

CLIMATE OF INACTION: ON UN CLIMATE CHANGE CONFERENCE

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

If climate change is the defining issue of the century, the UN conference in Madrid failed miserably in galvanising action to address it. This year's outcome is all the more depressing because nearly 200 delegates representing rich and poor countries had the benefit of new scientific reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warning of near-certain catastrophic consequences of inaction, and an analysis from the UN Environment Programme on the gap between current greenhouse gas emissions and the limit over the coming decade. Eventually, in Spain, the Conference of the Parties to the Paris Agreement, degenerated into an unproductive wrangle over establishing a market system to trade in carbon credits earned through reductions in emissions, with some countries eager to cash in on poorly audited emissions savings from the Clean Development Mechanism of the Kyoto Protocol that preceded the Paris pact. Such horse trading stands in contrast to the real losses from extreme weather events that climate-vulnerable countries, India included, are facing with frightening regularity: even insured losses worldwide during 2017 and 2018 together stood at a record \$225 billion, while the bulk of destruction had no such risk cover. These dire data should have imbued the climate negotiations with urgency and purpose, but the final declaration was desultory, merely expressing serious concern at the emissions gap in seeking to limit temperature increase to 1.5° C.

Climate negotiators might have tossed the more intractable questions — raising \$100 billion a year from 2020 for developing countries, creating a strong framework to address loss and damage from climate events and transferring technology to poorer countries on reasonable terms — to the next conference a year later, but they cannot avoid rising pressure from civil society in several countries for concrete action. One of the models that will be closely studied is the Green Deal that has been announced by the European Commission, with binding targets for member nations to cut emissions by at least 50% by 2030 and go net zero by 2050. This approach could potentially make the EU the leader in global climate action, a position that the U.S. never adopted, and China will take longer to aspire for. India's own status as a low per capita carbon emitter offers little comfort as its overall emissions are bound to grow. With a low base compared to other major nations, it may well achieve its initial voluntary targets under the Paris Agreement, but a shift away from fossil fuels is inevitable in the longer term. As it prepares to face calls for higher ambition in 2020 and beyond, India has to involve its States in mitigation and adaptation efforts. Death and destruction by frequent storms, floods and droughts should lead to urgent cohesive action.

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