

IT'S NOT ECONOMY VS CLEAN AIR

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Conservation, Sustainable Development, and EIA

The damage to the global economy from [COVID-19](#) threatens to far exceed that of the recession of 2007-2009 and could, according to the International Monetary Fund, trigger the worst recession since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Governments desperate to reopen moribund economies are now tiptoeing around the lockdown to avoid the dreaded “second wave” of the virus.

However, as lockdown exit strategies turn their attention to saving livelihoods, there is pressure on governments to lower environmental standards, suspend environmental monitoring requirements and reduce environmental enforcement, in the belief that this is necessary to salvage economic growth. Yet, it would be a mistake to assume that there is a trade-off between saving livelihoods and protecting the environment. The crisis of COVID-19 has highlighted that improving the quality of air in our country is not a matter of choice but an emergency.

At the end of March, the US announced a significant reduction in fuel efficiency standards for new cars, which could result in increased gasoline consumption by 80 billion tonnes, pumping increased carbon emissions into the atmosphere. The US Environmental Protection Agency has announced that it will not be enforcing compliance with routine monitoring and reporting obligations of environmental protection, for an indefinite period.

On April 15, the UN special rapporteur on human rights and the environment, David Boyd, condemned such steps as “irrational, irresponsible, and jeopardiz[ing] the rights of vulnerable people”, emphasizing that COVID-19 must not be used as an excuse to weaken environmental protection. Thirteen European climate and environment ministers, including those of [Italy](#) and [Spain](#), the countries worst affected by the virus in Europe, wrote as recently as on April 9 that “we should resist the temptations of short-term solutions in response to the present crisis” and stressed the need to maintain and strengthen EU’s effective regulatory tools to stick to its 2030 climate goals.

India has even greater reason to resist the temptation to put clean air on the backburner. First and foremost, people living in areas with higher levels of air pollution face increased risk of premature death from COVID-19. New Delhi was the world’s most polluted capital city for the second straight year in 2019, and India was also home to 21 of the world’s 30 most polluted cities, Swiss-based group IQ AirVisual said in a recent study.

The State of Global Air 2019 Report finds air pollution responsible for over 1.2 million deaths in [China](#) and India each, based on 2017 data. Whereas China succeeded in reducing air pollution in its cities by 32 per cent on average in four years from 2014-2018, India has had little success. Again, continued air pollution directly translates to mortality under COVID-19.

Second, there is enormous inequality in the impact of the COVID-19 fallout. Those who suffer the most from air pollution are the millions who live and toil in the open, who cannot afford air-purifiers or other mitigating measures, as also the elderly and children.

Third, there is good evidence that three-quarters of the emerging infectious diseases migrate from wild or domesticated animals into humans. This includes Ebola, SARS, MERS and now COVID-19. Deforestation, industrial agriculture, illegal wildlife trade, climate change and other types of environmental degradation increase the risk of future pandemics.

Fourth, from Delhi to Sao Paulo, Bangkok to Bogota, the dramatic improvement in the quality of air and water in the most polluted cities around the world has been transmitted by social media. This may well result in a groundswell of public support for measures to protect the environment.

Fifth, it is possible that the cataclysm of corona will jolt the markets into giving a clean, healthy and sustainable environment the economic value it deserves. As Mark Carney, former governor of the Bank of [England](#), wrote in The Economist: “.the traditional drivers of value have been shaken, new ones will gain prominence, and there’s a possibility that the gulf between what markets value, and what people value, will close.”

For all these reasons and more, the [pandemic](#) is an urgent call to action on the environment — air pollution in particular — on a war footing. In the past, we have never treated air pollution as a national emergency, failing to coordinate between the Centre and state governments. The COVID pandemic has been declared a national disaster in India, under the National Disaster Management Act, 2005. This legislation mandates the disaster authorities at the national, state and district levels under the Act, as well as the Central and state governments, coordinate among themselves and take measures for the prevention and mitigation of the pandemic. Air pollution creates medical conditions that gravely increase the risk of fatalities from COVID-19.

Preventing and mitigating the risks of COVID-19, therefore, means the mandate for the disaster authorities is also to tackle air and other forms of pollution head-on.

The NDMA is a platform which should be used to combat air pollution as an emergency, with a framework for coordination between different levels of the government. Similar coordination will be required at an international level to continue to work towards reduced emissions under the Paris Agreement. It is a great pity that it takes a pandemic to bring the realisation that economic growth versus clean air is a false dichotomy.

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