



Into the *Mainstream*

PREETY BHANDARI describes how India could play a crucial role in tackling climate change

Negotiations on climate change are delicately poised: the next two years appear to be crucial for making any progress on a global commitment to address this challenge. The role that India can assume could be crucial to advancing efforts to tackle it. There are, of course, a menu of imperatives that could drive this – economic aspirations as well as political ones, underlining India’s current euphoria at having arrived on the international scene.

Its economic aspirations are evident. A well publicized and consistent effort to maintain GDP growth at and above 8 per cent a year is clear evidence of them. Yet this very economic growth is drawing attention to India’s likely greenhouse gas footprint, and those of other major developing economies including China, Brazil, South Africa, and Mexico. India’s incremental energy demand is projected to be among the highest in the world, driven by sustained economic growth, increasing income levels, and greater availability of

goods and services – all factors which attest to increased greenhouse gas emissions. The worst fears, however, are somewhat unfounded. There are many reform processes and initiatives accompanying this economic growth which have the potential to decouple it from its environmental implications.

Some energy-economy-environment model runs have shown clearly that existing policies and programmes could lower the trend of emissions by about 20 per cent. Besides these measures – driven largely by narrow domestic considerations – India can clearly articulate the technological or financial support it requires from the international community to pursue a greener path of development. Its recent forays with the United States, either bilaterally or multilaterally through the Asia Pacific Pact on Clean Development and Climate, are manifestations of this. Though some argue that political imperatives, rather than a commitment to climate change mitigation, drive this developing partnership.

Development challenge

In the face of increasing pressure on India to make some form of commitment to reducing its emissions of greenhouse gases, it needs to make clear that the strides in development that the world perceives it to be making – shown by a burgeoning middle class with high spending power, urban islands of prosperity – do not completely represent its development paradigm. A large part of its population is still at the subsistence level, and thus a large part of its development challenge remains ▶



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yet to be met. Not until these people are extricated from the poverty trap can all the talk of 'strides' in Indian development be fully warranted.

It is simply unfair to impose restrictions on India, considering its present, early, position on its development trajectory, and considering that its projected rise in per capita carbon emissions in 2030 will still represent less than half the 2000 world average of 3.8 tonnes. Furthermore, the adverse impacts of climate change will disproportionately affect the poor in developing countries, including India, exacerbating their already precarious conditions.

Climate change

Two-thirds of India's cropland are prone to drought, with the monsoon rains highly variable from year to year, season to season, and place to place. Besides, 40 million hectares of land are susceptible to floods: on average eight million hectares, and 30 million people, are affected each year. In the seasons before and after the monsoon, the coastline – particularly the east coast – is vulnerable to tropical cyclones. In 2001 alone, 20,753 people died in floods, droughts and earthquakes in India, with 36,649,077 people affected. These extreme events are likely to worsen with climate change, while underdevelopment – and lack of resources to hedge against them – will fundamentally constrain the capacity to adapt. The Indian government will have to consider anticipatory responses and programmes, and the associated expense, while negotiating its response to a future climate regime. For all these reasons, it would

be unthinkable, at this stage, for India to decelerate its development juggernaut, for the sake of the climate.

The only way to ensure that some form of responsibility for India's future climate footprint is factored into its planning process is by 'mainstreaming' environmental considerations into it. Thus the country's policy makers will have to ensure that incremental energy demand will be met, as far as possible, through environmentally benign sources and technologies. At the same time, issues related to the security of the environment and such natural resources as water and food need to be raised high enough to produce a paradigm shift in harnessing them for growth, while ensuring adaptive policy responses to deal with predicted impacts of climatic variability and change. The climate change lexicon has to permeate to the policy making community. The handful of research institutions engaged in the area, and the few negotiators that represent the country, have a paramount role in informing and educating politicians. If India succeeds in instituting such considerations in its planning process, it would show the way as a proactive emergent power that is concerned about both local and global environmental issues.

Global issues

India's international political aspirations include the desire to be seen as a champion of the developing country brigade, as it has so successfully been in the past through the Non-Aligned Movement, the formulation of the Berlin Mandate during the climate change negotiations, and more recently at the WTO talks. Arguably, it needs a 'makeover', if it wishes to gain legitimacy as a global political power, and to be an articulate and forceful negotiator for developing country interests. Perhaps what is needed is a revival of economic, cultural, and – more importantly – ideological moorings and identities with other countries, both to insure against isolation on important regional and global issues, and to build and enhance on the image of a country willing to be a partner and help in the process of 'development for all'. It is trying to build bridges with Africa and Latin America – and ASEAN too – but these discussions will necessarily have to be more comprehensive, taking in all strategic considerations including the environment. The climate agenda offers India another avenue both to further its sustainable development, and to be seen as a political leader of some reckoning in tabling developing country concern ■

Preeti M. Bhandari is Director of the Policy Analysis Division, TERI, India. These are her views and may not reflect those of the institution.