A convergence of crises

Policy ideas should marry employment and industrial priorities with green outcomes

There is a growing debate about what the scarcity and privation wrought by the COVID-19 crisis will mean for our response to climate change. The very language used to describe the effects of climate change is now being deployed, correctly, to shape our understanding of a disease-ravaged near future: poverty, the failure of markets, uncertainty, and an overwhelmed government. In less than a month, we have been given a glimpse of how the climate crisis can yank at the seams of a state already undone.

- We saw Cyclone Amphan transform from a tropical storm to one of the largest cyclones South Asia has ever seen in a matter of hours, aided by warmer than usual waters in the Bay of Bengal.
- We also saw Cyclone Nisarga barrel down on Maharashtra, the second pre-monsoon cyclone to hit the west coast in 127 years.
- Governments would have been hard-pressed to deal with such extremes even in the best of times.

Debate

- There is a mounting debate about what the scarcity and privation wrought by the COVID-19 crisis will mean for our long-term response to climate change. There are two strands of opinion.
  - The optimistic one sees this as a moment to remake our states and societies in a measured response. This includes directing economic packages to areas that increase our resilience to natural disasters and technologies that reduce our emissions.
  - On the personal front, this could be an opportunity to reinforce sustainable behaviour — fewer morning commutes and less air travel, for example.
  - The other strand is more dire, arguing that this will amount to a lost decade or two as our attention is focused on keeping the teetering ship of economy afloat.
  - In this reading, present concerns will trump preparations for an uncertain future. Between these two strands there is consensus that we are at a critical juncture.
  - What we do now will determine the flow of events decades into the future.

Limited funds

- It has been two months since India’s lockdown, and we know enough to have a rational conversation about our climate future.
- Perhaps the most important news relates to public and private debt. The government has raised its borrowing limit, states will need to borrow more to tide over shortfalls and the private sector has seen returns from investments dry out.
- All three are already heavily indebted, meaning the cost of capital for future borrowing will only grow. That leaves limited fiscal room to finance the building blocks of resilience: everything from grain to health, employment schemes, irrigation,
efficient water systems and river management infrastructure.

- It could mean that efforts to reduce our energy emissions are left without patient pools of long-term capital.
- The knowledge infrastructure needed to react to climate change might be left similarly underdeveloped. Climate change distinguishes itself from other policy fields in the wide range of analytical tasks it demands, from predicting weather trends to understanding how specific seed varieties react to droughts.
- Thinking about climate change requires a lot of people exploring varied questions simultaneously. That involves funding an ecosystem of thinkers from diverse disciplines.
- Only the state can provide for multi-year studies, institutional support and the like. These are inherently long-term investments and only really start paying off over decades, which means hamstrung investment in coming years will leave a knowledge vacuum in the future.
- The final point relates to something more ephemeral: the psychology of government. The Indian government, reacting to a million crises erupting across the economy, will be hard-pressed to plan for a hazy but sinister future.
- Promises of a greener, less turbulent future will falter against the turbulence of today; this instinct will be shared by governments across the world. This might well numb the effects of the global climate negotiation architecture.

Dealing with twin challenges

Crafting a response that carefully balances present and future will take a great deal of collective effort. Foremost, it will require policy ideas that deliberately marry employment and industrial priorities with green outcomes. Ideas such as pushing to manufacture solar equipment or electric vehicles in India should, at some point, coalesce into something that looks like a climate plan for the country. This task will fall to universities, NGOs, think tanks and individuals working together in disciplined debate. This process is our only hope for being creative about the twin challenges battering the country. We should be careful not to drag ourselves through one crisis only to emerge into another longer, less predictable, and unstoppable one.

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