

NEGOTIATING THE NEW GLOBAL CLIMATE POLICY

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Degradation - GHGs, Ozone Depletion and Climate Change

The policy significance of the [recent report](#) of the [United Nations \(UN\) Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change \(IPCC\)](#) is that reaching net zero alone is not enough as it is the cumulative emissions up to net zero which determine the temperature that is reached, and that a global policy which considers only current emissions will not limit global warming and its adverse effects.

For 30 years, climate negotiations have struggled with a frame that created an imbalance between countries sharing global carbon space, the only limited natural resource. Development depleted carbon space causing the climate problem and developing countries are being pressured to limit their use of the remaining space as the solution. At the G20 Climate and Energy Ministerial meeting in July, India proposed that major economies bring down their own per capita emissions to the global average by 2030.

Explained | Where will climate change strike?

Reframing negotiations in terms of bringing per-person emissions, or human well-being, as the essential first step highlights that merely achieving net zero of current emissions by 2050 — the proposal of the G7 — restricts well-being and is unacceptable as global policy. Varying levels of per-capita emissions converging to a common point will allow those who have already used more than their fair share of the carbon space a larger share of the remaining space than countries such as India which need the remaining carbon space to grow to comparable levels of well-being.

The policy significance of the imbalance becomes clear when per-capita emissions are compared. The world's per capita greenhouse gas emissions are 6.55 tonnes of carbon dioxide. India's per capita emission at 1.96 tonnes is less than one-third; emissions of the United States, Canada and Australia are more than two-and-a-half times; Germany, the United Kingdom and France are above, and China, at 6.4 tonnes, is just below the global average. Accepting 'net zero' emissions by 2050 effectively prevents India's urbanisation and shift of the rural population into the middle class.

India is rightly objecting to the obfuscation, as the Objective of the Climate Treaty is "stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations". By contributing over 60% of global cumulative emissions, with just one-fourth of the global population, North America and Europe are responsible for nearly 970 billion tonnes of carbon emissions.

Data | [Earth records its warmest ever July in 2021](#)

Whereas, the world's remaining carbon budget — the total amount we can emit to have a chance of limiting warming to 1.5° C — is only 400 gigatonnes of carbon dioxide, and the U.S. alone has contributed this amount for its high standard of living. For a global consensus, such countries will need some flexibility in the new climate policy.

The reframing should stress 'essential' emissions to justify the flexibility and the need. Infrastructure, or construction, essential for urbanisation and quality of living is responsible for two-fifths of global carbon dioxide emissions from fuel combustion and 25% of emissions overall. These emissions arise from energy intensive cement production and half of the steel produced which is used in construction, both having no substitutes.

The varying levels of per capita emissions are accounted for by expressways and the urban boom in the U.S. and Europe between 1950 and 2000, before China began its infrastructure push, leading to per-capita material use that is four times that of China. The U.S. first recognised the implications of its way of life preparing for the Stockholm Summit in 1972, but then shaped the global agenda in terms of current emissions which were going to grow in developing countries as they urbanised, rather than the scientifically correct stabilisation of cumulative emissions, to draw attention away from its own urbanisation and lifestyle.

New ideas such as 'climate justice', coming from India have three strategic implications. First, a focus on drivers and patterns of natural resource, not just anthropogenic emissions, highlights that as against measuring emissions when considering solutions, the causes become important, in particular, the shift of the human population from rural to urban areas. Second, the IPCC report has reiterated that impacts such as a rise in sea level, variability of rainfall and temperature increases will not be reversible for some time even after emissions fall. The adverse effects of climate change, or adaptation, are no longer a local but a global concern. Third, consequently, multilateral cooperation will shift from common rules monitoring emissions based on international environmental law to common goals of human well-being as a universal human right based on a policy consensus.

World leaders out of excuses on climate change, Greta Thunberg, youth activists say

Shifting from environmental damage and its implications for well-being to comparable levels of well-being within global ecological limits provides a very different conceptual frame to understanding climate change and the negotiations. First, there is a need for a debate on what society values and whether societal priorities or market exchange and pricing mechanisms determine what is to be valued, produced, and consumed. Second, with consumption of the urban middle class now more important than production in terms of GDP, it has become clear that the rising prosperity of the poor and its need for infrastructure is not endangering planetary life support systems as stress on population and national emissions suggests. Third, with different civilisational values, consumption of the middle class in developing countries is less wasteful than in the first phase of urbanisation. These socio-economic trends are not captured in the models based on natural sciences designed for countries whose emissions have peaked with questionable global policy relevance.

It took 25 years for the 'Paris Agreement' to reverse the defining feature of the 'Framework Convention', the division of countries into 'annexes', while providing for a 'common cause' instead of commitments. India's proposal supports this evolution. Moving away from regulating emissions to recognising ecological limits makes the subsidiary bodies for scientific advice and implementation review established to ratchet-up commitments redundant. Sharing prosperity should be the objective of new intergovernmental mechanisms, with the involvement of the private sector, for example, supporting solar energy, joint research in new crop varieties and exchanging experiences on infrastructure viability. We now know that climate change is not just an environmental or sustainable development concern involving trade-offs. It requires a civilisational transformation in what we value, the way we live, and how we interact with one another.

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