



EDITORIAL

Covid-19 and Climate Change

The Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns have understandably called forth much comment on the significance of this experience for meeting the challenge of global warming. A good part of such reflection has emphasised the need to pay heed to science, especially on potential threats to global well-being, the need for resolute societal action to mitigate such threats at the earliest opportunity, and the importance of global cooperation.

For some sections of the climate science community and public opinion, the key lessons for climate change come from the dramatic and disruptive lockdowns, viewing them as a template for climate action to deal with a parallel “climate emergency.” That the unthinkable, a shutdown of all economic activity, and the attendant ways of living, is actually taking place, has led some climate action enthusiasts to argue that lockdowns provide the opportunity to think about similar radical alternatives for climate action. Such views, however, miss the point, which is that the lockdowns are temporary and can hardly be the exemplar for more fundamental transformation. Apart from this, they miss another elementary point: climate change and the pandemic are two very different phenomena, with very different causes and drivers, which quite decisively determine the different challenges that they pose. There is no vaccine for climate change, and it bears repeating that its causes and origins are far more deeply embedded in the current global social and economic structure than epidemics of zoonotic origin.

In another variant of such views, the pandemic and climate change are both seen as the price for having interfered with Nature itself, by means of, for instance, environmental degradation, intensification of agricultural production, and the destruction of biodiversity. While inter-linkages between these factors, new zoonotic diseases as well as climate change need careful scientific investigation, it bears emphasis that “let Nature be” is hardly the solution to either problem. What is certain is that, for global warming, the slow progress of the mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions from the industrial and related sectors of human economic activity remains the chief obstacle.

Finally, mainstream opinion on the climate-pandemic connection appears to have converged on the view that post-pandemic economic recovery represents a unique opportunity for a low-carbon transition. It is argued widely that governments must either let enterprises and businesses fail in high emission industries and sectors, or impose stringent mitigation targets on them to avail support, while also promoting low-carbon industries and sectors. For developing countries this would be an unwise strategy as it would lead to increased energy costs and increased costs of other goods and services as well, which would worsen the economic contraction associated with Covid-19. Moreover, while the extensive small-scale and informal sectors in such economies are struggling to even survive, they could hardly be expected to undertake a technological leap in their recovery. Developed countries have greater economic space for flexibility and enhanced mitigation efforts, but there are limits for them too. There is no short cut to climate action that the pandemic makes possible.