

CLIMATE TREATY AT A TIPPING POINT

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Conservation, Sustainable Development, and EIA

The annual Climate Summit, with increasing levels of concentration of greenhouse gases, raises questions on global climate policy.

The world's major emitter has rejected multilateralism, premised on burden sharing. The European Union's ambition of 'net' zero emissions by 2050 obfuscates needed societal change by ignoring the embedded carbon in imports — a third of their emissions of carbon dioxide. Both are shifting the burden to India and China.

The policy problem is that the Climate Treaty considers symptoms (emissions of greenhouse gases), rather than the causes (use of natural resources). India, which is responsible for just 3% of cumulative emissions, is the most carbon efficient and sustainable major economy.

Excessive resource use by a fifth of the world population in a small part of the planet in the West is still responsible for half of global material use and the cause of climate change. Asia with half the world's population is responsible for less than half of material use, and living in harmony with nature.

Three shifts in natural resource use have taken place in the last 400 years: from agriculture to industry; rural to urban; and, livelihood to well-being. Colonialism and its aftermath of multinational corporations was the driver of the first shift, infrastructure of the second, and societal notions of progress of the third. Only the first two global trends show limited convergence and stabilisation. The third diverges sharply between material abundance in the West and societal well-being in India and China. Consumption patterns of primary material use for the provision of major services are driven by diverse values that include both global trends transforming human societies — for example, urbanisation, economic globalisation and digitisation, as well as national pathways to achieve prosperity. At the national-level, resource use is primarily construction material and energy use in buildings, mobility and manufacturing as well as food, which together lead to human well-being. More than half of natural resource use and global emissions occurred after 1950, driven by the gradual shift of three-quarters of the global population to cities.

National natural resource-use accelerated in two distinct phases with very different origins and impacts. In North America and Europe, resource use accelerated after 1950, not with industrial resource use from 1850. By 1970, three-quarters of their population had moved to cities, characterised as "unprecedented prosperity", leading to the trajectory towards climate change.

China's acceleration of natural resource use from 2000, also driven by urbanisation, is characterised as "unprecedented growth". Different values and the objective of increasing well-being, rather than wealth, led to China, in 2016, having the same per-capita emissions of carbon dioxide as the West had in 1885.

The shares of material use of the different activities in cities in China have remained constant since 1995 as increase in wealth does not modify the structural, economic and social changes, energy and material uses in civilisational states. Clearly, there will be no convergence in global material use as values, along with digital service economies in cities, will continue to shape the future. The pathway adopted by China can now be compared and contrasted with the West, as it has come up to that level of urbanisation and well-being. The contribution of the United States to resource use, or cumulative emissions of carbon dioxide, peaked at 40% in 1950, with rapid

infrastructure development in Europe, declined to 26% and is likely to remain at this level, reflecting its direction and intensity. By 2015, global population had doubled when emissions in China began to stabilise and accounted for 12% of total cumulative emissions. Asia and Africa will peak at per-capita levels that are a third of those of the West.

India and China, civilisational states with a population nearly eight times that of the U.S., have re-defined progress. In China, electricity consumption per-capita is a third of the European Union (EU) and a sixth of the U.S. Residential energy consumption has increased at a rate less than half the increase in GDP, and corresponds to the increase in urban population, showing limited increase with more disposable household income. China also has less than a sixth of the number of cars with respect to population than the EU, while the U.S. has nearly two times that number. In China, nearly 40% of the distance travelled is by public transport, which is two times that of the EU. While the number of cars in China is projected to double by 2040, half the new cars are expected to be electric vehicles. China has the world's most extensive electric high-speed rail system. In Beijing, three-quarters of public transport buses are already electric. Asian household savings as a percent of GDP are two times that of the U.S.

Measures for global sustainability should draw lessons from India and China. For example, transport emissions are the fastest growing emissions worldwide, projected to become half of global emissions, and in the future more polluting than coal use. India and China are global leaders in sustainability not only because of their low per-capita resource use but also because of their contribution to peak oil around 2035 as they adopt electric vehicles supported by solar and wind renewable energy. By then, India and China are expected to have half the global renewable capacity and electric vehicles.

By 2040 more than half of global wealth is again going to be in Asia; the low carbon social development model adopted by India and China will become the world system, ensuring global sustainability. Then the pattern of natural resource use adopted by western civilisation will more clearly be seen as a short-term anomaly rather than collective transformation or unified evolution of civilisation. Much before that, alternative strategies led by India and China should replace the ineffective Climate Treaty.

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