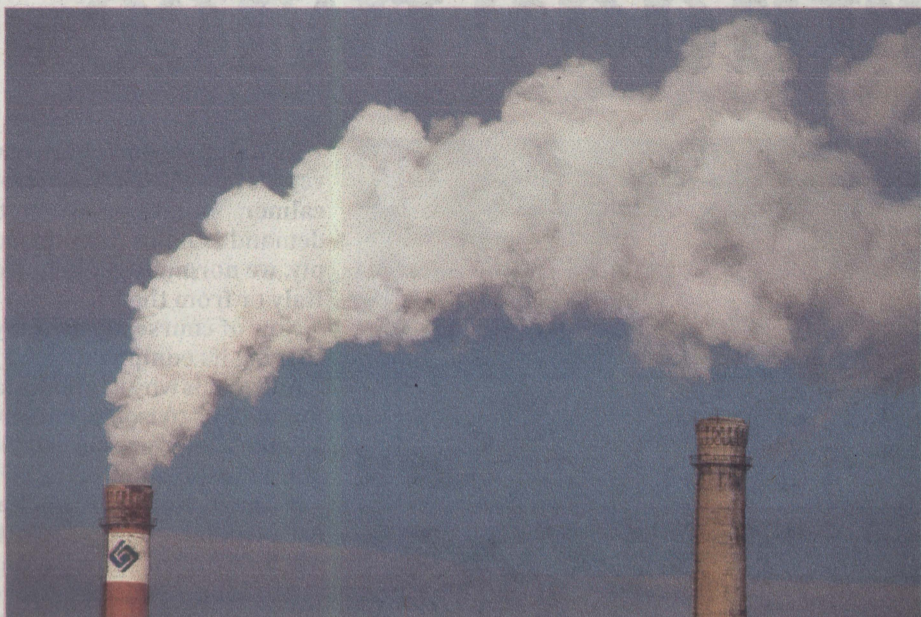


OPINIONS AND LETTERS



Two global crises (COVID-19, climate change) – two very different responses by human societies. PHOTOS: AFP

Sometimes, a crisis can actually be helpful...

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As the world grapples with the COVID-19 pandemic, a stark difference between this and another crisis is steadily becoming obvious to many. The past few weeks have seen the adoption of unprecedented measures in a collective effort to stem the spread of the virus, in testimony of a sense of great urgency to come to terms with the current emergency.

It seems that terms like 'outbreak' and 'pandemic' have managed to drive the message home, both within Joe Citizen and within decision makers.

The immediacy of the crisis has fostered a general sense of panic, which in turn is galvanising entire communities into action.

While a prompt and decisive response to any public health crisis is completely understandable and legitimate, the sluggish response policymakers have shown in response to a more insidious (in the long term) threat posed by climate change is, in stark contrast, baffling.

Scientists and advocates alike cannot fathom how the

same impetus that is leading the world to react to the COVID-19 pandemic with such fortitude is completely missing when it comes to, for example, introducing measures to store carbon, to promote renewable energy production infrastructure and alternative travel and, in general, to foster the collective behavioural change which is necessary in order to address the climate change emergency.

The 'alarm' and immediacy factor simply has not permeated deep enough in human societies with respect to their welfare by climate change impacts.

A number of commentators have pinned this down to human bias and to the short-term nature of partisan politics. Human bias is reflected in the priorities dominating the media world's agenda. For

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instance, a recent study by the Media Matters organisation has revealed that climate matters featured within just 0.7 per cent of all broadcasts in 2019 on major US networks such as ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox.

One can counter that it's not entirely the media's fault, at the end of the day, given that the media responds to the demand out there, in a cut-throat world shaped by viewer numbers and advertising flows.

One of the sobering realities that emerge upon assessing the environmental impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak is that it had to take such a pandemic for global carbon emissions to go (significantly) down.

In China, for instance, its skyrocketing carbon emissions were substantially subdued by the current crisis, to the tune of a 25 per cent reduction, which translates into a six per cent global reduction in emissions.

Emissions from the aviation industry, which have been steadily burgeoning in recent years, accounting for two per cent of all global carbon emissions, were also reined in by the crisis as a result of 13,000 flights being cancelled on a daily basis by mid-February of this year.

While such an indirect outcome is uplifting, a global public health crisis is definitely the worst way of achieving such carbon emissions slashes, given that such cuts in

emissions should have been entrenched structurally long ago, rather than being imposed upon us by a force majeure. It had to take a crisis to achieve concrete progress in addressing another crisis.

But the causality trajectory linking the COVID-19 pandemic with palpable achievements on the climate change scene can also go horribly wrong in future. Two feasible negative knock-on effects, in fact, might include a lower attractiveness of renewable energy and of electric vehicles as a result of considerably cheaper oil prices and a global economic downturn which drains funds out of investments into further renewable energy research.

The latter point is especially true for China, which is a hotbed for the development of new solar, wind and battery storage technology.

Besides slashing emissions, the ongoing COVID-19 outbreak can teach us a lesson or two about the future approach to adopt if we aspire to bring about systemic change.

The projection of long-term forecasts of prospective impacts of any phenomenon is simply not effective enough to get people to listen. Individuals tend to switch off when timelines extending into decades from now are mooted.

Its impacts, which will almost definitely (the putative impacts which carry a high de-

gree of uncertainty, need to be avoided as they face the highest flak from sceptics) occur in the coming years which attract most attention. Climate change seems, to many, too far away on the horizon to be taken seriously, and there is a Herculean feat in addressing such a misconception.

The response to the COVID-19 outbreak has generally been characterised by unison and consensus, with very few, if any, voices of dissent with respect to imposed measures.

This is, once again, in contrast to the climate change emergency, where sceptics have reared their head in recent times in depicting the corpulent body of scientific evidence behind climate change as a myth.

This too might be denting our prospects of achieving substantial progress on the climate change front. Necessity has compelled countries to take on board the WHO's recommendations on how to contain the COVID-19 outbreak.

This streamlined and harmonised global approach is once again in contrast to the unilateral and arbitrary climate change approach adopted by many countries, which have chosen not to comply with international treaties and conventions, thus hampering an effective response to the climate change emergency.

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