

Climate Change Negotiations and India: Exploring Co-benefits approach to Climate Policy Action

By

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Abstract

Global climate change is an imminent and defining issue of our times. Last decade of the 20th century saw the emergence of a robust scientific opinion that anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions augment the natural greenhouse effect, potentially altering planetary life irreversibly. UNFCCC 1992 established the process of dialogue among governments as efforts coalesced to seek the most optimal policy prescriptions and action plans by way of Kyoto Protocol 1997, and subsequently Paris Agreement 2015. Conversations around raising ambitions on climate change targets have gathered momentum recently with the re-entry of US in Paris Agreement 2015, as the spotlight is back on deferred COP 26-Glasgow talks. It is crucial to understand some of the complexities surrounding the issue as they significantly affect the scope of governmental response. This article presents India's engagement with international climate change treaties in the last decade followed by a discussion on the Co-benefits approach to climate policy action. The article concludes that for a better realization of India's economic and diplomatic aspirations, it is imperative that India be seen as a part of the solution to this global problem par excellence. New strategy must mainstream climate agenda in the cross-cutting sectors. Measures for mitigation, the global public good must go hand in hand with measures for adaptation, a local public good. Therefore, a greater congruence between our stands in climate negotiations and domestic policy action maybe a promising way going forward for India.

Keywords: *Climate Change Negotiations, Co-benefits approach, Climate policy action*

Global climate change is an imminent and defining issue of our times. In the context of climate negotiations, climate change refers to a change in climate “attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the atmosphere and which is in addition to the natural variability observed over comparable time periods” (UNFCCC, 1992, art. 1¹).

Climate change is a global phenomenon with local ramifications. Emissions from all sources from all countries contribute to greenhouse concentrations. No nation

¹ UNFCCC, (1992). United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. 1171 U.N.T.S. 107. Retrieved October 17, 2008, from <http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/convkp/converg.pdf>

can solve the issue unilaterally, nor can it insulate itself from the consequences of another's actions. This very characteristic necessitates global cooperation for curtailing emissions. The difficulties in reaching agreements in climate negotiations are deep rooted. There are huge disparities among nations in terms of their cumulative and per capita emissions; vulnerability to the potentially irreversible and unevenly distributed impacts of climate change; and their capabilities to adjust or cope with the impacts. Energy is germane to every nation's economy and nearly 80% of all anthropogenic emissions ensue from the burning of fossil fuels. These facts raise moot normative concerns about who should bear the costs and what should be the equitable basis on which the national targets are set.

India's Climate Policy and Action

India as a country has always been deeply vulnerable to climate impacts owing to its large, impoverished population lacking in capacity or capability to fend off or adapt, primarily rainfed agrarian economy and a long coastline. Climate change can devastate its agricultural practices, food supply, water availability, forest cover, and animal and human ecosystems, displacing people and disrupting livelihoods. Therefore, the success or failure of international efforts to tackle climate change is highly consequential to India.

India has historically played an important role in global environmentalism and has been a critical actor in the negotiations of various global climate regimes under the Framework Convention on Climate Change. Home to 1.3 billion or a fifth of humanity, India is also the third largest emitter of Greenhouse Gases (GHGs). In 2015, India's total GHG emissions were 3,202 million metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent (MtCO₂e) or 6.55% of global GHG emissions (Global Climate Change, 2020) although in per capita terms it was extremely low at 2.7tCO₂e, around a seventh of the US and less than half of the world average of 7.0tCO₂e (Home, Carbon Brief, 2020.²) The majority of India's emissions (68.7%) are produced by the energy sector including transport, industry and residential consumption;

² Carbon Brief. 2020. Home | Carbon Brief. [online] Available at: www.carbonbrief.org Accessed on March 18, 2020.

followed by agriculture (19.6 %); industrial processes (6%); land-use change and forestry (3.8%); and, waste disposal (1.9 %.)

Constructive engagement with the international climate debate is fundamental to India since as a country it remains deeply vulnerable to climate impacts; its overriding priority of poverty eradication sets it on a developmental trajectory that cannot remain innocent of climate change concerns; and, climate change features prominently in India's engagement with the global community with significant implications for its economy and foreign policy. The duality in India's position of simultaneously being a large current and future emitter of GHGs and yet bearing no historical responsibility for the phenomenon to which it remains highly vulnerable, means that India occupies a unique role in global climate politics. Understandably, broad swaths of interests within the nation have legitimate stakes in the national and international policy responses by the Indian government. As a result, the international climate negotiations have generated an important political and policy discourse, ranging from advocacy to repudiation.

