The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the biggest challenges the world is battling with. It has increased both social and economic inequalities and posed threats to our healthcare systems, working environments, food systems, and biodiversity. It has wreaked havoc in countries across the globe including massive loss of lives, disruptions in movement, increased poverty (especially in developing countries), strict quarantine measures, closed borders, scarcities in personal protective equipment such as hand sanitisers, and vaccines inequities, among others.

COVID-19 and climate

As bad as these disruptions may be, the pandemic has impacted the environment in another, very intriguing way. It has reduced carbon dioxide emissions, triggered changes in human mobility such as the adoption of cycling, and improved air quality due to reduced air pollution as industries and aviation were forced to function at minimal capacity or cease operations.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us what happens when political and world leaders ignore science and refuse to take the necessary steps to protect humanity from health crises and other disasters. Many lives have been lost to this pandemic and it should serve as a warning that climate action cannot be delayed anymore, or we risk even more devastating consequences. Governments should be prepared for similar threats that undoubtedly await us in the future if we don’t act sooner. Otherwise, if not addressed, increased global heating could fuel the spread of future viruses and deadly disease outbreaks.
Climate anxiety and young people

Young people aged under 24 years account for nearly 40 per cent of the world’s population¹. A BBC global survey illustrates the depth of anxiety many young people are feeling about climate change. With responses from 10,000 people aged between 16 and 25, nearly 60 per cent of them felt extremely worried, with three-quarters thinking that the future was frightening, and more than half (56 per cent) saying that they think humanity is doomed².

One 16-year-old said: “It’s different for young people. For us, the destruction of the planet is personal.” This increasing climate change anxiety and inaction from governments has prompted thousands of them to join climate movements and organizations globally with the aim of making their voices heard. This anxiety is only compounded by the combination of the pandemic and climate disasters, which have increased social economic inequalities, affecting women, children, the elderly, and indigenous people disproportionately.

Impact of COVID-19 on Fridays For Future

Fridays for Future is a youth-led and organised global climate strike movement that started in August 2018 by a Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg. Its aim is to demand urgent action on the climate crisis. At Fridays for Future, the COVID-19 pandemic did not only limit the movement’s operations but also impacted our efforts to raise climate awareness. Our actions felt insignificant as the world was concentrated on addressing the pandemic.

We were not able to carry out climate strikes in groups or in our desired areas as we used to because of health and safety requirements. Physical actions that are the main activities for Fridays For Future such as mass mobilisation, meetings, community outreaches, sensitisations, conferences, tree-planting, clean-ups, and many campaigns were greatly affected. It was difficult to keep these types of communal activities going during the peak of the pandemic due to social-distancing measures and bans on public gatherings.

The Fridays for Future movement had to adapt to the new regulations in order to limit the spread of the virus, resulting in a shift to online communications and meetings, mobilisation, events, and coordination. These activities are now done on social networks such as Zoom and social media channels like Twitter, WhatsApp, Telegram, and emails.
It was impossible to organise actions on the ground considering the widespread fear of people moving from one place to another. The focus therefore remained more on online actions and a lot of collaborations with other activists around the globe. Now, more digital strikes are carried out in our own homes and neighborhoods and then posted on social media to raise awareness.

By the beginning of 2021, the spread of the coronavirus was slowing in some areas (mostly developed countries) as governments were able to provide vaccines to most nationals. Activists and environmentalists in these countries slowly started to have small physical events with limited numbers, while also complying with preventive measures such as sanitising and wearing face masks. Climate strikes in some parts of Europe were happening on the streets and in front of parliaments, starting with a few people and slowly growing in numbers.

COVID restrictions also made it very difficult for the movement to organise physical meetings and team-building events among the leaders, which affected our mental and social health. The group feeling just isn't nearly as empowering when you can't see each other in-person. The lack of interpersonal connection also affected the movement's participation numbers, as many people needed to take some time off from organising and strikes to spend more time with family, friends, and be in nature. More than a third of our movement's leaders were not active and this ultimately affected the magnitude of our reach and the number of events we could do. In addition, government restrictions on movements and organising (which involve public gatherings) also affected the contributions of our movement leaders and therefore stalled the movement's work during the pandemic.

**Looking to the future**

The pandemic showed that countries’ inaction against deadly climate change has not been due to their lack of economic strength. According to the Asia Foundation, it would cost the United States about $5.7 trillion (£4.18 trillion) to completely transition to renewable energy over 15 years. Ironically, the United States was able to commit $6 trillion (£4.4 trillion) to combat the coronavirus in the first three months of the outbreak alone. The creation of functional systems that support people without threatening life on earth should be a priority moving forward.
The COVID-19 pandemic has provided an opportunity for us to move towards a more sustainable lifestyle, but this is only possible if governments are willing to take bold steps to enforce and encourage positive environmental changes with urgency. Equally, this health crisis has taught us how important human interaction is, and that we can’t do everything by ourselves. We need global society to stand and fight with us for the climate, just as it did in the pandemic.

Involving youths, indigenous people, and people from ‘Most Affected People and Areas’ (MAPA) in important policy-making forums is crucial for solving many social and economic inequalities. We need to develop long-term, sustainable strategies to address this global challenge that prioritises MAPA with solidarity and intersectionality.

We, youth globally, are thirsty for real peace and healing of the planet and human race. Our dream to see the future generations thriving in a healthy world is a dream we wish to live in our own lifetimes. There is no option of giving up when there is still something to fight for.

In times where activists in the global south aren’t able to organise actions due to pandemic restrictions, those in the global north could help to amplify their voices and experiences. With perseverance, passion, determination, love, and hard work towards clean nature and hope for a just climate and social future, nothing can stop us.

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