

# wanted: political

by Sunita Narain

The world is interconnected but it is not 'one'. We have collectively failed to secure a common future for all. In spite of the many millions of hours of negotiations that governments have expended to stitch together multilateral environmental agreements — from climate to persistent organic pollutants — the world is even more divided and even more at risk of global environmental damage than when we embarked on this journey. This, then, is the time to step back, to consider and to re-engineer directions so that we can indeed make the difference.

In the last 15 years, the world has seen a growth of intergovernmental negotiations to formulate international environmental treaties. This 'ecological globalization' is the result of the ongoing processes of economic growth and economic globalization, which not only stitch the world's economies together, but take national production and consumption levels to a point that threatens the world's ecological systems.

The predominant economic model is highly material and energy-intensive, metabolizes huge quantities of natural resources, and leaves a trail of toxins and highly degraded and transformed ecosystems in its wake. The process of ecological globalization is driven by the fact that levels of production and consumption have reached a stage that what one does in one's own country can have major impacts on neighbouring countries or even on the rest of the world. Never before have human beings needed so much to learn to live in 'one world' as we do now.

The problem is that the two processes of globalization outlined above are not accompanied by any form of political globalization. So there is no process that has any interest in ensuring that the emerging global market or the emerging global ecological policy is managed in the best interest of the maximum number of people — and on the basis of the principles of 'good governance', equality and justice. We have also seen that there is very little political will on the part of world governments to put these issues on the political agenda.

We now know with much greater certainty that global warming is beginning to change our world for the worse. Evidence shows not just that climate change will be disastrous for countries, particularly the poor, but that it would cost the world much less if it invested today in mitigating emissions than it would need to spend in the future when climate catastrophe is on our head.

The warming of the global atmosphere is possibly the biggest and most difficult economic and political issue the world has ever needed to confront. This is so, firstly, because emissions of carbon dioxide are directly linked to economic growth. So growth as we know is on the line. We will have to

reinvent what we do and how we do it. There will be costs, but they will be a fraction of what we would otherwise need to spend in future.


Secondly, the issue is about sharing that growth between nations and people. Global economic wealth is highly skewed — and so are emissions of greenhouse gases. The question now is how the world will share its rights to emit (or pollute) or whether it freezes inequities. The question is whether the rich world — which has accumulated a huge 'natural debt', overdrawing on its share of the global commons — will repay it so that the poorer world can grow and use the same ecological space?

Thirdly, climate change is about international cooperation. It teaches us more than anything else that the world is one; if the rich world pumped in excessive quantities of carbon dioxide yesterday, the emerging rich world does so today. It also tells that the only way to build controls would be to ensure that there is fairness and equity in the agreement, so that this biggest-ever cooperative enterprise is possible.

What must we do to avert climate change? We must accept that the world needs to go beyond the commitments under the Kyoto Protocol. The way forward would be to re-negotiate the world's agreement. But this time the agreement must be political. It must reflect the desperate urgency of the world faced with catastrophe. It must be fair and it must be meaningful. In other words, it must not take the world another 15 years to cut emissions and get something as weak and pusillanimous as the current Kyoto Protocol.

There is clear understanding that the rich and the emerging rich worlds need to make the transition to a low carbon economy. There is also much better understanding that the route ahead is made up to technologies that we already have in hand. This is not about inventing new things, but about using the technologies of the present much more efficiently and effectively. So answers will lie in increasing efficiencies in both generating energy and in using it in manufacturing other products. It will also lie with the change in how we do things — from transportation policies in our cities to everything else. The fact is that we know how to change.

It is also clear that the emerging rich world — China, India and others — are already showing themselves to be more efficient per unit of output within their limited means than the industrial world. They would want to make this transition, if compensated for their efficiency.

Ultimately, climate change is the true globalizer. It forces our world to come together not just to make short term profit for some, but long term economic and ecological benefits for all. The challenge is ours to take. 



# globalization