

# POLLUTION AND PANDEMIC

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Pollution - Air, Water, Soil & E-waste

The [coronavirus pandemic](#) and its fallout have had devastating effects in most parts of the world. The swift and aggressive globalisation of the world has been stopped in its tracks. Industrial economies, supply chains, essential commodities, public health services, and various other activities have taken a serious hit because of the much-needed governmental regulations to curb the spread of [Covid-19](#). A silver lining, though, has been the effect of regulatory [social distancing](#) and the blanket lockdown of the industrial and service sectors on the environment.

There are four main sources of air pollution: Stationary sources such as industries, power plants and factories; mobile sources or vehicular transport; area sources such as agricultural tracts and cities; and natural sources, which include volcanoes, cyclones and wildfires. The current lockdown seems to have snuffed out a lot of the first three sources. The industrial, tourism and service sectors have been brought to a standstill.

The effect of all this is apparent. For instance, the Air Quality Index (AQI) at Anand Vihar — infamous for being one of the most polluted regions in Delhi due to the plethora of industries in its vicinity — has come down from 229 (deemed poor) about this time last year to about 80 currently (regarded as satisfactory). The difference is, in fact, much more when Anand Vihar's current AQI is compared to that in November last year — the region had recorded 447 then. There have been similar improvements in other parts of the country — the world, in fact.

The natural question, then, is: Why have governments not been able to enforce such environmental measures proactively? Why is the current situation a by-product of managing a pandemic? The most obvious — and understandable — answer would be that the lockdown was needed to bring down the fatalities caused by the pandemic.

However, according to a World Health Organisation report, the combined effects of ambient (outdoor) and household air pollution are responsible for 70,00,000 deaths every year — largely as a result of increased mortality caused by heart diseases, chronic obstructive pulmonary diseases, lung [cancer](#) and acute respiratory infections. Compare this to the about 50,000 deaths in the three months of the pandemic — about 2,00,000 deaths a year, via simple extrapolation, discounting other developments. That is less than 3 per cent of the deaths caused by air pollution alone. We have not even considered other sources of pollution — water pollution, hazardous waste pollution — as well as displacement due to glacial recessions and climate change.

The effort at reducing social interactions and cutting down commercial activities has been almost on a global scale — and that has brought down pollution. This shows that positive actions by a handful of countries or regions do not always improve the environment. Industries displaced from environmentally-regulated regions move to other regions. Of course, governments would be hard-pressed to impose measures designed for an international pandemic to address environmental issues like air pollution. It is also not pragmatic to impose a blanket lockdown to address air pollution. Policy decisions will have to balance socio-economic considerations with health imperatives. Inter-generational equity should be the thrust of such efforts.

Under Common Law, the public trust doctrine is often invoked in cases of large-scale environmental harm. The doctrine presupposes the government to be the custodian of the environment — its protection, therefore, is the responsibility of the government. However, during the current pandemic the maximum stimulus, especially in the technology and service sectors,

has come from the private sector.

The government can consider promoting innovation in the private sector in matters pertaining to the environment. Individual sectors can be made custodians of regions to curb pollution. For instance, green indices of companies can be made a factor in their market valuation. Similarly, instead of adding fuel/carbon tax at the time of issuing flight tickets, the same could be added to the yearly tax returns to make a person aware of his/her carbon footprint. Some of these measures can be scaled globally within a short time.

It has required a pandemic to clean up the environment. It is the global community's duty to carry the task forward.

***The writer is an environmental and energy lawyer and an assistant professor at Jindal School for Environment and Sustainability***

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