

11 LESSONS FROM THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Disaster and disaster management

[COVID-19](#) is a mega-pandemic, if ever there was one. No other outbreak, even if it was called a pandemic by the World Health Organization, affected people in as many countries as this one has. Nothing in my lifetime (and I am 55 now) has ever caused the world to shut down. Every country that has tried to follow a different path, calibrated or otherwise, has discovered that a shutdown is inevitable. The impact was so swift and widespread that we were forced to learn new lessons and rediscover the value of some old ones much to our chagrin. Here are 11 lessons that we re-discovered or learnt. The list is by no means exhaustive but provides food for thought.

Shutdown works: Ebola didn't kill millions when it occurred because the shutdown of the affected area was prompt and complete. Yet we did not learn. On this occasion we have experienced responses from world leaders that range from measured to downright idiotic. This let the virus spread throughout the world and turn vibrant cities into ghost towns. People had to be confined to their homes, factories had to be closed and the economy took a huge hit. In each geography the only step that finally snapped the spread of the virus was a shutdown. Those who did it promptly, like Bhilwara in Rajasthan, recovered rapidly. Therefore it is fair to ask the questions, "why were nations so cavalier in our approach", "why did we forget what we had learnt from Ebola, SARS, and MERS" and "what will it take for us not to make the same mistakes again".

Hygiene helps: If any old lesson came handy during the COVID-19 crisis it was that hygiene helps. We have all been taught to wash our hands every time we've been to a place that could have disease causing germs, when we return home from outside and from time to time for good measure. Yet, if the upward graph of soap sales during the crisis is any indication, it was as if we were discovering the value of washing hands for the first time!

Focus is effective: We are taught the value of focus in everything we do. We have seen how focus on ensuring food security created the green revolution in the late 60's and early 70's. In recent times a focused approach led to the eradication of polio from the country and the creation of massive sanitation capacity in all parts of the country. Focus helps. Yet when it comes to making resources available for social development we follow the practice of too little, too late and in too many places. Little wonder that India languishes at the 129th rank in the Human Development Index (2019 report). The COVID-19 outbreak has shown, like never before, how focused action can lead to high social impact in a short period of time. Now that the crisis is blowing over, we might go back to our philandering ways of social development and it would be such a loss of a good lesson.

We really don't need much to live: We have lived through a lockdown. The availability of food, water, shelter, communication, medicines and education and entertainment on television & the internet has kept us going. The lockdown has forced us to ask what we really need to live reasonably well. And the answer in most cases is – not too much. While physiological and security needs have been paramount, many have found ways to learn new skills or do things they have always wanted to do but couldn't make time for. Families and friends have engaged over video calls and many have "met" members of their family more often during the lockdown than they otherwise do! Despite the lockdown we have discovered that we can satisfy all needs in Maslow's hierarchy. Many have learnt what really matters to them. Yet the chances of this learning being jettisoned as we return to the daily grind of yore is very high indeed.

Telecommuting is possible: The Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industry showed us that tele-calling could get many things done; IT companies demonstrated that you could be in a different continent and still enhance productivity. A 2016 survey by an HR services provider, Randstad, found that 53 per cent of the 7,500 respondents from India preferred telecommuting. Millennials have been vocal about this too. Yet most industries hesitated to explore the wonders of telecommuting. Even skyrocketing real estate prices did not take them there. Now that the lockdown has forced every company in every industry to rely on telecommuting to keep things going, it is quite clear that a lot can be done while working from home! This is the time to explore the values of remote working and physical presence and make a significant transition. This current imbroglio has forced everybody to update policies for security and business continuity. Chances are that work from home, flexi-time and other such policies won't be treated as pariahs or necessary evils in the aftermath of the crisis.

Our medical capacities are limited but we have huge reserve capacity: Medical capacities, especially in urban areas, have usually been taken for granted. Our worry has been the quality of care. But we have learnt now that the richest of nations are limited in their capacity to treat people if there is a large outbreak of a disease. To alleviate the massive pressure on the healthcare industry, governments, including the Indian government, have implemented several measures to enhance capacity – right from equipping tertiary medical care givers to getting healthcare on wheels activated. A pleasant surprise has been the return of 76,000-odd retired / qualified but not practising medical professionals to the New York medical system to boost the capacity of delivering medical care. India has a large qualified and capable base of medical professionals who are not allowed into regular practice and it is to our credit that we tapped into that base to tackle the pandemic. The existence of this reserve cohort of qualified medical personnel is a welcome realisation indeed.

