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The accumulated carbon in the air and near certainty of average temperatures rising by more than 2 deg C signal greater dangers ahead. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

We moved mountains to fight Covid-19. What about climate change?

Quick decision-making, the use of technology, mobilising funding, and a collective will helped beat the coronavirus. This holds lessons for tackling our global warming crisis.

Vinod Thomas

Climate disasters like the deadly heatwaves that scorched South-east and South Asia in April and May show that scientific projections are being systematically overshot.

The accumulated carbon in the air and near certainty of average temperatures rising by more than 2 deg C – the threshold for limiting global warming agreed on internationally – signal greater dangers ahead.

A top priority now should be the need to cut pollution and decarbonise economies, a theme highlighted at the World Environment Day on June 5. For that, financing and technology are two essential ingredients. Both can be mobilised if – but only if – a groundswell of public opinion presses politicians to act, as was the case in dealing with Covid-19.

The vital question is, what it will take for the same resolve to tackle the climate crisis.

The answer lies in four crucial strategies adopted to fight the pandemic – a nimble, speedy response by governments, bringing everyone on board for climate action, harnessing technology and giving weight to financial policy to enable that.

ACTING QUICKLY

The speed of response to runaway climate change is of the essence, as damage from heatwaves and storms mounts, and the cost of delays in slashing carbon emissions keeps rising.

Every United Nations climate meeting – from the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 to the Conference of the Parties in Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt, in 2022 – has under-delivered, with climate indicators getting worse and worse.

Carbon emissions rose from 360 parts per million (ppm) in 1992 to 417 ppm in 2022, with the average global temperature increasing 0.6 deg C over this period.

Of great concern to low-lying regions like South-east Asia is that average sea level rose 101 mm in those three decades, continuing at 3.9 mm a year.

That vast sums can indeed be quickly mobilised to fix global problems was dazzlingly demonstrated in the trillions of dollars – US$15 trillion (S$20 trillion), by one estimate, in 2020 by the so-called Group of Ten (G-10) plus China – raised to fight Covid-19.

In comparison, global investment in energy transition has been slow to come by, and reached an estimated US$1.3 trillion in 2022 – but it needs to exceed US$5 trillion a year quickly for any hope of staying on a 2 deg C limit.

The stakes are high for all. Not only is South-east Asia among the most at risk of climate damage, but its energy-related emissions are also set to rise sharply. Asean is projected to be the world's fourth-largest economic bloc by 2030. With Indonesia as its current chair, it would be timely for the upcoming Asean ministerial meeting in Jakarta to address the urgency for joint climate action.

EVERYONE MUST BE ON BOARD

To rally public support for decarbonisation, policymakers must deal with the misconception that clean energy holds back economic growth.

No amount of evidence on the promise of green jobs and a better future seems to move the needle on this front. But there is a way forward in the form of assuring a level playing-field in energy transition for the major emitters, who matter the most to atmospheric improvement.

Attempts to get delegates from over 190 countries at UN climate meetings to agree on strong measures have so far failed over their multiple goals and widely differing senses of fairness.

But a process driven by financial decision-makers of the major emitters – like the G-7 or the G-20, with support from regional bodies like Asean – should work. Asean in 2023 should give top priority to making decarbonisation integral to growth, which is one of the four agenda items.

TECH'S VITAL ROLE

It also bears remembering that, with public pressure for action, Covid-19 vaccines were produced in record time.

While a new vaccine usually takes five to 10 years to produce, it was the unprecedented cooperation among scientists and massive funding by governments that delivered Covid-19 vaccines only nine months after the World Health Organisation declared a pandemic.

The same sense of urgency, born out of fear of the collapse of lives and livelihoods, if nothing else, needs to take hold for climate change.

Full-scale adoption of solar energy would top the list of urgent steps. Spurred by technical improvements, including for batteries, solar capacity is rising, especially in China, India and South-east Asia, although from a very small base. However, an acceleration of the sharp reduction in its price is needed to assure its resounding competitive advantage over fossil fuels.

Sure, green hydrogen, carbon capture and geoengineering options hold promise, but they need massive investment to go to scale commercially.

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FINANCE A KEY ASPECT

Again, as shown by the pandemic experience, decisive and flexible leadership is vital for lining up climate finance.

To this end, responsibility for brokering climate policy needs to shift from environment ministers to finance ministers who control the purses. It helps that eight out of the 10 Asean nations – the exceptions are Myanmar and the Philippines – have committed to net-zero emissions, though the pace of change is far too slow for the emergency at hand.

One specific area where Asean can make a breakthrough is pricing carbon emissions, thereby valuing clean air. If adopted by all, carbon pricing would not change countries' competitive positions. The highest tax rate has been set by the Danish government for 2025, rising to €150 (S$220) /tCO2 (total carbon dioxide content) in 2030.

In 2019, Singapore set the carbon tax at $5 per tonne, increasing to $25 for 2024, and $45 by 2026; Indonesia has initiated a tax just for coal. High carbon taxation across China, the US, India, Russia, Japan, the European Union, and Asean – together accounting for some 70 per cent of global discharges – will change the game on global pollution.

Environmental care does not have the same political appeal as fighting pandemics when it comes to committing resources. But in the post Covid-19 context, climate change can be the top priority for the public to rally around now that countries are recognising an existential crisis.

Since global warming is caused by humans, it will respond to a sharp change in the precedence for climate action that the public demands. And South-east Asia, on the frontline as a victim of climate disasters and a major contributor to carbon emissions, has the opportunity and capability to be a key player, together with other major emitters.

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