 stimulus cash to help fix infrastructure while adhering to green commitments.

Over the last few years governments and businesses have been a little bit short-sighted and too complacent. National and global crises such as Covid-19 and climate change, make the case for a robust government, requiring coordination of individuals, public and private institutions. It is a common effort, and the way to organize it, as Covid-19 has demonstrated, is through government.

Yet there are others such as the world's largest economy, the United States, that appears to be heading in the opposite direction, as Trump waives the enforcement of environmental protection rules. This bodes poorly not only for Americans but for the wider world and Mother nature herself. The move creates a dangerous precedent by signalling that environmental regulations are optional possibly undermining decades of efforts to shift industries towards greener practices.

The Covid-19 pandemic is unprecedented in its rapid impact on all our lives. It is truly devastating in its consequences. But in responding to it, denying the threat of climate change could prove even more deadly. For while both crises share crucial similarities, the distinctions are just as vital.

Covid-19 like any plague that has come before it, will go through vaccine development and use. But climate change is much more permanent. It is here but it will not be solved in a matter of months or years, but a matter of decades. There is no vaccine. And arguably unlike Covid-19 and our return to a new normality, our world will never be the same again.

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