The supply chain can snap: Companies manage to deal with supply risk by having more than one supplier for a commodity. Shutdowns are localised and the idea that nothing will be available from the supply chain is not something that is in the realm of consideration. This outbreak has shown that even this extreme possibility is real. We may argue that OEMs are shut anyway so supply chain disruption doesn't matter. Well, the pain of restarting the supply line will prove that we have a problem. We now have an additional headache to manage when it comes to supply chain disruption. A headache we will do well not to forget when business resumes as usual.

We are living beyond the planet's boundaries: If there is one lesson that is staring us in the face it is the fact that human beings live well beyond natural boundaries. Climate protagonists have been screaming about this for some time but we have largely ignored them. The rapid return of clear blue skies, breathtakingly fresh air, and clean water in moribund rivers; the chirping of birds, sighting wild animals in urban areas, arrival of dolphins in coastal regions, and even rapid healing of the ozone layer re-establish that we are messing nature up very badly the way we live. It is crazy to expect that a shutdown way of life will be the new normal and nature will get a chance to rejuvenate herself, but it is not crazy to expect that we will seek solutions that ensure simultaneous well-being of the economy and ecology. If we continue our high polluting way post the COVID-19 crisis, we may have dodged a bullet but will continue to imbibe slow poison.

Communities are connected: The SARS n-CoV2 virus that causes COVID-19 has shown us that we are truly connected. People have helped the virus travel around the world. And people have reached out to connect with others using technology, the absence of which could have led to a simultaneous outbreak of mental illness of pandemic proportions. Communities have adopted novel ways of reaching out – doing clang-ups, lighting lamps, playing music on their veranda to entertain neighbours and organising virtual concerts. The virus has shown us that no

man is an island.

Society has a heart: The shutdown has, once again, shown us that society has a heart. We have seen individuals rise to the occasion and help elders take care of their daily needs, allow house-help to stay home without fear of their wages being affected, organisations come forward to manufacture personal protective equipment, provide meals from factory kitchens, and administration open up stadia and public buildings to provide space for those who need shelter or isolation. Central banks have brought in massive policy measures to help tide over the crisis and governments have provided the weaker sections of society with cash and food.

As a society we rarely express gratitude in public for services received by us. There is no social ritual to acknowledge the work of those who serve us, be it the janitor, the medical practitioner or even the soldier. Videos of American citizens applauding their soldiers in public spaces makes us feel that it is a wonderful thing to do but doesn't drive us to emulate the gesture. In the midst of this crisis, with some serious prodding from the Prime Minister, we have found ways to show our appreciation of the yeoman service being rendered by our fellow citizens in providing medical care, food and essential services.

Instances of doing good during this crisis are too numerous to enumerate comprehensively, but together they have re-established that society has a heart.

People first, economy later: In the early days of the crisis, governments around the world were struggling to choose between a shutdown to keep people safe or keeping the economy going. Each government realised, some sooner others later, that this is a false choice. To see people first or economy first as a dilemma is to be penny-wise, pound foolish; for without a healthy population there can be no healthy economy. The resources had to be invested in overcoming the pandemic with the least number of casualties first; so that post the crisis, with fiscal measures in place, healthy people could make the economy buoyant. Today we save the people, tomorrow the people come together to save the economy.

Lessons, lessons, lessons: They say, never waste a crisis. We wouldn't have wasted this one if we start building and adopting solutions to stay within planetary boundaries in right earnest, both in our personal lives and in public spaces; if as individuals we practise personal hygiene, focus on our needs and not get driven by greed; if organisations adopt new tricks they have learnt like telecommunicating and intensify supply chain resilience; if governments focus on removing social ills one at a time; if as a society we continue to be compassionate in life and remain connected with our loved ones; if we build a war chest to put people first and tide over the next crisis when it comes and if we shut down without dithering when, God forbid, we encounter another contagion.

Yes, this is too much to ask for. If we adopt half of what we have learnt, we will be better off. But I don't want to be accused of asking for too little.

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