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Covid-19 crisis and long-term transformations: alternatives from India

Will the Government of India listen to us, or go back to business as usual, content to handle the next emergency in the same kneejerk manner?

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Migrant workers in Chennai lockdown, waiting for meals arranged by the Chennai Corporation on April 2, 2020. | Pacific Press/PA. All rights reserved.

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While the most urgent measures to contain the Covid-19 virus and its impacts are the highest priority, we need to also think of and initiate long-term measures that help prevent such disasters in the future. Otherwise we will be staggering from one pandemic to the other; we've had many over the last 100 years, and many more are predicted if the conditions creating them continue as now.

Like this time, we will be able to respond in only knee-jerk ways, out of panic and rush, and make massive mistakes of the kind we are seeing in so many countries. In some, drastic lockdown measures are leading to joblessness, hunger, and other impacts especially on the most marginalized, that may sometimes be worse than the impacts of the virus. And in many places there is greater state surveillance, restrictions on democratic freedoms in the name of security, loosening of environmental and labour regulations, and so on, all in the name of emergency response... all of which could be even worse next time around unless we are a very different society.

The virus crisis has however also brought out the best of human nature, in the shape of more social solidarity (in the midst of 'physical distancing', wrongly labelled 'social distancing'), neighbourliness, civil society and governmental efforts to reach out to the most vulnerable, and people reconnecting with family and friends, and, why not? – also with themselves. And it has had a noticeable impact on the environment, with cleaner air and water, wildlife reclaiming spaces, and much else, as human mobility and activity dramatically reduces across the earth.

All of this shows that it is possible to think of fundamental shifts in the way we live with the rest of nature, and with each other.

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A social and political response from India

On March 28, a Forum of about 60 organizations and networks of civil society, working across India, submitted a statement to the Government of India and for public consideration. This Forum is the Core Group of a process called *Vikalp Sangam* or 'Alternatives Confluence', which since 2014 has attempted to bring together movements, groups and individuals working on just, equitable and sustainable pathways to human and ecological well-being. It rejects the current model of development and the structures of inequality and injustice underlying it (including patriarchy, capitalism, statism, casteism, and anthropocentrism), and searches for alternatives in practice and vision.

The statement stressed the need for measures that will "(a) significantly reduce the possibility of more such disastrous spread of diseases, and (b) significantly enhance the ability of communities to deal with such eventualities." It further stated that "the survival and sustainability of this planet lies in the adoption of values of dignity, equality and justice for all species, genders and social categories. This should reflect in the rejection of all policies and practices that cause destruction, exploitation and discrimination and injustice against any living being."

While the Vikalp Sangam statement is specific to India, it has relevance to many other parts of the world, since the issues of inequalities, injustice and unsustainability have many commonalities in their origin and nature, if not in the specifics of how they are manifested.

Recommendations and political paths: towards localization

The Vikalp Sangam statement starts with urging a “moratorium on all diversion of natural ecosystems for infrastructure, mining, and commercial purposes.” Given the increasing evidence from around the world of how the clearing of forests and the devastation of other natural ecosystems, also the commercial scale exploitation of wild animals, has been the source of many pathogens or the cause of them becoming virulent and given that India continues a pathway of ‘development’ that entails continued clearance of natural habitats, this is a crucial demand.

This would however raise the immediate question: but how then do we meet the needs of development, jobs, poverty eradication, and so on? For this, the Vikalp Sangam process has for many years already suggested a host of alternatives (hundreds documented on its website). In the statement, they include many.

Most importantly, the statement recommends that we “strengthen local, self-reliant economies.” Economic globalization has not only significantly enabled the spread of disease vectors and pathogens like Covid-19, but it has also devastated ecosystems and ecosystem-based livelihoods, unleashed abysmal levels of inequality, and created fragility in the economies of nearly all countries. This fragility is even more evident now than in the 2008 financial collapse. Instead of this, the Vikalp Sangam members suggest a shift to localization, a growing movement across the world. This will not happen or

succeed on its own, local institutions in villages and cities will need to be facilitated with resources, technical assistance and other inputs “to grow their own local, self-reliant economies, using local and new skills and resources, catering first and foremost to local needs.”

Localization does not entail isolationism.

Localization does not entail isolationism, but rather, that even as communities and settlements continue to exchange materials, ideas, and cultures across the globe (albeit with much less mobility, given the imperatives of the climate crisis), this is built on local self-reliance for basic needs. In fact such localization would itself help in significantly reducing the mobility that takes place out of distress, e.g. in so many parts of the world where villages are getting emptied as people leave for cities and industrial areas in search of jobs. This kind of migration is the biggest cause of the massively exploding urban populations and high densities, themselves ideal conditions for rapid pathogen spread.

