

Covid-19 and beyond (Sri Lanka): Epidemiological, Economic and Ecological crises

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Sri Lanka, at the time of writing, is going through an interlinked epidemiological, economic and ecological crises imposed by the neoliberalist phase of global capitalism (1980- 2020). Although, in first appearance, the three crises appear to be separate from each other, they are distantly related and superimposed.

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In an excellent article in the *Monthly Review* (June 2020, Vol. 72, No 2), John Bellamy Foster and Intan Suwandi have illustrated how the three crises are inseparably linked together through recent changes in the international circuit of capital. Let me paraphrase some of the salient points in the article as a point of departure to my discussion.

Changes in the Global Circuit of Capital

1. In recent years, especially in the last 40 years, under the neoliberalist global regime, the supply chain (movement of physical products) and value chains (value addition at each point) have become the predominant features of the circuit of capital.

2. In this system, exorbitant imperial rents from the control of global production are obtained not only from the *global labour arbitrage*, through which multinational corporations with their headquarters in the centre of the system overexploit industrial labour in the periphery, but also increasingly through the *global land arbitrage*, in which agribusiness multinationals expropriate cheap land (and labour) in the global South so as to produce export crops mainly for sale in the global North.

3. However, the supply and value chain should not be treated exclusively as economic/value phenomena because it also entails the material-ecological aspect of use values. So, Marx had stressed, the negative, i.e. destructive side of capitalist valorisation with respect to the natural conditions of production and the metabolism of human beings and nature.

4. The new historical-materialist epidemiology associated with structural one health paradigm explicitly recognises the role of global agribusiness in the emergence and the spread of new zoonoses. Such diseases, as Rob Wallace stated in *Big Farms Make Big Flu*, were the “inadvertent biotic fallout of efforts aimed at steering animal ontogeny and ecology to multinational profitability,”

that in turn has produced new deadly pathogens.

This has been very much evident in China, especially in Wuhan Province where small farmers were undercut and pushed out of the livestock industry. As a columnist of the Guardian has revealed, searching for a new way to earn a living, some of them turned to farming 'wild' species that had previously been eaten for subsistence only. The smallholders weren't only pushed out economically.

As industrial farming concerns took up more and more land, these small-scale farmers were pushed out geographically to closer uncultivable zones. Closer to the edge of the forest, that is, where bats and the viruses that infect them lurk. The density and frequency of contacts at that first interface increased, and hence, so did the risk of a spillover.

The above analysis and many other related recent studies see that it is imperative to connect the global changes in the circuit of capital that has taken place in the last 20 years of the 20th Century and the first 20 years of this Century to the increasing scale of ecological crises and that in turn has produced new deadly pathogens. It is cyclical. The changes in the circuit of capital have generated an ecological catastrophe which has led to a series of epidemiological crises. As the impact of COVID-19 has demonstrated the impact of the epidemiological crisis on global production is much more than that of the financial crisis of 2007-8. The process continues. Now as it is evident today in the USA, the crisis has now spilled over to the sphere of politics.

Addressing the Crisis Phenomenon

Although the three crises are inseparably linked, it does mean that addressing it is to be temporally synchronised. Moreover, sometimes a successful approach to one crisis may aggravate another crisis. As Michael Roberts has illustrated in Figure 1, the effective approach to containing the spread of COVID-19, had an adverse impact on the economy.

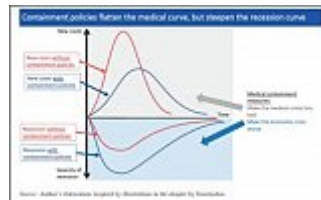


Figure 1

It is an undeniable fact that Sri Lanka has adopted quite a successful strategy in handling the COVID-19 pandemic. In the last 30 days, not a single COVID-19 infected has been found from the community. This success may be attributed to four main elements in the Sri Lankan governance system, namely, (1) public health system; (2) the effective mechanism of the security forces in spite of the non-adherence to sanitary requirements in the Navy camps; (3) the support service of the police in maintaining law and order; and (4) the Quarantine Act enacted by the colonial regime. One of the great successes of the President Gotabaya Rajapaksa administration has been his limited interference to the operational aspects of these institutions. A general consensus exists that if a country's public health system is strong, that country would have an advantage in successfully encountering this kind of pandemic. The Sri Lankan public health system with its pyramidal structure with the Director of Health Services at the top and village level public health inspectors and family health service has a long tradition and experience in dealing with contagion. They have all done an exemplary service.

Nonetheless, the presence of the public health system is a necessary condition; however that alone is not adequate. The examples of Cuba, the Indian State of Kerala, Vietnam and China have shown that a country needs a strong Government with an effective implementation mechanism. All these countries deployed force in implementing quarantine and other preventive measures. In Sri Lanka this aspect was fulfilled by the Sri Lankan security forces including the Police. It is a mistake to interpret this involvement by the security forces as a militarisation drive. The pandemic needs strong hand to curb the spread. That is why many critics had identified authoritarian tendencies in the New Zealand anti COVID-19 effort. Of course, this is not to deny the presence of authoritarian tendencies in Sri Lanka in the last 40 years for different reasons.

Thirdly, the private medical system has proved that it is totally ineffective in handling this type of pandemic. Many countries have been compelled to nationalise private hospitals. We have also witnessed in Sri Lanka that the private medical structures that were annexed to the health system in the last twenty years or so had miserably failed during the pandemic.

Ecological and Economic Crises

Although Sri Lanka like Taiwan, New Zealand and Vietnam has been quite successful in mitigating the epidemiological crisis, the same may not be said about the other two crises, ecological and economic. Of course, the Government is well aware about the seriousness of the economic crisis, it has not even recognised the magnitude of the ecological crisis.



Figure 2: Anatomy of the Crisis

It seems that the Government policy makers see Covid-19 as an exogenous shock to otherwise recovering economy so that It has been recognised that some contingency measures are needed in order to steer the economy to its normal status. On the hand, policy makers seem to view this crisis as a typical Keynesian demand management issue. Once again, it is interesting to know how Michael Roberts illustrates the anatomy of the crisis (see Figure 2). According to him it began as a supply shock. I will get back to this issue in a future column.

When it comes to the ecological crisis, the Government does not have any clear plan how the ecological factors could be mitigated so that the possibilities of the creation of locally made deadly pathogens are reduced. The news that 100 acres of land from a sanctuary would be allocated to a commercial mango farm is a clear example that we have no idea when and how the nature would take its revenge against humans. These two issues will be taken up in detail in future columns.

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