



# After pandemic passes, we must address the disparities

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Written by [Anil Kakodkar](#) | Updated: May 14, 2020 9:44:59 am





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**T**he [COVID-19 pandemic](#) will soon be brought under control and the lockdown relaxed. We should also expect vaccines and therapeutic drugs to appear on the scene, which will decisively overcome the virus. It is perhaps time now to think of whether returning swiftly to business as usual of the before corona era should be the only objective or should we also think about a shift to a new normal. The latter would address the root causes that led to the vulnerabilities that have come to the fore during the pandemic.

People often talk about jobs and their changing nature, protectionism and the challenges to globalisation, the impact of emerging technologies and so on when discussing the new normal. It seems to me that a fundamental facet of the new normal will be to ensure livelihood security and living in harmony with nature. Population growth and human greed have driven the earth close to the tipping point, even as a large part of humanity suffers serious deprivation.

I believe, in this context, that the have-nots becoming empowered enough to find their own solutions would be a far more effective approach to addressing human deprivation than relying on the vendor-buyer transactions between haves and have nots. The balance between meeting the development needs of all humans and the sustainability of mother earth will depend on solutions determined through science and technology (S&T). The challenge is to empower the have-nots with S&T knowledge and innovation ecosystems so that they can find their own solutions. This approach of local empowerment also presents India a unique opportunity to fast-

forward its development, provided we act decisively to leverage our demographic dividend in the ongoing knowledge era.

What can we learn from the pandemic to minimise the loss of lives and livelihoods should a similar episode occur again? Just as we have made progress in minimising loss of life and property from potentially disastrous events like cyclones and earthquakes, we need to develop a credible pandemic management plan. This will need to be a global action plan with pre-defined roles and actions at various levels going down to a locality or a hospital with mutually agreed SOPs for all stakeholders. Panic-driven irrational responses at any level should be avoided by ensuring transparency.

One of the biggest concerns is the extremely dense population in cities. We must leverage our demographic dividend and knowledge technologies to quickly create attractive jobs in rural areas that make villages not only self-sufficient but net exporters. A new and aggressive approach to the education and skilling of the youth in rural areas, which would build their capacity to earn livelihood in fields that go beyond the traditional concept of rural jobs, is necessary. Broadening our approach to schemes like MGNREGA to support rural youth wanting to transition to new-age jobs in addition to government schemes that encourage rural entrepreneurship could make a big difference. This approach would not only relieve high habitation density in urban areas but also bridge rural-urban gap and lead to faster economic growth.

Some of the economic models currently in operation seem to widen disparities. We do not pay adequate attention to the compensation of people at the grass roots in key areas like agriculture, public health and rural education that are crucial to the elimination of vulnerabilities. Our investments in these domains are also significantly below the accepted bench-marks. Our health sector, for example, while it boasts of global competence to the extent of making India a health tourism destination, remains near the bottom of the table. We need policies which can neutralise to a large extent the disparities created by market forces.

More generally, it seems to me that time has come to think about pricing principles based on the true cost of value addition and accepted norms for compensating those who do it. Also, the transactions along the value chain should be restricted only to those who add value. Others who are also necessary for this process should come in as service providers. Leveraging modern technologies and creative business formats, we should be able to develop a healthy and non-exploitative configuration, particularly to the grass roots producers and the consumers.

A balanced approach to land use patterns needs careful attention. We need to arrive at an optimum distribution of land for habitat and food for humans as well as animals, industry and other economic activities including infrastructure, energy, forest cover and water management. Agriculture, water, energy and environment are heavily intertwined and need to be dealt with in a holistic manner. Water harvesting, recharge and management systems also need attention, particularly in the context of groundwater levels, irrigated agriculture, flood control and ensuring that rivers and water bodies remain clean.

Finally, holistic education is perhaps the strongest tool to sustainably eradicate vulnerabilities. Education merits maximum attention as it is the key enabler of our demographic dividend, and necessary to leverage the opportunities of the knowledge era, particularly in rural areas. Many say that education as it exists today may become irrelevant. Technology is of crucial importance to address the issue of quality as well as access to education.

Our education environment should be linked with industry and society both in terms of work-based learning as well as real-life problem-solving. The education system should enable outreach for technology, capacity building and livelihood enhancement for rural areas. Such a “cillage” ecosystem that connects modern knowledge and research, currently restricted to cities, with the needs of new-age villages, should enable villages to benefit from the opportunities of the knowledge era. Then villages, rather than being a drag, will become the engines of national development.

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