

CITIES ARE TAKING CLIMATE ACTION

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

On September 23, Maharashtra's Environment Minister, Aaditya Thackeray, announced that 43 cities across the State will join the UN-backed 'Race to Zero' global campaign, which aims to create jobs while meeting goals of climate change and sustainable development. This is laudable and timely – Maharashtra has repeatedly been identified as a State that experiences multiple risks (floods, drought, sea-level rise to name a few) and reports abysmally inadequate policy action on climate-resilient development.

Indian cities have often been singled out for not doing enough on climate change. To examine this, we assessed climate action in 53 Indian cities with a population of over one million and found, promisingly, that approximately half these cities report climate plans, i.e., they have a climate resilience plan or set of projects in place. Of these, 18 cities have moved beyond intention to implementation. These numbers highlight an encouraging first step, signalling that recurrent experiences of floods, water scarcity, cyclones and storm surges are filtering up into urban development policy.

However, a lot of interventions are being implemented through sectoral projects focusing on particular, isolated risks. For example, most cities report targeted projects to deal with heat waves and water scarcity, followed by inland flooding, extreme rainfall, and growing disease incidence. Coastal flooding, sea-level rise, and cyclones are discussed less often despite India's long coastline and highly vulnerable coastal cities and infrastructure. This focus tends to overlook how multiple risks converge and reinforce each other — for example, seasonal cycles of flooding and water scarcity in Chennai.

Importantly, solutions exist and many of them can simultaneously meet climate action and sustainable development goals. Front-runners in this space have been cities such as Ahmedabad, which has had a Heat Action Plan (HAP) since 2010, its success evident from reduced heat mortality. The HAP involves key government departments, NGOs, researchers and citizens and focuses on high-risk social groups like wage labourers, low-income groups, women and the elderly. Combining infrastructural interventions (for example, painting roofs white) and behavioural aspects (building public awareness on managing heat), the model has now been scaled up to 17 cities across the country.

Nature-based solutions such as mangrove restoration in coastal Tamil Nadu and urban wetland management in Bengaluru have demonstrated how restoring ecosystem health can sustain human systems as well. For example, urban parks provide cooling benefits and wetlands regulate urban floods.

Many have identified how inadequate finances and political will at city scales constrain developing sustainable Indian cities. However, what is less discussed is inadequate institutional capacity in existing government departments to reorient ways of working. This would entail moving away from looking at risks in isolation and planning for multiple, intersecting risks. This would mean transforming the ways our cities operate and expand. Undertaking long-term planning needs resilience planners in every line department as well as communication channels across departments to enable vertical and horizontal knowledge sharing.

Another key aspect inherent in transforming cities is focusing on changing behaviours and lifestyles. This is tougher and less understood because the norms we adhere to, the values we cherish, and the systems we are familiar with tend to stymie change. One emerging example of

slow but steady behavioural change is bottom-up sustainable practices such as urban farming where citizens are interpreting sustainability at a local and personal scale. This can mean growing one's own food on terraces and simultaneously enhancing local biodiversity; composting organic waste and reducing landfill pressure; sharing farm produce with a neighbour, bringing communities closer and creating awareness about food growing.

India is becoming increasingly urban. Its cities or city-like villages are sites where the twin challenges of climate change and inclusive development will be won or lost. Pledges like Maharashtra's are a welcome addition to ongoing climate plans. It remains to be seen how they translate into action. While gloom and doom dominate climate reportage, a range of solutions with co-benefits for climate action and development exists. How to leverage these solutions and equip our city planners and citizens to implement them is what we should focus on.

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