Over the course of the three decades of international climate negotiations, the Indian narratives have been primarily moored along with risk– responsibility, development – environmental protection, North-South binaries rooted in the ideas of equity and climate justice. Despite the broad consistencies and continuities in its negotiating positions, India has rapidly transitioned from a protest voice on the fringes of global climate policy to the one that is actively shaping international efforts to combat climate change.

The bedrock of India's negotiating position in the various phases of international climate change treaties can be broadly understood thus:

- 1990 – 2008 {UNFCCC 1992, Kyoto Protocol 1997}: During this phase, India's negotiating position was enmeshed in the North-South debate attributing the historical responsibility of precipitating the climate crisis to the development path followed by the North; issues of equity for developing countries; protection of its space for socio-economic development while simultaneously pushing developed countries to take stringent action and the greater onus for mitigation

under the principle of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities (CBDR and RC). This intellectual tradition prioritised economic development, poverty eradication, energy sufficiency and importantly, to resist the call to arms for climate action.

- 2009 – 2015 {Copenhagen Accord 2009, Paris Agreement 2015}: This phase is characterised by notable shifts in India’s climate policy due to strong economic growth impulses; formation of Brazil, South Africa, India, China (BASIC) grouping as advanced developing economies as distinguished and different from G 77 and expectations on these countries to take lead in influencing outcomes of global climate governance; and acceptance of the position that developing countries should participate in global mitigation effort on a voluntary basis in line with their capabilities.

Presently India’s climate policy and action can be understood through two dimensions – domestic and global. The domestic component of India’s climate policy is articulated in the National Action Plan for Climate Change (NAPCC) 2008 and its 8 National Missions which have formed the basis for India’s progressive actions towards climate mitigation and adaptation. Domestically, India’s development aspirations, critical need for energy access and security to sustain its economic growth, and formulation of comprehensive climate mitigation and adaptation strategies, formed the basis for its tilt towards the ‘co-benefits’ paradigm and concomitant flexibility in its negotiating stance. The international component comprises India’s commitments by way of Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDC) submitted to United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in October 2015 in the run up to Conference of Parties 21 (COP-21) - Paris Agreement. Internationally, with the newfound status of an ‘emerging’ economy, India found itself aligning proactively with new coalitions and negotiating blocks to fulfil its desire to play a strategically important role in the new global order.

Incidentally, 2015 was a determinant year for three separate global sustainable development processes aimed at long term cooperation and agreements within the world community – Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (SFDRR) 2015

replacing the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA) 2005 – 2015; Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2015 – 2030, replacing the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) 2000 – 2015; and, Paris Agreement to the UNFCCC replacing the Kyoto Protocol of 1997. Even though these were conceived within separate intergovernmental processes, synergies among the three have been widely acknowledged since the success of their outcomes would depend on each other's achievements. Climate mitigation and adaptation are fundamental to all three agreements and to that extent, they have common goals and pathways.

Around the same time, India revamped the Prime Minister's Council on Climate Change to 'revive and streamline the council and set the agenda to deal with climate change.' The Ministry of Environment and Forest was renamed the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change through a Cabinet notification in 2014 signifying the importance allocated to the issue. In 2015, on the sidelines of the COP 21 Paris talks, India launched the 'International Solar Alliance' aimed at significantly expanding the adoption of solar energy especially around the tropics together with France. India welcomed the Paris Agreement with its 1.5°C goal, literally closing gates on carbon emissions of a late industrializing country such as itself, its 'bottom-up', and 'loosely differentiated' architecture, promptly ratifying it in 2016. India continued to support the Paris Agreement after June 2017 decision by US President Donald Trump to withdraw US from the treaty. Prime Minister Modi issued a joint press statement with the French President Emmanuel Macron declaring "protection of the environment and the mother planet is an article of faith.

