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Reverse Migration due to COVID-19 Underpins the Need for Adaptation



Center for Study of Science, Technology and Policy

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By Dr Indu K Murthy, Principal Research Scientist, CSTEP.

The domino effect set in motion by COVID-19 is a blunt reminder that under-prepared systems will have to bear devastating shocks. Climate change is one such inexorable force that not only amplifies existing risks but also creates new risks to natural and human systems.

This year was believed to be a turning point for climate and sustainable development, marking the start of a decade of action, until the pandemic struck. Countries across the world went into lockdown, resulting in a massive collapse of the economy and (consequently, albeit inadvertently) reduced emissions. However, this is not avoided emissions nor is it a substitute for concerted Climate Action, according to the World Meteorological Organization. This is because even if fossil-fuel emissions were significantly reduced or stopped, some level of warming is certain. In fact, it is very likely that the total concentration of CO₂ in the atmosphere will continue going up in the future, as past experiences during economic crises suggest.



Though climate change is a global phenomenon, its impacts are local and risks varied across continents, nations, states, and even districts. Risks are unevenly distributed — across countries and within countries, and is generally greater for developing countries. Moreover, whatever be the overall level of development in a country, the risks are higher for disadvantaged people. The risk of climate-related impacts is a result of interaction of climate-related hazards with vulnerability and exposure of natural and human systems, including their resilience and ability to adapt.

Risks are greatest — currently and in the future — for people dependent on natural-resource sectors. Such people include farmers, fishermen, forest-dependent communities, and all the other marginalised communities experiencing inequality and

poverty. COVID-19 has brought to surface this stark inequality, as seen in the case of people working in the non-service sectors and the migrant and landless labourers, as well as people dependent on natural-resource sectors.

The challenge in a post-COVID scenario becomes larger as a certain percentage of the migrant population who have moved back to rural areas may choose to remain there, because of the uncertainty and their recent harsh experience in the urban areas. This reverse migration of a population (who migrated earlier from rural to urban areas, following economic, environmental and climate-related challenges) places them where they were earlier — vulnerable and at risk.

Cash transfers to migrants is being suggested as a means to help them tide over financial stress, But, this is only an immediate solution, and will not address the medium and long-term needs. The migrant population choosing to remain in rural areas will require food security and livelihood opportunities. Much of the population may become involved in agriculture as labourers, or in activities that may be natural-resource-based, or are seasonal — vulnerable to climate variability and extremes. Under such circumstances, rebuilding the natural capital, building climate resilience, and adaptation are the need of the hour and the way forward.

Governments have formulated stimulus packages to revive the economy. The pandemic-induced financial decisions in the coming months will shape the global economy for the next decade, coinciding with climate action that requires halving our emissions. The stimulus packages will cost trillions of dollars, leaving the governments with limited resources to address another global crisis, such as climate change, in the years to come. Therefore, a good strategy would be to utilise the stimulus packages to promote investments on coherent integrated solutions that can propel the global economy towards sustainable growth, rebuild natural capital and increase resilience of systems — both natural and man-made.

Looking beyond immediate relief and toward longer-term recovery, adaptation planning is essential for building resilient systems that prepare countries for any future crisis — health, climate, or economic. Climate action, particularly adaptation, presents that opportunity as it involves addressing multiple development objectives. Adaptation planning also necessitates tackling complex issues of gender and social inclusion, ensuring that different social groups are reflected in adaptation actions, and benefits are shared equitably. Thus, it provides an opportunity to reap triple dividend — economic, natural capital and climate resilience.

The author is Principal Research Scientist at the Center for Study of Science, Technology and Policy, Bengaluru (@CSTEP_India), one of India's leading research-based think tanks. Contact: Indu K Murthy (indukmurthy@cstep.in, Twitter: @indukmurthy)

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