

# THE WEST IS BACKSLIDING ON CLIMATE ACTION

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

The Mehrum coal-fired power station in Mehrum, Germany | Photo Credit: AP

Countries in Europe led by Germany, Austria and the Netherlands are cranking up their coal plants again. Coal exports to Europe are surging. Fossil fuels are making a comeback and countries are rejecting the European Union (EU)'s plan to reduce natural gas consumption by 15%. Dutch, Polish and other European farmers are protesting against emission cuts from agriculture. Renewables are nowhere near meeting the rising power demand in summer or winter, with record high temperatures now. Hasty and ill-conceived EU climate policies are coming home to roost. While the current problems are being blamed on the Ukraine conflict, and more specifically Russia, they actually started when power prices began surging well before anything happened in Ukraine. Europe is staring at a recession and its appetite for climate action is waning.

In the U.S. too, the Senate and the Supreme Court have struck blows to climate action. And in the U.S. too, prices of fuel started increasing last year, not just this year. This is causing inflation. Energy security is nowhere near. Fossil fuels are making a quiet comeback, since the strength of the U.S. is its oil and gas industry. That is why we have just witnessed a 're-calibration' of U.S. policy towards the Gulf. The U.S.'s choice is between concentrating on its economy and getting it on track for its people or fighting hard against climate change and facing an irate electorate in November. The choice is clear.

So, coal, oil and gas are not going anywhere in the developed world; they are, in fact, making a comeback. It was foolish to think that the world would miraculously transition, and especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, to renewables. The West had rushed to draw down on fossil fuels even before technology for renewables were in place. Many developing countries are also facing unrest due to skyrocketing energy prices, which are threatening their governments. The United Nations, unsurprisingly, continues to pillory coal. In this scenario, we may do well to remember that it was Prime Minister Narendra Modi who made ambitious pledges on climate change last year in Glasgow at the Conference of the Parties (COP). Further, when India fought to make the COP language closer to our current energy-mix reality by calling for a 'phase down' of coal rather than a 'phase out', the COP President supposedly 'struggled to hold back tears'.

With countries of the developed world almost sure to renege on their 2030 Paris Agreement commitments, countries of the developing world must do everything to hold the countries of the developed world to their commitments and not get unwittingly drawn into their game. In fact, the EU Commissioner of Climate Action and Energy, Miguel Arias Cañete, helpfully signalled that the U.S. can downgrade its pledge under the Paris deal. G-7 leaders met to only backtrack on their pledges. If they all start downgrading pledges, which seems almost inevitable, who do they expect will compensate? The Global South, of course.

And so, the game is on. The Western nations have already started reinterpreting the Paris Agreement and look to downgrade their commitments. If they pull back, what will happen to the Paris deal aim of limiting global warming to below the 2°C limit (leave alone 1.5°C)? More importantly, what can the developing countries do to stop this backsliding by the developed world?

To begin with, we need to understand how the concept of net zero is being cleverly misinterpreted. To bring this to the attention of the Global South, India, China and eight other

countries from Africa, Asia and Latin America made a cross-regional statement on 'global net zero' on June 7 at the UN on World Environment Day. I take the liberty of referring to it at some length.

Article 4 of the Paris Agreement defines 'Global Peaking' thus: "In order to achieve the long-term temperature goal set out in Article 2, Parties aim to reach global peaking of greenhouse gas emissions as soon as possible, recognizing that peaking will take longer for developing country Parties." The cross-regional statement by the 10 countries says, "We believe that the word 'global peaking' is a conscious and considered insertion in the Paris Agreement text with full recognition of the fact that peaking will take longer for developing countries. The developed countries, given their historical emissions, will have to peak first. That's why the reference is to 'global peaking' and not 'individual peaking'. From this, it logically follows that when developing country parties peak later than developed countries, they will also achieve net zero later than developed countries. Consequently, it is the logical conclusion of the Article 4 of the Paris Agreement that when we consider net zero, we should only consider 'global net zero' and not 'individual net zero' for 2050. Any other interpretation will be contrary to Article 4..."

The statement further says, "It becomes clear that a global net zero, where developing countries take longer to reach net zero, can only be achieved if developed countries reach net zero earlier than 2050. Therefore, developed countries must reach net zero well before 2050 in order to achieve overall global net-zero target by around mid-century..." The statement, therefore, calls on developed countries to "do a net negative" on mitigation by 2050 rather than just "net zero", if they are serious about fighting climate change. In effect, the West needs to do a net minus and not just net zero. To claim that by achieving net zero in 2050, they will keep the temperature within the 2°C limit is a chimera.

Thanks to the efforts of India, the phrase used in the 2021 summit-level declarations at both G-20 and Quad is 'global net zero'. We need to build on this understanding.

But the back-sliding has begun. One of the prime ministerial candidates in the U.K. said recently that the net zero plan "musn't clobber people". This is another way of saying, let's forget about it for the present, shall we? We can't forget about the present or the future. The "global stocktake" of the Paris Agreement will be done in 2023 to assess the world's collective progress towards achieving the long-term goals (Article 14). In the current scenario, this stocktake may well provide the developed countries the right forum to shift the burden of their mitigation commitments on developing countries, knowing well that they will not be able to meet theirs by 2030.

And what is happening to the plan of developed countries mobilising \$100 billion per year by 2020 for climate action in developing countries? Can the Global South transition to renewables without genuine transfer of credible technology? India stands as beacon of hope in renewables. It is time for all developing countries, especially the small island developing states, to make sure that the developed world doesn't backslide on its commitments on mitigation yet again. COP 27 in Egypt gives us that opportunity to hold their feet to the fire. It is time for the developed world to make net minus pledges. If we don't collectively push for it, we will be collectively pushed back.

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