

THINK CLIMATE CHANGE ACTION, ACT GLOBAL

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

Almost everyone agrees that the recent global climate summit, the annual Conference of the Parties (COP25), held in Madrid in December 2019, was a failure and that the multilateral process to address the climate crisis is broken. At several discussions on finance, ambition, transparency of support and pre-2020 action, wealthy countries were recalcitrant. Although responsible for using the bulk of the carbon space in the atmosphere, they now disavow their obligations, with some even denying anthropogenic climate change. At this stage, there is a complete severance of climate science from the negotiations and agreements at the global level. The question is, what can we do now?

The next COP will be held at Glasgow, U.K. (in late 2020) and there may be little change in the outcomes, as the global political order may not alter much. The fact that we live in an unequal and unjust world is not going to change either.

But the right political leaders could nudge action in a new direction. For example, younger members could be elected to the U.S. Congress and the Green New Deal could pass sometime in 2021. In the meantime, climate activism is increasing awareness and having some success in removing insurance and financial support for fossil fuel companies. But these kinds of changes will occur slowly.

At least one expert has called for a parallel action COP at future summits where sub-state actors, civil society groups, non-governmental organisations and academics can share ideas and nudge action. How such an alternate meeting will be integrated with policy processes is unclear, but it is an idea whose time has come.

The stalemate at the global level offers India the opportunity to focus earnestly on developing its climate change action at State and sub-State levels, where the environment and climate continue to be relegated to peripheral status. Over decades, this has led to the destruction of ecosystems, forests, waterbodies and biodiversity. Numerous studies have shown the high economic and ecological costs and loss of lives due to extreme events. We do not need more data to stimulate action. As is also well recognised, India is extremely vulnerable to the effects of warming.

With support from bilateral agencies, States initially took different approaches in the first round of State Action Plans on Climate Change (SAPCCs). Some of them set up separate climate change cells while some collaborated with academic institutions. A few produced detailed action plans while others developed strategy documents. Still others integrated improvements in energy efficiency (contributing to reducing emissions), while almost all focused on adaptation.

Attention to climate change offers co-benefits to India for development. For instance: improving energy efficiency in industry reduces costs and local pollution; improving public transport reduces congestion, pollution and improves access; and using natural farming methods reduces fossil fuel-based fertilizers, improves soil health and biodiversity. These show that there are synergies in the steps to be taken for good development and climate change.

As the next round of the SAPCCs are being drawn up, under recommendations from the Centre, the focus ought to be on integrating the response to climate change with the development plan in different departments. Since the States together are to deliver the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) that India has promised, it means that they require guidance from the

Centre. Unfortunately, taking the lead from the Centre, most State government departments are handling climate change as a fringe issue and do not seem to recognise its urgency.

Line departments for government schemes and programmes in key development sectors, such as agriculture, transport and water, should be identified for carefully integrating actions that respond to climate change. This integration should also take place at district and sub-district levels. But only a demonstration of its success in some departments would show how this can be done. But first and foremost, States need to get the signal that climate is an urgent issue.

How funds for implementing SAPCCs will be obtained is not clear. There will not be enough from the Green Climate Fund, Adaptation Fund and bilateral agencies to support all States unless new sources are found. The coal cess in India is a good initiative, and as others have pointed out, could be used for environment and climate-related expenses. Similar alternative sources from high emissions' industries and practices would be an option, but still probably insufficient.

There also needs to be a clear analysis of how the first round of action plans fared. What were the challenges and how did they perform? Which approaches and projects were successful and ought to be scaled up and what lessons do the failures offer? Finally, what institutional structure works best?

If States are to develop SAPCCs that would ultimately add up to India's NDCs, then the country needs reliable greenhouse gas inventories. Individual research groups and the civil society initiative, GHG Platform India, have been producing such inventories and would be useful in synchronising and co-ordinating State and Central mitigation programmes.

States must also develop their programmes with longer timelines, with mid-course correction based on lessons and successes that can be integrated into the next stage of the plan. If the second round of SAPCCs were treated as an entry point to long-term development strategy, the States and the country would be better prepared for climate change. Ultimately, climate should be part and parcel of all thinking on development.

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