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# Covid-19 is sign of an ecological crisis

Dealing with it as if it were a singular phenomenon occurring in a single domain will not work

**T**he coronavirus (Covid-19) epidemic continues to spread across the world and is already a major health crisis. It has begun to spill over into the economic domain, causing cascading disruptions to the dense networks of production and investment, travel and trade. It is possible that within a year or so, an effective vaccine may be developed but that might be too late in preventing a full scale pandemic.

While focusing on the immediate crisis one should consider its deeper implications. The Covid-19 is a symptom of a deeper ecological crisis that endangers the survival of humanity itself. It is the inevitable outcome of the growing industrialisation of agriculture and animal husbandry based

on standardisation of species at the cost of bio-diversity, the steady loss of wild habitats, which compels wildlife to intrude into human settlements and the unintended exposure of human communities to organisms to which they have no immunity. In our own cities, we see bands of marauding monkeys. Leopards and elephants often stray into villages and urban settlements because forests are being denuded. Industrial techniques of mass production have been brought into the animal husbandry domain with animals and poultry packed together in cramped spaces. Any infection in one animal spreads quickly to others. Examples are swine flu and avian flu, and these then cross-over to human hosts. In order to minimise such risks, animals are routinely pumped full of antibiotics. This then gets into the food-chain with its own

adverse health consequences. The industrialisation of agriculture and animal husbandry may have enhanced food security but this creates a negative feedback loop in health security.



SHYAM SARAN

In reality, multiple crises confront humanity today, such as climate change, environmental degradation, declining water, food and energy security and social and economic inequality. These are all densely inter-connected, sometimes mutually reinforcing, while at other times mutually off-setting. They are symptoms of a deeper civilisational malaise embedded in our way of life, our value system, our understanding of the past and our aspirations for the future. Dealing with each crisis as if

it were a singular phenomenon occurring in a single domain will not work because it is linked through feedback loops to multiple domains. A crisis in one part of our planet's ecology such as the outbreak of Covid-19, may be linked to phenomena occurring in other domains, although this may not be immediately obvious. There was an interdependent causal chain at work here. The Covid-19 was a virus hosted by a species normally resident in the wild, in this case wild bats. These bats were brought into close proximity with industrially raised animals packed together at a food market in Wuhan, China, heightening the risk of contagion. The risk is inherent in the nature of processes developed to enhance food security without regard to consequences in other domains. This inability to look at our challenges in a

comprehensive frame is inherent in our current knowledge systems, which progress through ever-increasing specialisation and focus on the micro, abstracting from the macro. The big picture, the awareness of the myriad threads that bind the planet's fragile ecology together, that a small disturbance in one part of this ecology may trigger large disruptions in other parts, this compelling truth has been increasingly obscured and is now being denied in a fit of collective blindness. The reason is not hard to find. Acknowledging the truth will demand that we alter our lifestyles, change our value systems and reconnect humanity with nature — Man in Nature, not Man Against Nature, which has been the credo of our industrial age.

The report of the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has looked at the implications of the aspirational goal, incorporated in the Paris Climate Agreement, to limit global temperature rise to only 1.5 degrees centigrade compared with what it was at the beginning of the industrial revolution. It has come to the conclusion that we are already well on the way to reaching the 1.5 degree range and this will already be enough to unleash climate mayhem. More significantly the report concludes that "the pathways to avoiding an even hotter world require a swift and complete transformation not just of the global economy but of society too". Societal change is impossible without effecting a civilisational response.

Ours is an age of technological hubris. There is a pervasive belief that somehow technology will find the solutions we need to resolve the multiple crises we confront without having to change our patterns of living. There is a new world of artificial intelligence and machine learning waiting round the corner. There are the wonders of quantum computing and genetic engineering whose potential is already being actualised. There is a sense, in the words of one scientist, that "the outcome of future technological evolution could surpass humans by as much as we, intellectually surpass slime moulds."

May be. But will our planet and life on earth survive long enough to see the wonders of this technological advancement? Could there, for example, conceivably be a strain of virus whose virulence decimates the world's population before an antidote is found? The Covid-19 is perhaps a timely portent of an ecological disaster which we ignore at our peril.

What is the civilisational response needed to stave off the looming ecological crisis? We must look upon Nature as a living source of nurture from which one must never extract more than necessary for its regeneration. Biodiversity is fundamental to the maintenance of all life on our planet and must be preserved.

The cross-domain nature of the challenges we confront require a comprehensive and collaborative response at the global level. There is no alternative to multilateral processes through empowered international governance institutions.

Above all, we need a new definition of affluence which values clean air to breathe, fresh water to drink and a green earth to walk on above all else, and does not squander the inheritance of succeeding generations.

*The writer is a former foreign secretary and a senior fellow CPR. He was prime minister's special envoy for climate change 2007-2010*