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Achieving herd immunity could possibly lead to millions of deaths worldwide – 246,827 had already succumbed till Sunday – and hence not realistically possible. (ANI)

Four months into the worst pandemic in a generation that has shut down nations and forced half of humanity indoors, there is no definitive end in sight.

A vaccine for the coronavirus disease (Covid-19) is at least a year – if not two or more -- away. The most successful of therapies identified till now have limited benefits at best. Achieving herd immunity could possibly lead to millions of deaths worldwide – 246,827 had already succumbed till Sunday – and hence not realistically possible.

Combine this with the seemingly unstoppable nature of the Sars-Cov-2 infection that has ripped its way through the globe and there is only one feasible option: Large-scale social distancing that requires a fundamental rethink of the ways in which we socialise, work and function in society.

Scientists and medical experts unanimously agree that social distancing -- the practice of ensuring a minimum distance of 6 feet between two people to ensure that one person cannot contract the infection from another -- helped save tens of thousands of lives in China and elsewhere.

Social distancing strategies are the core of national policies in China, South Korea, Australia and Hong Kong that lifted some curbs in the last fortnight. Some European countries such as France, Italy and Spain plan to allow more people to move around later this month.

While masks, temperature checks and hand sanitizers have become ubiquitous, experts and authorities are now looking at social distancing strategies that are more focused and less disruptive than sweeping shutdowns that cripple national economies, batter incomes and can drive millions into poverty.

But such large-scale strategies require a re-imagining of the ways people interact, workplace practices, shift timings and classroom compositions.

According to demography and sociology researchers from three European universities, one of the most crucial principles behind these measures would be to split up people into smaller, insulated clusters of population.

The suggestion is based on evidence of how people behave in social networks: Most people interact largely with the same set of people over the day, with some contact with individuals from another cluster.

If contact between such clusters of people are minimised, an infected person is likely to expose a smaller number of people to the coronavirus than usual.

“Our models demonstrate that while social distancing measures clearly do flatten the curve, strategic reduction of contact can strongly increase their efficiency, introducing the possibility of allowing some social contact while keeping risks low,” say the researchers in a study shared on arXiv, a moderated online archive of papers that have not been fully peer reviewed.

“We can make judgements on which of our contacts are long-range ties that should be avoided or, if necessary for work, should be treated with utmost care: People that live far away, people that don’t know any of our other contacts, or people that we have not seen in a longer time – these are contacts that carry the biggest risk,” said Per Block, the lead author of the study and a researcher at University of Oxford’s Leverhulme Centre for Demographic Science And Department Of Sociology.

The strategy, Block adds, can be adapted to most interactions people have in everyday life, whether it is for schoolchildren, essential workers, office-goers or people merely meeting their friends.

“For essential workers it means keeping composition of work shifts constant over long periods of time and distributing people on shifts based on proximity and similarity.

“For workplaces, it means staggered start, break and end times by different departments or units – keep contact in small groups, and reducing contact between them.

“For schools, this would mean closed classroom composition, varied break times, distribution of children to similar groups...,” Block added, citing co-author Melinda Mills.

Such a strategy, however, may be challenging in a country like India where household sizes are larger and many people often cram into a single room.

“On a principle level, I think it is fair to say that larger households require more discipline and coordination among household members, since the contact partners of each individual household member are often not in contact,” said Block, adding that the insights in their paper

can serve as a basis for policy recommendations by people on the ground who are more aware of population-specific context.

Some workplaces have begun reorganising their offices on the basis of such principles.

“Instead of having one large office, what we’ve done, even prior to Covid, was to have smaller offices in different cities... and we were connected through cloud and digital technologies. Now the next step post-Covid is that even within a single city, we are planning to open offices in different places which can access talent that lives closer,” said Manit Rastogi, founder of Morphogenesis, an architecture firm.

Rastogi’s company has offices spread out across three cities, and more locations will follow a ‘hub and spoke model’ post-lockdown.

“The idea is that these are smaller offices: to use a random number, 4-5 different offices, with 20 people each, living locally. So no one will have to travel more than a 5-7km radius. These are the spokes. The hub in turn, is the repository of the information being fed realtime from the spokes,” he added.

Letting people interact in some manner is also crucial from a mental health perspective. Prolonged social distancing is likely to lead to “mental health outcomes; especially for those who do not have a robust support system in place and are struggling through this process alone,” said Dr Samir Parikh, director, department of mental health and behavioural sciences, Fortis Healthcare.

(With inputs from Dhamini Ratnam and Rhythmia Kaul)