

Climate change in times of Covid

28 December 2020

The first half of 2020 saw a sharp dip in pollution levels all over the world, thanks to the lockdowns imposed in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, leading to rising hopes of a rollback in global warming. However, as the year ends, all hopes lie in pieces as carbon emissions scale new highs globally.

According to a provisional report by the World Meteorological Organisation, published earlier this month, the year 2020 is set to be the among the three warmest on record. The State of the Global Climate report also goes on to say that the decade 2011-2020 would be the warmest ever. It says that the global mean surface temperature for January-October was 1.2°C higher than the pre-industrial baseline (1850-1900), making it the second-warmest year on record.

What is surprising that the year 2020 turned out to be so warm despite the fact that near-La Niña conditions prevailing in the equatorial Pacific Ocean since August and moderate La Niña conditions prevailing since October. The La Niña phase of the El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO) phenomenon generally has a cooling effect on many parts of the world. Increasing temperatures are directly related to human activity, through greenhouse gases, which rose to a record level in 2019 and despite the dip in the first half of the year, emissions flew higher again. The year has also seen global sea levels rise in proportions similar to 2019 values, mainly due to the increased melting of the ice sheets in Greenland and Antarctica. In Greenland alone ice weighing 152 gigatonnes melted between September 2019 and August 2020, which was on the high end of the 40-year satellite records.

According to the United Nations, calculations by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration of the United States show that even though the first 11 months of 2020 were .02°C cooler than record-hot 2016, there's a 55 pc chance that the year will end up as the warmest year on record. For its part, NASA said 2020 so far is the warmest on record and it's likely to stay that way. Using NASA data, if December is just 0.59°C above the 1980 to 2010 average, 2020 should be the hottest year on record.

Besides being the hottest year on record, 2020 also topped in the number of extreme weather events such as tropical cyclones, floods, heavy rainfall and droughts, all a well-known and expensive consequence of global warming impacted many parts of the world. The most dramatic was the record-breaking Atlantic Hurricane Season that witnessed 30 named storms from June 1 to November 30, the highest number ever recorded. A record number of these storms also made landfall along the United States coast. There was also heavy rainfall and flooding in many parts of Asia and Africa leading to loss of human lives, property and livelihoods. The most affected were the Sahel and Greater Horn regions of Africa and China, India, Korea and Japan regions of Asia. South America on the other hand experienced severe droughts with northern Argentina, Paraguay and western areas of Brazil being some of the worst affected. Brazil alone recorded agricultural losses of USD 3 billion, says a report by the WMO.

The UN warned that in view of the continued worsening of global warming, coral reefs face existential challenges and may disappear from the face of the Earth within a few decades. Coral reefs are extremely important part of the Earth's biosphere and they sustain a wide variety of marine life. They also protect coastlines from erosions from waves and storms, sink carbon and nitrogen and help recycle nutrients.

“Humanity must act with evidence-based urgency, ambition and innovation to change the trajectory for this ecosystem, which is the canary in the coalmine for climate’s impact on oceans, before it’s too late,” said Leticia Carvalho, head of United Nation Environment Programme. Coral reef loss would have devastating consequences not only for marine life, but also for over a billion people globally who benefit directly or indirectly from them.

However, there is little evidence that even today either governments or businesses have woken up to the catastrophic scenario facing the Earth. A clear opportunity lost by every country in resetting its environment protection policies during the Covid-19 pandemic. Three months of lockdowns all over the world had seen a rapid and surprising restoration of air and water as the pollution levels dipped dramatically, restoring long-polluted sites to their former pristine selves. This was a god-sent opportunity for the governments to take advantage of low or no pollution levels to ensure that the world does not get back to its dirty old ways. Unfortunately, within weeks of easing lockdowns in various nations, the gains of the lockdown were squandered away. In June, barely a fortnight after France ended the lockdown in place since March, red alert was raised over air pollution in Paris. Same was the story with many other parts of Europe. While Europe was battling automobile pollution, forest fires were once again flaring in different countries, from Siberia to Canada and California. This year has seen the worst forest fires in many countries. In Siberia, over 20 million hectares of forests, an area bigger than Greece, have been destroyed, while Canada and California, too, have witnessed unprecedented blazes.

In the first half of 2020, several environmental organisations had urged government as well as businesses to use the lockdowns as opportunity to reset modern lifestyle. They said that it was an ideal occasion to go as green as possible in all our activities – industry, transport, agriculture or leisure. And as each government opened its war chests to help business, there were numerous appeals made by environmental activists that the governments ought to put strict conditions and terms, linking the aid of trillions of dollars with drastic cut in emissions and to have clear and benchmarked shift towards a green economy. Unfortunately, little if any of the government aid was tied to green business. No political leader or business magnate has talked of investing the bailout in a way not only to make their companies financially strong, but also to make their businesses sustainable by cutting their carbon emissions and pollution level. Despite all the cautions and red alerts raised across the globe, pollution levels as well as global warming and climate change have continued to rise sharply.

According to a study, by end of September, the US had already witnessed 16 natural disasters (including wildfires, hurricanes, tornadoes and drought) that each caused at least USD 1 billion in damage, tying the record set in both 2011 and 2017—with several months left to go. Such statistics have been compiled since 1980. Another study, by Christian Aid, says that the world’s 10 costliest weather disasters of the year led to USD 150 billion in losses and caused 3500 deaths as well as displacement of 13.5 million persons. Only 4 pc of the losses had been insured, indicating that the poor suffered much higher losses than the rich. This is also true of the nations as middle and low income countries are facing disproportionate impact of the damages caused by global warming.

The virtual Climate Ambition Summit hosted earlier this month by British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, French President Emmanuel Macron and the UN Secretary General Antonio, too, failed to come up with any concrete measures to not only counter global warming but also to raise the finance needed to help poor nations deal with the impact of climate change. Most climatologists predict that if humanity has to save the Earth and itself, it needs to cut greenhouse gas emissions dramatically by 2030. The warning was given during the Paris Climate Summit in 2015. Five years have already gone by and the situation has become even more alarming. As the world enters 2021, it would do well to know that the climate change clock is ticking faster than ever and humanity is racing blindly towards its own extinction.

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