

A GREENER WAY

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

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In 2014, 193 countries asked the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) to analyse how environmental degradation affects the social and economic well-being of people. In response, the UN's environment body roped in 250 scientists and experts from 70 countries to evaluate the state of the world's air, freshwater, oceans, and biodiversity. Their endeavour has produced a chastening report card, the Global Environmental Outlook. It was released last week at the UN Environment Assembly in Nairobi.

The “grow now, clean up later approach” in most parts of the world “has not factored in climate change, pollution or degradation of natural systems. This approach has also contributed to increasing inequality within and between countries,” the report notes. It directs attention to the human costs of “poorly enforced environmental regulations”. Most countries, for example, have laws to curb air pollution. However, poor air is responsible for more than six million premature deaths and an estimated \$5 trillion in welfare losses each year. The number of people succumbing to ailments caused by exposure to dangerous levels of PM 2.5 has increased by more than 10 per cent since 2010 — India accounts for nearly a fifth of such preventable deaths. Water pollution is responsible for nearly 1.5 million premature deaths, the report points out. “Antimicrobial resistance could become a leading cause of early death from infectious diseases worldwide by 2050 if countermeasures are not taken. In addition, the use of pesticides and the dumping of industrial chemicals have introduced pollutants that can disrupt hormonal functions into freshwater systems on all continents,” it says.

It would be a mistake, however, to read the Global Environmental Outlook as just another dire picture of the planet. It encourages policy-makers to recognise that global or regional action is often essential due to the transboundary nature of many environmental problems. This is a significant intervention because the ramifications of pollution are rarely seen beyond their local contexts. As a result, there is scarcely any conversation between the agencies responsible for bringing down the levels of particulate matter in air and those involved in curbing greenhouse gas emissions — even though the mandate of both concerns is mitigating the effects of fossil fuel burning. But by emphasising on “synergies” between “the efforts to meet climate change targets and policies to reduce air pollution”, the report offers a new pathway to policy-makers. This is particularly significant for India, whose Paris Climate Treaty commitments rely heavily on a shift to renewable energy (RE). But this transition could take at least 20 years and would also be subject to market vagaries. Meanwhile, aligning the country's pollution control imperatives with its climate change commitments could underscore the salience of far less risky measures like bolstering public transport. The Global Environment Outlook should be seen as a call for such creativity by breaking down the silos in environmental policy-making.

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