India has a number of examples of revitalized, economically and socially more thriving villages having reduced and even reversed rural-urban migration, from whom lessons can be learnt. Orientation of a number of its government supported programmes, such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (giving every ‘poor’ person the right to at least 100 days of employment), housing subsidy schemes, and other welfare programmes, towards more ecologically and socially sensitive approaches would also help significantly in creating such local self-reliant and vibrant economies.

As a specific component of this, there is a focus on agriculture and allied activities. Given that the biggest livelihood sector in India is still agriculture, a

crucial recommendation is to shift away from the Green Revolution model of industrial-scale, chemical-intensive, lab-seed based agriculture, also identified with significant ecological disruption creating the conditions for disease related disasters.

Agroecological alternatives are available, and are being practiced by many, either as continuation of traditional agriculture or in a myriad new ways, with a focus on organic, biologically diverse farming, free range pastoralism, artisanal fisheries, and so on, using locally bred seeds and varieties, and in the control of the small producer. Unfortunately these are all swimming against the tide given that policy and market conditions favour the industrial model; one major step the government could take is to shift the huge multi-billion rupee subsidy for chemical fertilizers to organic inputs.

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Another specific component of localization is the need to empower communities to take care of health and medical systems. In many parts of the world, including widely contrasting nations like India and USA, the privatization of health services has been disastrous for hundreds of millions of people. Vikalp Sangam urges: “strengthening public health including district level epidemiological units that can understand and monitor local health problems and their determinants, as well as put back public sector medical services in the driving seat, rather than the privatization encouraged in recent times.”

It also recommends that every settlement should have basic facilities and trained ‘barefoot and paramedics’, using multiple health systems (moving away

from the predominant focus on allopathy, to include Ayurveda, Unani, Tibetan, and folk systems that have ancient roots and are time-tested. Reference is made to how China has used its traditional medicine in both prevention and treatment of cases in the Covid-19 crisis. There is however also a warning against fake claims that are being made in the name of traditional medicine, many of them viral on 'social' media, pushed by religious organizations; and against the indiscriminate slaughter or exploitation of wild animals that some systems encourage.

Key systemic transformations

A part of the Vikalp Sangam's statement is devoted to the more systemic transformations required in the economy and the polity. In its work over the last few years it has placed great stress on the struggles of those marginalized by tradition or modernity, including on the fronts of caste, gender, ethnicity, ability, age, sexual orientation, and so on. It seeks to "promote ecological design and sensitivity in all development and livelihoods", including in infrastructure, communications, energy, and education.

Perhaps most crucially, it stresses the need for radical, direct democracy, through institutions of self-governance (gram sabhas or village assemblies in rural areas, mohalla sabhas or area/ward committees in urban areas, or other relevant traditional institutions in regions with predominantly 'adivasi' (indigenous) populations). Unfortunately seven decades of a top-down governance system, and the brainwashing we have all gone through to accept liberal, representative democracies as the only form that is available, has meant that communities have lost their ability to self-govern.

Considerable facilitation is needed to rebuild this capacity, and to generate resources of various kinds so that people can govern their lands, conserve the nature around them, create economies of self-reliance that are in the hands of producers and consumers rather than corporations and the state, achieve

greater internal equity, and beyond all this, also make the state (in so far as it will continue to exist) accountable and transparent.

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The Vikalp Sangam statement is short, and does not spell out these recommendations in detail. But it is based on a document that has emerged from the last five years of dialogue and action, called 'The Search of Radical Alternatives', and links itself to a 'People's Manifesto for a Just, Equitable and Sustainable India', issued and sent to major political parties before India's general elections in early 2019. Much more detail on the above recommendations is contained in these documents.

“Lockdown” in India

India is currently in a state of complete 'lockdown' for a period of 3 weeks announced by its Prime Minister Narendra Modi on March 24. This completely unprecedented step is raising lots of questions about how necessary it was and how effective it will be in stopping the spread of the virus, especially in view of the widespread suffering it has caused amongst the country's largely unorganized, informal workforce.

Millions find themselves without a job, desperately trying to get back home but being left stranded as trains and buses are at a standstill, or being at home but with no daily wage to bring back home in order to buy that night's meal. As of the time of writing, more than 20 people have died as a result, in just six days of this lockdown (a quarter of the number that has so far died due to the virus over the last 2 months).

Some drastic steps were obviously necessary to contain the virus' spread, but the callous and insensitive manner in which it has been done has created the potential for massive economic, social, and personal devastation ([click here](#) for a series of stories). The kind of measures recommended by Vikalp Sangam may not immediately reduce this distress, but could well create the conditions by which communities can rebuild their lives over the next few months and years, and deal much more coherently and strongly with any future such outbreak.

Will the Government of India listen, or will it go back to business as usual, content to handle the next emergency in the same kneejerk manner? History is unfortunately on the side of the latter... but history can be changed, and for that there is a need of a vision of transformation. The Vikalp Sangam process and its multiple outputs, provide glimpses of such a vision.

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