It has been rightly commented that India's climate politics has been one long story of remarkable consistency. For the first two decades of India's engagement with climate negotiations, there was a clear separation between development policy and climate policy with the latter being formulated as a matter strategy along the decision points in international negotiations. However, the period (2009-2015) saw both widening and deepening of India's climate narratives. Evidently, there has been a paradigm shift in policy narrative from economic development as a competing interest vis-à-vis environmental protection to India being an active participant in the process, voluntarily accepting the mitigation targets.

Eminent scholar of the subject, Navroz Dubash (Dubash, 2013a, 2013b, 2015)³ attributes this to the dominance of the ‘sustainable development realists’ pursuing the ‘co-benefits’ approach to sustainable development as compared to the ‘growth first realists’ who dominated the initial framing of the issue as well as the ‘sustainable development internationalists’ who with their emphasis on greater urgency for an internationally effective climate regime, could not gain much prominence or say.

Co-benefits approach to Climate policy action

Shifts in India’s negotiating strategy can be understood through the ‘Co-benefits’ approach predicated on aligning of climate mitigation and adaptation goals with the development trajectories in a way that actions deliver both climate as well as development objectives. This paradigm irons out the development v. environment dichotomy by emphasizing that both need not be mutually exclusive and inimical. The explicit linkages between development objectives and climate objectives facilitated by India’s strategy of climate action based on the co-benefits approach may not be seen just a terminology or a classification but as a very important policy idea.

The co-benefits approach is about yoking together India’s development imperative and need to address climate change in a way that climate change mitigation yields economic opportunity. The government’s framing of co-benefits sought both to align domestic priorities of securing energy to sustain economic growth and also provide India leverage in international negotiations. Energy security has been a strong objective driving climate mitigation in India. Increasing energy access has been an important quest of the government even before the climate issue came on the domestic policy agenda. With climate change negotiations what changed was the choice of energy mix and the demand and supply of sources increasingly enmeshed

³ Dubash, Navroz. K., (2013). The politics of climate change in India: narratives of equity and cobenefits. WIRES Climate Change, Vol.4, Issue 3, 191-201
Dubash, Navroz. K. (ed.) (2013). Handbook of climate change and India – development, politics and governance, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
Dubash, Navroz K. and Lavanya Rajamani. (2015). ‘Multilateral Diplomacy on Climate Change’, in David M. Malone, C. Raja Mohan and Srinath Raghavan (eds.), Oxford Handbook on Indian Foreign Policy, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 663–77.

in the global climate diplomacy. The sense of energy insecurity was created by the twin effects of growing energy demands due to increased economic growth rate and the increase in the global energy prices in coal and gas, downward revision in estimates of coal reserves and shortfalls due to mis-governance and conflicts over access and resources. Energy security enjoys considerable political and popular support as compared to goals of climate mitigation. Measures towards climate mitigation such as promoting end use energy efficiency, and pursuing renewable energy supply, are consistent with reduced GHG emissions. Dubash states that this thinking formed the basis of India's domestic climate policies and actions even though its link with India's negotiating position has been somewhat tenuous. He notes that the climate debate in India both deepened and widened with involvement of wider range of constituencies and activities stimulated by COP 15- Copenhagen Accord. While the equity frame remained the fulcrum of India's efforts, Dubash notes that it was "complemented by calls for domestic mitigation measures" effectively predicated on co-benefits approach.

The shift in the climate narrative to co-benefits discourse is exemplified in NAPCC 2008 the driving motive behind which was to "promote our development objectives while also yielding co-benefits for addressing climate change effectively" (NAPCC, Sec.2).⁴The NAPCC recognized that climate change and energy security were "two sides of the same coin" – India had to make the strategic shift from dependence on fossil fuels to a pattern of economic activity based on progressively on renewable sources of energy. The NAPCC 2008 comprising the 8 National Missions, clearly drew linkages between climate change and energy security. Increased thrust towards renewable energy resources has become the nation's central theme in its quest for equitable access to energy.

India's performance vis-à-vis Paris Agreement targets

In the context of India's performance vis-à-vis Paris Agreement targets, it can be safely said that India is "walking the talk" on climate change. While India is well on track to meet its Paris targets, none of the developed nations is Paris Agreement

⁴ NAPCC, Sec.2

compliant at present. India's quantified pledges in the INDC included:

- Share of non-fossil fuel in the total installed capacity to be 40% by 2030.
- Emissions intensity of GDP to reduce by 33 – 35% by 2030 from 2005 levels.
- To create an additional carbon sink of 2.5 to 3 billion tons of CO₂ through additional forest cover by 2030.

