

## OPINION

Relevant for: Environment & Disaster Management | Topic: Environmental Degradation - GHGs, Ozone Depletion & Climate Change

The 2016 Paris agreement's pledge to keep temperature increases between 1.5°C and 2°C above pre-industrial levels was always a bit of eyewash. The lower end of the target range was a concession to small island nations with little expectation that it could be met. Now, in the *Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C*, released on Monday, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change has reported that the world could hit the 1.5°C mark as early as 2030, with any further rise having far-reaching consequences. It is what the report says about limiting the rise to 1.5°C that is of particular interest.

The consequences of climate change—ranging from a rise in mean temperatures and changes in precipitation patterns to a rise in drought frequency, flood hazards and coastal risk—will hit the global south particularly hard. Few countries will be more affected than India. Another recent study in *Nature Climate Change* quantified the domestic social costs of carbon emissions. At approximately \$90/tonne, the cost to India is the highest in the world.

Given this, the Narendra Modi government has done well to sharpen the policy focus on sustainable growth. But this is, by definition, a broad spectrum approach, whether it's looking at renewable energy or clean emission vehicles. This is important. It is not, however, enough. The UN report notes that the different pathways to limiting global warming to 1.5°C “would require rapid and far-reaching transitions in energy, land, urban and infrastructure (including transport and buildings), and industrial systems”. Much of that falls in the domain of state or urban policy.

This makes sense—particularly in the case of India, where geography and topography vary widely across regions and within them. National goals and policies are necessary, but the stark difference in pollution levels between industrialized states and forested states, for instance, demands a complementary localized approach. So too the urban-rural divide: cities contribute a disproportionate share of greenhouse gas emissions. Especially in India, they are also the most susceptible to climate change consequences, given that large segments of the urban population are concentrated along coastlines, rivers and flood plains.

The main culprits when it comes to emissions are the power and transport sectors. Looking at the transport sector through the prisms of land-use planning and transit-oriented development would be useful here. The water and sanitation sectors are other pressure points, responsible for vast amounts of methane emissions. Methane has been observed to be 25 times more potent than CO<sub>2</sub> as a greenhouse gas, but is still dismissed as a temporary pollutant.

Another area of concern is city planning. Shoddy planning, tardy implementation and a paucity of qualified town planners have created cities with no mixed-use planning, lengthy daily commutes, energy-inefficient buildings, and unsustainable mobility and spatial development plans. Considering just how unprepared Indian cities are to face climate change consequences, an increase in the stock of municipal corporation personnel specializing in environmental engineering, disaster management and the like—and their integration into policy making and administrative processes—is essential.

The gaps in fiscal and administrative devolution to rural and urban bodies present challenges, however. Empowered city mayors and local councils around the world are playing influential roles in combating climate change. Beijing and London are prime examples. The domestic reaction within the US to President Donald Trump pulling the country out of the Paris Accord is

even more so. A number of cities and states pledged to remain committed to the accord following Trump's decision. Governor Jerry Brown of California ratified a bill setting a 2045 deadline for the state's total switch to renewable and other zero-carbon electricity. Other cities and states, including some Republican-led ones, are also making the switch from non-renewable to renewable electricity, enforcing rigorous energy-efficiency norms on buildings, electrifying public transport etc. Then there's Bruce Rauner, the Republican governor of Illinois, who passed a bill calling for a significant increase in the state's solar capacity, and allocated \$750 million for vocational training in clean-energy industries.

Such unilateral action is admirable. But it can impose a cost; climate change is the tragedy of the commons. This is particularly so in emerging economies like India where development imperatives can be overwhelming. The 'common but differentiated responsibility' formulation is important for this reason. In the face of developed economies' reluctance to respect it, the sort of intensive efforts outlined in the UN report will be difficult to pull off. That said, New Delhi is doing well to try and find the right mix for sustainable growth. Subnational policymakers and administrators must do likewise.

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