

FROM THE RINGSIDE

Warming up to a paradigm change

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The recent report of the United Nation's Intergovernmental Panel on climate change dispels any lingering doubts. It draws on new and more comprehensive data, more accurate simulation models of climate processes, and sophisticated data analysis to pronounce climate system warming "unequivocal" and the causes "very likely" to be human activity.

The report does not focus on the impact of climate change, but the human and social costs involved glare from between the lines. Take this phrase from the report: "observations of increases in global average air and ocean temperatures, widespread melting of snow and ice, and rising global average sea level". It means submerged coasts, fewer islands, flooding rivers, agricultural disruption for India. Imagine Mumbai as a set of islands again. Two islands in the Sundarbans have already disappeared.

India can and must be a leader in responding, both at home and internationally. Domestic emissions of carbon, especially soot, are an easy target.

The strategies for limiting black carbon emissions are straightforward: tackle biomass-based cooking more seriously, allocate more funding for "smokeless chulhas" and ensure that they are suitable for local cooking needs, and support distribution of LPG in rural areas.

Moving to fossil fuel, we must crack down on fuel adulteration and provide incentives for engine tuning. We must also deliver on the promise for rural electrification to cut down the use of diesel generators and encourage the use of CNG for buses and cabs.

International strategies are trickier. On the one hand, India is a developing country, starting to ramp up its fossil-fuel use and emissions after the richer countries have contributed to the problem for decades. It has inherited problems it neither created nor benefited from creating. On the other hand, it is one of the world's largest economies and, along with China, the future centre of economic activity — and emissions.

India has two choices: stubbornly claim its right to unfettered emissions in its economic transition, or acknowledge that the world has changed and that development today might require different strategies than it did in the last century.

India has always sought differentiated treatment in any international agreements to limit emissions. It currently has no reduction obligations and can earn credit under the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) for the emissions it does forgo.

There are three reasons to reconsider this stance and to consider committing to phased limits on emissions growth. India should not have to overpay for past emissions, but it also should not underpay for its current and future emissions.

First, full exemption from emissions controls is not sustainable. The negotiations over emissions controls look like a classic war of attrition, with stubborn adherence to positions while the costs of stalling steadily increase. Climate change will affect India at least as much as the developed nations that it blames for the problem. It is not as if climate change gives India special treatment.

Second, energy efficiency — one component of limiting emissions — is not necessarily incompatible with rapid growth. One indicator is China's energy intensity of GDP (measured as BTU per dollar of GDP) decreased by 4.5

per cent annually in the 1980s and nearly 6 per cent annually over the 1990s, according to the US Energy Information Administration. India, too, has the domestic scientific and technical capacity to compete in the growing international market for green technology.

Third, the demonstration value of emissions controls would short-circuit many of the current international cries of "but they need to stop polluting before we do." India is home to a fifth of the world's population and many of the world's poorest. If it commits to emissions reductions, others have few excuses. It can play the leadership role.

There is a saying, "Death waits for no man." Neither does climate change. We must move away from the past paradigm.

Regular columnist N.K. Singh and Dr. Jessica S. Wallack, a professor of economics at University of California, are collaborating on a book on infrastructure reforms on India. Essays based on their research will appear every fortnight.

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