



India and its Climate Change Conundrum

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Abstract

With Global climate projected to continue to change over this century and beyond, it will become an acute threat to global development efforts to end poverty. India being home to some of the world's poorest people whose lives and property are threatened by climate change, it becomes all the more imperative to evolve legally binding policies which tackle climate change for the benefits of communities, especially the poor and marginalized people. Climate change exposes vulnerable communities to dangers like disasters, diseases, loss of livelihoods, crop failures, poverty and displacement, threatening loss of biodiversity and food security. Not only do India's existing environmental laws and policies need to be strongly enforced, what we essentially require is climate-specific legislation that has been sweeping across the globe today. There is no denying that climate crisis is a growing and an undeniable reality and it is people living in the margins who have the most to lose. India would need environmental reforms rooted in strong legislation that would be capable of tackling existing problems and protecting the vulnerable communities in the era of climate change. The area of climate change also represents a unique opportunity to rethink the nature and scope of India's economic development.

Keywords: Climate, Environment, People, Politics, Poor.

Introduction

India's development trajectory is defined by three factors, the large size of India geographically and demographically, the low starting point of development and the high potential for development over the next few decades. This gives India not only the most important prospects for mass poverty elimination in the coming decades but also offers both challenges and opportunities for sustainable development. The Industrial Revolution that started in 1760 resulted in a marked increase in the impact of human activity on the planet Earth which brought significant changes in the environment and increased anthropogenic activity and more deviations could follow unless corrective measures are urgently taken.

Climate change is an enormous political and policy problem, but it is also a conceptual and deliberative challenge. Different frames for climate change can lead to different political and policy solutions. Notably, environmental versus developmental frames of the problem, which often map to northern versus southern perspectives, provide very different political and policy outcomes and continue to be central themes of climate negotiations.

The Global Scenario

The Earth's environment acquired significance as an issue of concern with the convening of the UN Conference on the Human Environment at Stockholm in 1972. This conference brought environmental issues into the ambit of international diplomacy and led to gradually enhanced global environmental co-operation. Addressing the Conference, Indira Gandhi drew attention to the link between environment and development, highlighting that "the environment cannot be improved in conditions of poverty". The Conference led to the establishment of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), which in 1982 convened in Nairobi a 'UNEP Session of a Special Character: Ten Years after Stockholm'. It recognized that most global environmental challenges remained inadequately addressed and environmental threats had grown, including from acid rain, air, soil and water pollution, desertification and deforestation, ozone layer depletion. The Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, "Our Common Future", which was released in 1987 sought to balance human and environmental well-being and reconcile economic development with environmental protection. It also promoted the concept of "sustainable development", which it defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". This definition viewed environment and development through the prism of "needs", in particular those of the world's poor, and highlighted the notion of inter-generational equity.

India's position

India's domestic position India's and policy on climate change, until recently, rarely acknowledged the issue as one having relevance for the country's development imperatives. However, over the last decade, there has been a gradual change in thinking around the issue of climate change both within national and regional governments in India, as well as among various non-state actors, like the civil society groups. Since 2007, especially, responding to international pressure for action, there has been more focused domestic policy movement around climate change and related issues, including the creation of institutional structures at the national and state levels to prioritize and implement climate change action plans. While the growing involvement of national and regional level governments and their agencies in climate change policy has been a welcome change, local level governments in India have been absent from this process and are seen only as agencies for implementation. In India, climate change action plans have been formulated at the regional level by government officials from state-level agencies, but aim to integrate national priorities with the respective state's development goals. Government officials from Urban Local Bodies are typically absent from the plan-making process. Climate change in the context of Indian cities is rarely seen as an urban challenge by the local and state governments. This is due to the governance framework in India, where local governments have very little power and decision-making

authority. Fragmented urban governance, and the division of responsibilities for urban planning among a very wide range of agencies, often lead to a lack of ownership over larger issues.

The harsh consequences of climate change will intensify challenges to development, especially in India, Bangladesh and other South Asian countries. Natural hazards and vulnerabilities arising from environmental circumstances already make India one of the more disaster-prone countries of the world. Climate change related risks will increasingly affect the Indian subcontinent, leading to sea level rise, cyclonic activity and changes in temperature and precipitation patterns. Rising sea levels are also a danger which will submerge low-lying islands and contaminate coastal freshwater reserves. Melting Himalayan glaciers would reduce downstream water supply in many of India's important rivers in the dry season, impacting millions.

India's dilemma or way forward?

While everyone around the world feels the effects of climate change, the most vulnerable are people living in the underdeveloped countries, where increasingly unpredictable weather patterns and natural disasters threaten these populations, increasing their risk and their dependency on humanitarian aid. Balancing growth imperatives with environmental responsibilities continues to remain the key challenge for India. In the past few years, the government has introduced a range of environmental regulations in consultation with various stakeholders and has also ensured mandatory implementation of 24/7 real-time emission and effluent monitoring in industries, upgraded emission standards for polluting industrial sectors, and taken stringent action, including closure against polluting industries. From a development perspective, climate change is increasingly being recognized as a risk multiplier that disproportionately burdens the poorest and most vulnerable. As we move towards an increasingly urban planet, this risk will be felt intensely in the city areas. Alongside the global response to climate change, there has also been a growing involvement of municipal governments in cities to deal with challenges posed by a changing climate. From a global environmental perspective, the current wave of urban-focused growth and development as well as global and regional sustainable development trends offers a unique, large-scale opportunity to move over unsustainable development trajectories and put in place transformative development trajectories that focus on implementing low-carbon as well as local and climate resilient development.

Climate change and its crisis has been brought to a such a stage by the excessive and unsustainable production and consumption patterns of the developed countries. It is estimated that climate change can cost the Indian economy 2 per cent of its gross domestic product (GDP) and can upset its plans to become a developed nation by 2050. Even though its per capita emissions are still half of global average, India is nevertheless the world's third largest contributor of greenhouse gases. And going by scientific forecasts, it is likely to be one of the worst victims of climate change. According to a 2018 study by the World Bank, unabated climate change could rob the country \$1.2 trillion worth of GDP by 2050.

India's commitment to a low-carbon future also means there is a constant tension between its economic ambitions and its well-entrenched fossil-fuel economy. This raises an urgent dilemma about how to juggle the

available energy options like, solar, wind, biomass, nuclear, coal, and hydro – to power one of the fastest growing economies in the world. The consequences of climate change have been widely discussed but its impact on politics has received little attention, especially in India. In fact, climate change can turn out to be the biggest disruptor of economy and society, and can do more damage than wars. Climate change has become an acute crisis and a global collective action challenge. In order to address all these challenges and mitigate the impact of climate change, there is a need for comprehensive and coordinated action at multiple levels. This includes measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, promote sustainable land use practices, improve disaster preparedness and response, and enhance ecosystem resilience. There is also an urgent need for policy interventions and community-led initiatives that focus on sustainable development and conservation of natural resources. This may include promoting renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and forest management practices that can mitigate the impacts of climate change, while improving the livelihoods of local communities. Additionally, there should be a greater emphasis on preserving indigenous knowledge systems and promoting community participation in decision-making processes to ensure that their perspectives and priorities are adequately represented.

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