

A tale of two crises: the pandemic versus the climate emergency

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As the summer of 2021 unfolds, it is interesting to compare the response of the public and politicians to two very different crises, the Covid-19 pandemic and the longer-term problem of climate change.

The development of the first vaccine for Covid-19 in late 2020 was quickly followed by the synthesis of several other vaccines. The unprecedented speed of the development of these vaccines was the direct result of unparalleled efforts by scientists, big pharma and governments, a worldwide effort that was driven by a widespread recognition of the threat posed by the virus.

The emergence of the vaccines was swiftly followed by large-scale programmes to deploy the vaccines to the nations of the world and their citizens. This was no small task but it was reasonably well-managed in many countries, despite many setbacks and problems with vaccine supply, allowing the prospect of a return to normal in September 2021.

All of this was enabled by a public recognition of the crisis, with daily updates in the world's media of case numbers and deaths. In consequence, many countries acted reasonably quickly, with the exception of rogue administrations such as that of [Jair Bolsonaro](#) in [Brazil](#).

However, the emergence of variants, such as Delta, raised the stakes in the race between vaccination and infection; in this context, the decision of Boris Johnson's government to drop all restrictions in England from July 19th seems questionable.

Another concern is that the poorer nations of the world have received very little help in vaccinating their populations. This approach is as self-defeating as it is selfish, as the existence of large unvaccinated populations runs the risk of the emergence of a new strain of the virus resistant to existing vaccines.

By contrast, the problem of climate change received little attention in the media this year. For example, the concentration of atmospheric carbon dioxide, a key greenhouse gas responsible for global warming, hit a record high in April 2021 – a whopping 50 per cent above pre-industrial levels. This worrying landmark received almost no attention in the world's media, yet it marked a key moment in the story of global climate change.

Similarly, an unprecedented heatwave in northwestern US and [Canada](#) received surprisingly brief coverage. This event saw record temperatures above 45 degrees in several areas, causing hundreds of deaths, wildfires and appalling damage to the biodiversity of the region – yet it received only a few reports in the news for a day or two. Indeed, what few reports I saw on [RTÉ](#) failed to mention any connection with climate change.

Of course, it is always difficult to link one particular event with a changing climate. However, the probability of such incidents is hugely increased in a warming world and it is no surprise that events such as the Canadian heatwave are occurring with ever-increasing frequency. Indeed, a recent statistical analysis of that particular incident suggested that it was virtually impossible without global warming.

International action

One problem may be that media reports of such events are often given by meteorologists, whose training may lie in the area of weather prediction rather than climate science. For this reason, many countries have instituted substantial training programmes in climate science for meteorologists. However, my own feeling is that the basic problem is that our daily news bulletins are orientated towards short-term events, rather than long-term phenomena such as climate change.

All in all, it could be said that the global response to the short, sharp shock of Covid-19 has been much better than our response to the long-term crisis of climate change. The latter is still seen by many governments and citizens as a problem remote in both time and distance, a distant challenge rather than a looming crisis.

In [Ireland](#), it is not uncommon to hear respected political figures openly question the part we should play in addressing the climate crisis. This is a most unfortunate attitude, given that global warming is a threat that can only be addressed by concerted international action. In any case, the inhabitants of a small island in the Atlantic have little to be complacent about, given the prospect of the melting of the polar ice caps and concomitant rise in sea level.

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