

Response to Covid-19 and climate change: a remarkable divergence

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As the year 2021 progressed, a remarkable divergence between the global response to the Covid-19 pandemic and to climate change became ever more apparent.

Considering Covid-19 first, there is little question that the tide has turned in this war. The use of selective lockdowns, masking and social distancing measures followed by widespread vaccination dramatically slowed the spread of the disease. Indeed, these measures proved so successful in countries like [Ireland](#) that some commentators have taken to criticising the Government for being overcautious in the measures it took to combat the disease.

I don't subscribe to this view. One reason is that an exponential rate of growth, left unchecked, can quickly become unstoppable. Another is the emergence of the Delta variant, which proved highly infectious among unvaccinated people and also resulted in a significant number of breakthrough infections among the vaccinated. Indeed, it remains to be seen how severe the impact of the delta variant will be in primary school children, most of whom are unvaccinated.

As regards second- and third-level education, I was somewhat disappointed vaccination was not made mandatory for all staff and students. After all we are institutes of education! No doubt there are complex legal reasons for this, but it certainly makes everyday life difficult, from teachers and lecturers having to deliver class through a mask to students attempting to observe social distancing in the classroom.

Overall, it could be said that the war against Covid-19 has been won, mainly due to the use of widespread vaccination. The main worry now is to ensure that similar vaccination programmes take place in the poorest nations, not least because of the possibility of the emergence of new variants that could prove to be vaccine resistant.

Global warming

As regards the climate crisis, the situation is very different. Despite a great many reports, resolutions and international meetings, there has been almost no slowing in the rise of greenhouse gas emissions, or in the rise of mean global temperature. Indeed, even the global shutdown in the year 2020-2021 had a barely discernible impact on the seemingly inexorable rise in emissions and surface temperature. Thus it appears that we are losing the war in the long-term theatre of climate change.

This a matter of great concern. It should be obvious that the longer it takes to "bend the curve" on emissions, the more severe our corrective action will need to be. In addition, many climate scientists point to the existence of likely tipping points in global warming, ie points of no return such as the collapse of enormous ice sheets.

Yet some commentators continue to emphasise the uncertainties in climate change, in particular the uncertainty in climate sensitivity (defined as the rise in mean global temperature produced by a doubling of the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere). This seems to me to be an odd approach, akin to asking how many cancer cells are produced by each cigarette. Given that we have not managed to slow the rise of emissions to date, the current trajectory is clear. It is simply a question of time before we sail past a catastrophic tipping point, if action is not taken.

So what is the solution? Is there a vaccine for climate change? The good news is that the very fact that global warming is a result of human activity implies that the solution is at hand. It is a matter of making the necessary changes to human activity, from land use to the burning of fossil fuels, from the obsession with relentless economic growth to a reconsideration of unnecessary enterprises such as space tourism.

In recent years, it has become a mantra among some journalists that the solution to climate change lies in the actions of the individual. There is some truth to this but given the scale of the challenge, governments also have a vital role to play.

The transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy, or from cars to public transport, are choices that can be facilitated only by strong government. Most importantly, the national governments of the world need to co-operate on action, rather than indulging in fruitless bouts of whataboutery. With this in mind, it will be interesting to see what comes out of the COP26 meeting in [Edinburgh](#) in November.

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