GREENING THE POWERHOUSES

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

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Can cities, which generate over 80% of the world's GDP, be the driving force for mitigation of climate change as national governments fail to provide leadership? At a recent summit of mayors held in Copenhagen under the C40 Cities initiative, Al Gore, the former U.S. Vice-President and climate campaigner, said cities really have no choice, since too many national governments have come under the influence of special interests, and are no longer willing to lead.

The mayors at the summit were keen, because their cities represent an estimated 70% of global carbon dioxide emissions. They also realise that nearly 90% of urban areas are at high risk from extreme climate events such as storms, because they are situated along coastlines. These cities are home to millions, many of them poor and ill-equipped to handle floods; many also endure cycles of drought and heat waves.

Indisputably, urbanisation will remain a strong trend this century. Annually, about 70 million people will be drawn to cities and towns for the next three decades, according to the special report on global warming of 1.5°C issued by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change last year. This means mayors of cities worldwide, and State governments in India, must prepare for difficult times with action plans for urban centres.

This is a greenfield opportunity for policymakers, since much of the infrastructure in India remains to be built, unlike cities in the developed world. All planning must therefore be climate-centric. In Copenhagen, mayors from Toronto and Berlin spoke about expensive plans to retrofit buildings for energy efficiency and shift their transport infrastructure to greener options. Montreal is shifting city logistics to electric vehicles, keeping large trucks confined to centralised terminals. India does not have to repeat the cycle and can leapfrog the era of dirty fuels.

Rome's Mayor Virginia Raggi has an aggressive plan to ban diesel emissions, encourage sustainable shared mobility including biking and walking, and pursue a green new deal. China's Hangzhou already has the largest public bicycle-sharing system and is moving to a smart bus service. Hong Kong is ready to harvest super typhoons in new drainage tunnels that will reuse rainwater and grow biodiversity. Singapore will put a price on carbon. Novo Nordisk, a healthcare company, wants to partner with mayors on its Cities Changing Diabetes programme to "bend the curve" on the public health challenge through better facilities for biking, walking and urban mobility.

India's fast-expanding cities and towns need such far-sighted measures. But today, climate change is not integral to their planning, despite the risk to residents and economic assets. It will take innovation, technology and financing to adapt to drought, floods and heat islands.

At the C40 summit, Kolkata bagged an award for green mobility, and Delhi's Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal informed the delegates that the national capital was cutting emissions by inducting 1,000 electric buses, planting trees on a massive scale, and eliminating the use of dangerous industrial chemicals. Delhi is also setting up a task force for clean air. These must be the priorities for all cities. Determined policies can restore the power of the commons: through inclusive and green urban spaces, sustainable mobility, protected water sources and a reduction of waste — all of which will sharply reduce carbon emissions in a growing economy.

It is almost four years since India signed the Paris Agreement, a period during which the Environment Ministry should have helped States come up with city-level action plans, since the country lacks empowered mayors. In 2020, the Paris framework will enter its active phase of implementation, and fast-growing countries will be expected to demonstrate their efforts at greening their economies. This is an opportunity, and not a threat. India's urbanisation should move to a trajectory of low emissions, reflected in urban governance that incentivises eco-friendly design. It should be friendly to people, and rely on the right technology, materials and energy systems.

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