

# The environment crisis demands a response

Peter Middleton

## COMMENT



As well as deadly attacks in New Zealand, Sri Lanka and now the USA, the past six weeks have seen the devastation of Cyclone Idai that hit Mozambique and Zimbabwe; floods and mudslides in KwaZulu-Natal killing 32 people, and environmental protests across the globe.

There have been more than 1 000 fatalities following Cyclone Idai. Infrastructural damage across Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Madagascar and Malawi is being estimated to be at least US\$1-billion. In the area around Beira, buildings have been submerged and severely damaged; none of Beira's health centres remained functional; and cholera has become a problem due to extensive damage to the water supply network.

While cyclones are not uncommon in the region, how frightening is it that their increasing severity may be linked to climate change?

Over the Easter weekend, Extinction Rebellion protesters in France, Australia, New Zealand, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Italy, the Netherlands, the UK and other countries lay across the ground to simulate death and glued themselves to trains to demand drastic action to avert environmental collapse. Sympathy for the movement was enhanced by the release of David Attenborough's very bleak climate change documentary. The broadcaster says conditions have changed considerably faster than he ever imagined when he first started talking about the environment 20 years ago. "Climate change is humanity's greatest threat in thousands of years", potentially leading to the "collapse of civilisations and the extinction of much of the natural world," he said.

The world's attention has also been drawn to a 16-year-old Swedish climate activist, Greta Thunberg, who is criticising the inane response of the world's politicians to climate change. "Our house is on fire. We are facing a disaster of unspoken sufferings for enormous numbers of people and now is not the time for speaking politely or focusing on what we can or cannot say. Now is the time to speak clearly," she says. "Solving the climate crisis is the greatest and most complex challenge that *Homo sapiens* have ever faced. The main solution, however, is so simple that even a small child can understand it. We have to stop our emissions of greenhouse gases," she adds.

Thunberg accuses the UK government of "very creative carbon accounting" in claiming that its greenhouse gas emissions have fallen by 37% since 1990. She told MPs in Westminster that the true reduction was more like 10%, because the 37% figure excludes

emissions from international aviation, shipping and imports. The UK's Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) counters by saying "the UK follows the agreed international approach for estimating and reporting greenhouse gas emissions under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Kyoto Protocol".

Opposition politicians in the UK are trying to respond to the Extinction Rebellion and Thunberg. The Labour Party's Jeremy Corbyn is calling on the government to become the first national legislature to declare a climate emergency, calling the wave of protests "a necessary wake-up call" that demanded "dramatic action". Similarly in Scotland, First Minister Nicola Sturgeon from the Scottish National Party (SNP) has declared a 'climate emergency' in her speech to the SNP conference, telling delegates that she "was inspired" by the young climate change activists.

But the global response remains limp.

As a result of the KZN storms, the coastline around the Umgeni River mouth was covered in plastic debris that got washed downstream with the flood waters, triggering several organisations to mobilise people to assist in clean-ups. "The current situation is just the tip of the iceberg, said Hanno Langenhoven, strategic manager for recycling at the Wild Trust. "What we're currently facing on the beaches is a result of a much, much bigger waste management and pollution problem upriver, where smaller and poorer communities are not serviced, hence waste – especially plastic – is literally just dumped everywhere. During the course of the year it builds up into river systems and when we do have a big weather event, the river takes it down to the beach," he said.

Having banned the use of non-biodegradable polythene bags some 10 years ago, Africa's Ruanda has established itself as one of the world's cleanest nations. Businesses have made the transition to using paper as an alternative and, instead of providing tax incentives to companies that manufactured plastic bags, authorities encouraged them to recycle, which has created a new market for environmentally friendly bags that did not exist prior to the ban.

The environmental problems facing the world are multi-faceted and complex. What is clear, however, is that future generations will be saddled with the enormous cost of our current neglect.

As Thunberg points out, humanity is at a crossroads: "We must decide which path we want to take."

Her views demand a response, from all of us. □

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