Planetary Health:
Managing Competing Tensions

By Margareth Sembiring

SYNOPSIS

After more than two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, wars present a stark reminder of how difficult it is to stay committed to environmental causes when crises arise.

COMMENTARY

SINCE COVID-19 erupted across the globe, the world's attention on environmental issues has been fluctuating. In view of the massive resources allocated for pandemic response, there are concerns that the governments' commitments to climate change and related issues may weaken.

Different elements of the society are pushing for a green recovery to ensure that the economic recovery budget is not spent on fossil fuels. This happens in parallel with mounting plastic pollution that results from continuing use of disposable masks and other medical waste as part of the pandemic response. To signal that climate change was not forgotten amidst the frantic period, countries came up with net-zero pledges halfway through the pandemic.

Defence Sector's High Carbon Footprint

Various climate meetings, including the climate summit for 40 world leaders convened by President Biden in April 2021, further suggest that climate change remains relevant. All this built-up momentum culminated in the headlines-grabbing release of the 'code red for humanity' IPCC report and the subsequent COP26 meeting in November 2021. The high note at which it all ended seems to suggest that climate agenda continues to be on track despite the pandemic.

Like the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the war in Ukraine once again shows the

frailty of our commitments to the environment in the face of crises. In addition to unspeakable human sufferings, the sheer scale of environmental damage that wars cause through the use of weapons, the destruction of vehicles and infrastructure, among others, is too evident.

As a result, the 1992 UN General Assembly called on the world governments to be mindful of environmental protection during armed conflicts. But as air, water, and land become increasingly polluted in the ongoing war, it is clear that the environment has once again become an inevitable victim of human choices.

Then there is the question of carbon emissions as well. The production and use of military equipment is carbon intensive. For example, the US military is the world's largest oil consumer, and consequently, the world's single largest institutional carbon emitter. Between 2001 and 2018, the US military emitted about 1,267 million metric tonnes of greenhouse gases; 35 percent of which was related to wars in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and Syria.

It is this realisation of the defence sector's high carbon footprint that has led to growing calls and initiatives to green it in recent years. Against this backdrop, it will be of no surprise that the current war in Ukraine is contributing to increasing carbon emissions that have begun to rebound to pre-COVID-19 levels since last year. This definitely puts a challenge to yet another ominous warning found in the latest April 2022 IPCC report of the urgent need to slash emissions which otherwise set the world on track to reach 3.2°C by the end of the century.

Managing Ongoing Dilemma and Tension

Although climate change, biodiversity loss and extreme weather are consistently showing up among the top five global worries in the last five years, the health and geopolitics crises in the last two years alone show how challenging it is to stay committed to environmental causes. This is despite a general consensus that a healthy environment is critical for human own survival.

The planetary health concept, for example, establishes that the health of the planet is a pre-requisite to sustaining human civilisation. Just like pollution is bad for human health, so are climate change and biodiversity loss. Continuing environmental degradation, therefore, endangers the future of humanity.

While the harmony between human and the environment presents the most ideal scenario, the relationship between the two is characterised mostly by constant dilemma and tension. More often than not, the eventual outcome tilts towards the detriment of the environment as shown by Covid-19 mounting waste and the war in Ukraine.

Does that amount to a doomsday scenario? Human activities inevitably cause some damage to the environment. Being realistic of what can be expected is a good first step. While being totally environment-friendly may likely be out of reach, minimising trade-off among policy objectives can be strengthened to maximise the effects on environmental protection.

Systems thinking as proposed by the planetary health concept can potentially facilitate better synergy across different policy goals. If adopted, it will prompt various sectors to bring environmental considerations front and centre in their planning. This is akin to ongoing greening and low-carbon development practices which increasingly compel different sectors, such as the maritime, defence, aviation sectors, among others, to find ways to reduce their carbon footprints.

Merits of the Planetary Health Concept

Given choices, the awareness and adoption of the planetary health concept is likely to result in the change of mindset and behaviours, which then leads to the prioritisation of more environmentally friendly options. These options include the ones that pollute the least, damage the forests, the oceans, and the rivers ecosystems the least, and disturb the animal habitats the least.

Policymakers and government officials need to be among the first to see the merit of planetary health concept although communities and individuals must be onboard too. By so doing, the overall impact on the health of the planet, which is currently measured by planetary boundaries, carbon budget, ecological footprint, among others, can be reduced, minimised, or even reversed.

In view of worsening environmental degradation, its protection can no longer be treated as a peacetime issue, developmental problem, or an afterthought. Little is known about what will happen in the future, but the ongoing pandemic and wars have shown how easy it is to overlook environmental concerns especially in times of crises. More needs to be done to ensure that strong commitments for the environment remain in place regardless of future challenges.

The complexity, dilemma and tension surrounding environmental protection aside, it is important to acknowledge that countries, communities, and individuals differ in their preferences and capacities to live more environmentally friendly options. Some are better able to go without red meat compared to others. Some are better able to afford cleaner technologies compared to others. Some are better able to live simpler than others.

While efforts are in the works to incentivise the uptake of more environmentally friendly lifestyles and reduce overall resource consumption, understanding this sensitivity is critical to encourage all parties to participate fully in the process according to their capacities.

The application of the planetary health concept will therefore have nuances across societies. Examining and comprehending the characteristics of different societies will help in formulating realistic policy objectives for behavioural changes that are more compatible with planetary health ideal. Such approach is likely to result in more resilient commitments towards the health of the planet even in the face of crises.

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