

Carbon Tunnel Vision Dominates the Climate Crisis Narrative

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- *The West has been pushing a carbon-obsessed mitigation narrative. The same hard push is not observed for solving the multitude of crises in the Global South, even in India.*
- *While we admit that there are many frameworks and conventions to address non-emission issues, funding and commitment have failed to reflect the urgency to solve the problems.*

The 27th Conference of Parties (COP27) concluded its annual meeting at Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, in November 2022. For two weeks a year during COP, the world hyper focuses on carbon emissions. Yet emissions are only one part of a much larger problem. The climate crisis is embedded in a breakdown of the larger socio-ecological system, wherein solving carbon will not necessarily solve the crises we are in. Recognising this, governments from around the world reached a historic agreement at the 15th United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (COP 15) last month to halt and reverse nature loss by [2030](#). While this is indeed positive news, we need to reflect on the multiple socio-ecological system crises that we face while being tasked with the additional burden of solving the global emissions problem.

Socio-ecological systems and justice

Socio-ecological systems comprise a deeply interconnected relationship between society and nature. Activities in either sphere have profound implications for the other. In the Global South, especially in India, our bare necessities for survival (food and water) are highly dependent on socio-ecological systems, with an emphasis on *local*. For instance, our predominantly rural population does not have access to centralised water supply systems but is dependent on streams, groundwater systems, or spring sheds for water.

The degradation of local socio-ecological systems can have significant global implications. The loss of the Amazon forest in Brazil has negative impacts on native communities and the world's atmospheric balance. These tropical rainforests, often called the 'lungs of the planet', are essential to regulate carbon dioxide and oxygen concentrations in our atmosphere, which affect populations living outside the borders of the Amazon. Carbon emissions also have dire global consequences but will have to be mitigated through local socio-ecological systems; the strength of our local socio-ecological systems will reflect how much we can mitigate.

The Global South with its developmental aspirations has the challenge of navigating through the climate crisis while neck-deep in other socio-ecological crises. A singular focus on carbon emissions

will be a symptomatic treatment that ignores the complexity of a deeply intertwined socio-ecological system that is slowly decaying.

The crises

The West has been pushing a carbon-obsessed mitigation narrative. The same hard push is not observed for solving the multitude of crises in the Global South, even in India. Our lands are degrading (becoming less productive) at an alarming rate, and [60% of these lands](#), affecting the most marginalised communities in the country. The topsoil of [29.5 million hectares](#) of rainfed agricultural lands is simply washing away, causing land degradation and desertification in India. As a party to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, we pledged land degradation neutrality by [2030](#). This is no small feat to achieve as we are currently [losing more land to degradation and desertification](#) than we are reclaiming. This has significant implications for India's net-zero target as land degradation is a major source of greenhouse gas emissions. Also, India's food security and the growing economic disparity between rural and urban areas will increase with further degradation of our socio-ecological systems.

Let us not forget that our water resources are not faring well either. We are the [largest user of groundwater in the world](#), and our supplies are running dry. Groundwater spurred the Green Revolution that made India a food-secure nation. This might have been the need of the hour; however, the widespread over-extraction of groundwater resources has led to its alarming decline. In 20 years, about [60%](#) of our aquifers will have been critically exploited. Dependence on groundwater has also exposed a mass of our population to arsenic and fluoride toxicity, causing an endemic health emergency across India's rural geographies.

Amidst all of this, we have the responsibility of acting to solve the global emergency – climate change. There are also expectations from India to contribute to the 'loss and damage' fund and pay carbon border taxes, both of which Indian negotiators at COP27 rejected. While we admit that there are many frameworks and conventions to address *non-emission* issues, funding and commitment have failed to reflect the urgency to solve the problem(s).

A '[carbon tunnel vision](#)' (a phrase coined by Dr Jan Konietzko, Maastricht University) ignores the multiple socio-ecological system crises that we face to focus only on emissions and/or reduces all the other crises to a solvable emissions problem. Both are erroneous. In a country that has been described by eminent economists Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen as 'pockets of California in a sea of Sub-Saharan Africa', we simply cannot afford to ignore the multitude of crises that we face to accommodate the interests of the Global North.

The arguments presented in this article are not meant to divert policy focus from carbon emissions but rather to elevate the other crises to the extent to which carbon emissions are debated (and rightfully so because of their widespread impact across the globe) and to recognise the embeddedness of the crisis in socio-ecological systems. The developing world certainly has a role to play in mitigating carbon, and India has demonstrated this through our nationally determined contribution commitments on expanding the share of renewables and by releasing the Long-Term Low Emission Development Strategy at COP27. But this is insufficient if the Global North does not self-reflect and take stock of its material footprint.

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