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*Global Health Security:
COVID-19 & Its Impacts*

Urgently Needed: Ecological View in Decision-making

By Margareth Sembiring

SYNOPSIS

Increasing plastic use during the time of pandemic confirms the underlying limitation in the common human security approach to solving environmental woes. A shift to a more ecological perspective is needed if the world is to meaningfully address environmental worries and care for the planet.

COMMENTARY

FROM THE start of the pandemic response, it was evident that the environment has been placed on the backburner. In the first few months, when the world was gripped by much anxiety over a lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) supply in the market, governments' most common strategy was to quickly produce as many PPE as possible to meet skyrocketing demands. That PPE are mostly made of [plastics](#), the arch-enemy of environmental campaigns, did not seem to matter at all.

Likewise, fear for life has rendered the [fossil fuel](#) origins of plastic products completely irrelevant. The use of these products is at times justifiable although how much is enough is a matter of personal judgment for most people. The emphasis on meeting human needs, which is often done at the expense of the environment, however, points to a deeper issue. It reflects society's underlying convenient attitude towards the environment that has arguably hampered the effectiveness of various environmental protection measures thus far.

Worsening Waste Management Inadequacy

The world's fear-driven response to this pandemic, which has resulted in [heaping](#) plastic trash, will surely add up to an estimated five [billion tonnes of plastics](#) that had ended up in landfill or natural environment since 1950s. Globally, only [9 per cent](#) of plastics ever produced has been recycled.

This demonstrates existing inadequacy in waste management capacity that the pandemic response has evidently exacerbated. Not only disposable masks and other PPE are found [littering](#) the oceans. Around [15-20 million](#) informal waste collectors who are often among the poorest and most vulnerable in the society also put their health at [risk](#) from scavenging potentially infected garbage piles.

These observations suggest limitations in the human security approach to the environment. Considering existing complex environmental challenges and the [race](#) against time to meet the 1.5°C Paris target, a shift from human security to a more ecological perspective is needed. This is to change the way society utilises Earth's resources and enable effective measures to address environmental worries.

Rethinking Human Security

The care of the environment has long been seen primarily from the human security lens. Climate change is a nightmare because of disaster prospects and their potential impacts on food availability, stability and security, and other human needs.

Plastic waste is a pressing issue because microplastics that fish consume will eventually end up in the human digestive systems. In other words, the health of the ecology itself is hardly the main reason behind the zeal for environmental protection agenda.

The pandemic response has brought to the fore the tension between prioritising human needs and the care of the environment. In March 2020, the World Health Organisation ([WHO](#)) urged the PPE industry to increase their manufacturing capacity by 40 percent. This was to meet the world's demand of 89 million disposable masks, 76 million gloves, and 1.6 million goggles every month.

Relatedly, the pandemic-driven instant rush for plastic-made disposable masks was projected to lead to a [massive](#) jump in global sale from US\$800 million in 2019 to \$166 billion in 2020. Unfortunately, the good intention to provide enough PPE quickly has overlooked the eventual repercussions on the environment.

A similar response at the societal level is seen in the continuing use of disposable masks among low-risk populations. This is despite the [WHO](#) recommending their use mainly for health workers, people with COVID-19 symptoms, people caring for COVID-19 patients at home, and at-risk people. After the PPE supply chain was successfully restored, reasonably priced PPE products can easily be found in the market.

This, combined with convenience, hygiene, better protection, and other personal reasons, have probably led to continuing preferences for disposable over reusable fabric masks. A recent [survey](#) in the United States revealed that more than 70 percent of respondents aged 18 to 64 years had been using fabric masks.

But around 60 percent and 35 percent of them had also donned disposable masks and N95 masks within the week respectively. Despite the availability of more environmentally friendly alternatives, it is again clear that the emphasis on human needs can easily trump environmental considerations.

Integrating the Ecological Perspective

Considering that humanity and the environment are interconnected and mutually affecting, an ecological perspective is urgently needed to complement the current human security approach to environment and climate issues. The ecological perspective means to be constantly aware of humanity and the environment sharing the same space on Earth.

It calls for an integral consideration of pressures on the weakest in society, the environment, and other living beings, in every decision making. It means enlarging the focus beyond one's immediate needs and a willingness to bear some inconveniences in the spirit of solidarity for the collective good of the greater society.

In the specific example of mask use, the ecological perspective will enable one to keep their fear and personal preferences in check and opt for reusable masks based on risk assessment. Governments can help by encouraging low-risk population to use fabric instead of disposable masks, or even regulate the use of disposable masks only for those who really need them.

Similarly, as economies are re-opening and eager to rebound, an ecological approach will mindfully take into account the implications of a certain recovery strategy on resource use, the environment, and the most needy. This will be not only within national borders but also beyond, especially when global supply chains are involved. After all, we live in the same planet and environmental impacts know no boundaries as climate change attests.

For a start, governments can consider applying concepts akin to private sector-intended Environmental, Social, and Corporate Governance ([ESG](#)) principles to make necessary adjustments to national recovery packages. ESG, as some define, is the practice of considering material environmental, social and governance issues in the investment process.

The care of the environment cannot be exercised as and when convenient. Pushing the environment to the backseat and thinking it can be dealt with later are simply untenable. This is because of the enormous environmental stresses resulting from decades of it playing second fiddle. An ecological approach needs to be made intrinsic in the decision-making for resource use in crisis response and in the post-COVID-19 world.

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