**Publication: CNA Online**
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# Commentary: The wonder of clear skies and returning wildlife is our new climate problem


A red fox runs around a parking lot in the southern Israeli city of Ashkelon, where predatory animals now roam amidrestrictions that have closed beaches and emptied sidewalks on Apr 20, 2020. (Photo: REUTERS/ Amir Cohen)

During this current pandemic, reports of environmental recovery arising from lockdowns on economic activities and social movement have circulated widely.

The images of clear skies in Delhi, Nairobi, and Los Angeles, or wildlife returning to unpolluted canals of Venice are striking, and indicate how significant humanity's environmental footprint is.

Yet, these pictures - and the funny memes that creative people have made from them – would do wrong if they imply Mother Earth is recovering due to humanity's enforced lockdown or suggest that staying indoors is enough to reverse climate change.

The reality is more complicated than that. In the context of climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic can exacerbate risks already present within vulnerable communities in the short-term.

But it also presents an opportunity for governments and policymakers to implement sustainable long-term policies aligned to the Paris Agreement.

## THE MYTH OF 'NATURE IS RECOVERING'

The "Nature-is-recovering" images circulating over the past month may have been a welcome change from pictures of devastating Australian wildfires or cities choking under polluted skies. But they are misleading given the stark reality of ongoing climate impact.

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Episodic falls in carbon emissions and air pollutants aren't enough to permanently move the needle on climate change.

Even as lockdowns brought factories to a grinding halt worldwide, the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration forecast in March that 2020 would be a hot year – with a 75 per cent chance of overtaking 2016 as the hottest year on record.

This would result in extensive climate hazards. The earlier Australian wildfires, and ongoing ones in Northern Thailand and Siberia, all arose from very warm and dry local conditions likely compounded by climate change.

FILE PHOTO: Dead trees mark the scorched landscape surrounding the Kangaroo Valley Bush Retreat after a wildfire in Kangaroo Valley, New South Wales, Australia, January 23, 2020. REUTERS/Thomas Peter/File photo

The impact from this increased warmth can be deadly to vulnerable communities in lockdown. Two relevant examples illustrate the immediate climate-COVID policy challenges.

First, parts of India this March experienced heatwave conditions typically occurring later in summer. The India Meteorological Department has predicted that these heatwave conditions will likely continue for the next few months.

Heatwaves are becoming more frequent and intense because of climate change. Sheltering in place to prevent COVID-19 transmission may instead expose communities to lethal heat stress, especially without air conditioning or other means to adapt.

Second, weather forecasters predict a very active hurricane season from June in the North Atlantic due to warmer-than-normal sea surface temperatures. This has potentially deadly consequences for people sheltering-in-place in the Caribbean, US Eastern Seaboard and Gulf States if a major hurricane makes landfall.

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Will these vulnerable coastal communities still subject to stay-at-home notices be forced to evacuate to large shelters, where extended close contact is inevitable? Can hospitals in these areas, already dealing with a prolonged influx of COVID-19 cases, cope with hurricane-related injuries and power outages from storms?

We are already seeing this in real time not in the Atlantic, but in the Bay of Bengal with Tropical Cyclone Amphan.

Ignoring these immediate compound climate-COVID risks is folly. Specific policies reducing these climate risks in these areas exist, and governments will have to plan for undesirable contingencies later this year, albeit with less resources because of the ongoing pandemic.

AN UNEXPECTED BENEFIT OF LOCKDOWNS

A common long-term goal of fighting COVID-19 and climate change is that both “curves” – currently depicting inexorable increases in global rates of infection and global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions respectively – must bend towards zero.

While global COVID-19 infections have yet to fully peak, an unexpected benefit is that lockdowns worldwide have significantly reduced GHG emissions from last year’s record.

(Photo: Unsplash/veeterzy)

The International Energy Association recently announced that the world is on course to reduce close to 8 per cent (or about 2.6 billion tonnes) of current GHG emissions by the end of this year.

This is a considerable amount. It is 50 times the amount of Singapore’s total estimated emissions in 2019, and more than six times the amount compared to reductions during the 2008 to 2009 global financial crisis.

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More encouragingly, the 8 per cent cut is roughly equivalent to the annual emissions reductions needed from this year onwards to limit warming to the Paris Agreement 1.5 degrees Celsius limit.

But does that mean global lockdowns are the path to stopping climate change? Far from it. We may have bent the curve, but the opportunistic emissions decrease can't be sustained year-on-year with lockdowns.

Yet a return to "normal" development and resumption of economic activity will lead to emissions rebounding sharply, as was the case immediately after the financial crisis, when a 1.8 per cent decrease in carbon emissions in 2009 was offset by a 6 per cent increase in 2010.

THE SUSTAINABLE WAY FORWARD

What we need to do is to sustain the decreases in order to get GHG emissions to net-zero, which occurs when human-caused emissions are balanced out by either natural or artificial removal of GHGs from the atmosphere.

Our leaders need a coherent, fair, and long-term developmental vision towards net-zero GHG emissions and the political will to sustain it.


Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg gives a speech during at the COP25 climate change conference in Madrid where some say the struggle to protect nature needs to get more attention AFP/CRISTINA QUICLER

A pathway for governments to follow was suggested in a recent study co-authored by prominent economists Lord Nicholas Stern and the Nobel Prize winner Joseph Stiglitz.

They surveyed 230 finance and economic experts from G20 countries to assess the costs and benefits of government spending on different post-COVID recovery policies.

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The respondents gave highest ratings to “green” investments in clean energy technology, retrofits to improve energy efficiency, and the restoration of carbon-rich habitats.

Another highly ranked measure is the educating and training of workers in carbon-intensive industries affected by COVID-19. This policy is topical for the oil industry, which has seen record price drops due to substantial oversupply and demand loss from decimated land transport and aviation sectors.

Prospects for long-term recovery in this sector were unclear even before COVID-19. Financial investors already had little appetite to continue bankrolling oil producers after years of sub-par returns from a combination of geopolitical and climate factors.

Instead, the industry relied on government financial packages to offset considerable economic losses.

Rather than unconditional financial bailouts and subsidies which largely benefit executives over vulnerable workers, a more sensible investment policy is in retraining and redeploying this sector’s highly-skilled workforce towards future low-carbon industries, including carbon capture and storage.

Such policies enabling a just transition for affected workers would enable resilient economic growth while lowering carbon emissions, especially when also applied to other carbon-intensive industries.

Carbon dioxide storage tanks are seen at a cement plant and carbon capture facility in Anhui province, China on Sep 11, 2019. (Photo: REUTERS/David Stanway)

A well-planned and managed green stimulus can drive a superior economic recovery in the long-term while consistently lowering climate emissions towards the Paris 1.5 degrees Celsius goal.

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THE CLIMATE OPPORTUNITY OF COVID-19

The magnitude of COVID-19 infections and deaths worldwide is staggering, and the pandemic has revealed the scale of the response needed for effective short- and long-term climate action.

Regrettably, neither crisis is being addressed properly with desired outcomes. Both require urgent, sensible science-based policies that redirect our resources and political will to prevent unneeded suffering and death worldwide.

That said, the famous saying goes that “in every crisis, there lies opportunity.”

The real silver lining of COVID-19 is the opportunity to collectively bend the climate curve sustainably through our own actions, rather than inadvertently doing so because of the pandemic.

Let’s hope that as the pandemic ends sometime in the future, this climate opportunity is grasped fully.

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