

We know what we need to do, but we won't do it

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Last week, India overtook Russia to become the world's third most-affected country. Meanwhile, at a time when hospitals have run out of beds to admit patients, doctors in Bengaluru warn us that our annual dengue season has begun. Simultaneously, North India braces itself to face a locust attack – caused by climate change – that is worse than anything we have faced in the past 26 years. At a time when agriculture is already in a serious crisis, locusts pose a major threat to the crops growing in farms across six northern states.

Let's move a bit farther out – much farther in fact, all the way out to Siberia. Siberia has long been known as one of the coldest inhabited parts of the world. Now? Parts of Siberia are on fire, reaching record temperatures that have crossed 38°C. The glaciers are melting, faster than ever before. The forest fires in Siberia pumped 59 million metric tons of CO₂ into the air and atmosphere in June. That's the order of emissions that a city like New York generates in a year.

Climate change is not a distant threat that lies in the future. The world 's environment is changing far faster than we thought. It is not our children and grandchildren alone who will bear the brunt of it. We will, too.

We must gear up for the challenge. There are things we can do more easily, while other challenges will be very difficult to adapt to. If the weather system goes completely out of whack, can Bengaluru deal with a prolonged drought? That would be hard. But can we adapt to shorter, more irregular periods of rainfall that are more intense than before? Yes, we can – if each of us invests in rainwater harvesting structures, while the BBMP invests in the protection and restoration of lakes and their associated wetlands as functioning ecosystems. Of course, we are not doing this now. Instead, we persist in remaking our lakes into large pools of water, ringfenced with concrete jogging and walking tracks.

Can we adapt to global warming? That may be a difficult task to deal with as a city. Instead, let's ask – can Bengaluru reconfigure itself to reduce the threat of heatwaves, which arise from local urban heat islands caused by too much concrete? Of course, we can. We need to maintain our waterbodies and trees, and to plant millions of trees, to replace the many we have felled in the past.

What are we doing, though? Rather than focusing on planting saplings, Bengaluru is engaged in plans to chop down thousands of trees. A plan to widen roads at the periphery of Bengaluru will leave us poorer by at least 8,500 trees. There is no proper environmental assessment that tells us the impact of such felling on our health, and physical and mental wellbeing. Some of these are gigantic trees that took decades, perhaps even centuries to grow to their current impressive size.

What about air pollution? Bengaluru is one of the most polluted cities in India. During lockdown, air pollution levels in the city decreased by 28%, showing us what the city can achieve if public transport improves, helping more people move away from travel by cars. Trees are an important buffer against local air pollution, and locating trees on the side of roads is especially important. We seem intent on cutting trees across Bengaluru, though, incessantly widening roads, building flyovers and underpasses, only to demolish them for a new infrastructure project.

It would be ideal if all other crises, local and global, would pause and give us a break while we are immersed in dealing with Covid-19. But that's not going to happen. We need to invest our energies in making Bengaluru more resilient to future shocks -- epidemics, drought, heatwaves and air pollution are only part of a long list. Unfortunately, we seem determined to return to business as usual.

Can't we think of development with the environment, instead of against it?