While there's been a 56% expected shortfall in target emissions between countries' commitments and progress thus far as per UNEP's Emissions Gap 2020 report⁵, India's performance stands out:

- India has already reduced emissions intensity by 21%
- India is just 2% short of its 2030 target of 40% of non-fossil fuel installed electricity capacity
- India's is working on expanding its forest cover.

India is a growing “energy thirsty country” with large developmental needs. As such, at the current pace, India's electricity demand is likely to increase six folds from 356 GW to 2300 GW by 2050. Renewable energy is going to play a key role in meeting future needs and some initiatives to reinforce climate objectives and development objectives and yield co-benefits for a green and sustainable economy are being undertaken in India.

On the domestic front, India aims to install an ambitious 175 GW of renewable energy by 2022, representing 24% of its total installed capacity. Apart from imposing a prohibiting coal cess, India has also reduced its thermal capacity from 70% in 2015 to 61% in 2020. Chhattisgarh with the third largest coal reserves has vowed not to set up new coal plants; Gujarat will not give fresh permission for setting up any more coal plants; and, Rajasthan has announced that it will build 50 GW of solar capacity. ‘India Cooling Action Plan’ is driving efforts to save energy and reduce heat-trapping Hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs). The ‘FAME II’ scheme provides a funding of \$1.4 billion for electric vehicles. There has been an attempt to increase the fleet of electric vehicles and its charging infrastructure. India is expanding its biofuel mix to reduce the share of crude oil usage. ‘The Jal Shakti Abhiyan’ promotes water conservation, rainwater harvesting and rejuvenation of water bodies. ‘Ujjawala’ - India's cooking

⁵ UNEP's Emissions Gap 2020 report, available at <https://www.unep.org/emissions-gap-report-2020> retrieved on 15 April 2021

energy program aims to provide clean cooking gas connection to over 150 million households. The ‘Industry Transition Group’ is mandated to develop low carbon pathways to achieve net zero emissions in steel and cement industries.

On the international front, India is leading efforts with International Solar Alliance and boasts of one of the lowest solar tariffs globally. India has also led the establishment of Coalition of Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI) along with 30 other nations.

Although India has made significant progress in implementing several of its national missions, its expectations of a supportive international climate regime facilitating funds and access to green technology have not come through, however, for a better realization of India’s economic and diplomatic aspirations, it is imperative that India be seen as a part of the solution to this global problem par excellence. This requires a better appreciation of the fact that climate objectives and development objectives may complement and reinforce each other and yield co-benefits. It also provides an opportunity for leading in research, development and innovations in the field of green energy technology and adoption of low carbon growth strategy. India’s lofty slogans of “We care” and “Sustainable Lifestyles” must be matched with a meaningful negotiating strategy.

India’s stance in international climate negotiations is likely to have far reaching implications for the success of global climate cooperation. While India may have had little historical responsibility in causing the climate crisis, with its status as the third largest aggregate GHG emitter and vulnerability of its vast majority, it certainly has a current responsibility of engaging with climate change constructively and meaningfully. However, the rhetoric that India has espoused during international climate negotiations has been informed by several other factors – historical emissions, twin objectives of poverty eradication and economic development, foreign policy implications, energy and technology access, impact on foreign trade, geopolitical and international leadership aspirations, changing world order and realignment of coalitions and so on. For a long India has focused mainly on warding off pressures from the developed nations to undertake deeper emissions cut obligations and has fixated on funding and transfer of technology from the developed

world. India has been defensive rather than proactive, never proffering any alternative structure/ program for burden sharing among the countries.

Time has come to bridge the chasm between domestic action and international stance and rescript India's conversation on climate change based entirely on irrefutable science and genuine need for action. As the nation steps up to revive the economy reeling under the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, conscientious decision and concerted action needs to be taken towards green recovery and a sustainable future in keeping with climate goals and commitments. India's official stance and negotiating strategy in the international arena need to be recast to ensure a greater congruence between what India sets out to do and achieves and what it projects. Therefore, devoting more attention to climate negotiations alongside its other pressing domestic concerns and reconciling the contradictory trends in its development story and climate negotiations strategy may be a promising move going forward.