Local action amidst global inertia

While global consensus and funding remain elusive, local and national actions are making tangible progress

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi (unseen) visits the residence of beneficiaries of PM Surya Ghar Muft Bijli Yojana, in Gandhinagar. | Photo Credit: ANI

After hours of intense negotiations, the 29th Conference of the Parties (COP29) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) ended with a climate finance goal where developed countries are to provide $300 billion annually by 2035. However, this is far from what the developing countries need, and once again brings global climate gridlock into the spotlight.

No consensus

The notion that developed countries should finance climate action in developing nations while also ramping up their own mitigation efforts (such as taking the lead in phasing out fossil fuels and reaching net zero emissions faster) is accepted in principle, but has proven contentious to implement across COPs. The developed world continues to use fossil fuels to meet most of its demands and has no plans of reaching net zero before mid-century. The deadlock has remained a recurring theme at climate negotiations, and COP29 was unsurprisingly no exception. The powerful fossil fuel lobby, especially the oil and gas lobby; the developed world's heavy reliance on fossil fuels; the re-election of climate change deniers; and the differential impacts of climate change across the globe (with the developing world more likely to be impacted than others) are all challenges that hinder reaching a consensus.

Global negotiations are not useless. On the contrary, they are extremely important, even if the victories are few and far between. For instance, the Montreal Protocol, which came into force in 1989, has successfully helped protect the ozone layer and eliminate certain chemicals used in refrigeration (chlorofluorocarbons), a significant contributor to the depletion of the ozone layer. Similarly, the Kyoto Protocol, the first global accord on reducing greenhouse gas emissions, which came into force in 2005; the 2015 Paris Agreement, a consensus on limiting global warming to 2 degrees Celsius with revised national targets every five years; and the 2021 Glasgow Climate Pact, which introduced a loss and damage fund and in which nations declared their respective net-zero dates, are some of the milestone COPs to celebrate.

However, unlike the melting of glaciers, the pace of action has been slow. Studies indicate that the 1.5 degrees Celsius target will be breached within a few years, with one study even suggesting that it has already been exceeded. Scientific evidence warns that crossing this threshold will lead to severe consequences in terms of natural disasters and heat stress, which are already apparent across the world. In some instances, the changes expected are unknown and could be catastrophic. Further, studies also point to the fact that the earth's climate will continue to evolve even after global net zero is reached, but the longer we take to get there, the more significant the impact of climate change will be.

India's efforts

Whether the goal is to limit global temperature rise to 1.5-2 degrees Celsius or condemn political aggressors for starting wars, the rate at which action is needed is exponential, but the rate at which it is realistically possible is incremental at best. So then, how do we reconcile these different scales (exponential versus incremental rates) of action? Our answer is to focus efforts on national and sub-national-level action. In India, several policies and finance have already been put in place towards clean energy transition, assuming that international climate finance contribution will be minimal. Being a developing country with several challenges, India has largely followed the co-benefits approach in addressing climate change. For instance, the PM Surya Ghar Muft Bijli Yojana provides households with subsidies to install rooftop solar panels, thereby also addressing energy poverty and access. The PM Electric Drive Revolution in Innovative Vehicle Enhancement (PM E-DRIVE) initiative aims to promote the adoption of zero-emission vehicles, including two-wheelers, three-wheelers, ambulances, and trucks, offering purchase subsidies and supporting essential charging infrastructure to accelerate the transition to clean air and clean transportation. The Perform, Achieve, and Trade scheme, soon to be replaced by the Indian Carbon Market, helps mobilise investments needed to improve energy efficiency and emissions reduction in industries. It is important to note that India has been working hard on reducing its emissions intensity (CO_2 per unit of GDP) as per its commitment to the Paris Agreement. Further, in addition to strategies for emissions mitigation, State Action Plans on Climate Change support adaptation strategies tailored to specific vulnerabilities of States and regions, with a focus on agriculture, forestry, water resources, and disaster risk reduction.

While global consensus and funding remain elusive, local and national actions are making tangible progress. The hullabaloo around COPs from “non-parties” is less crucial than the need to drive action on the ground. India deserves praise for already taking steps in the right direction. Moving forward, sustained efforts in emissions mitigation, mindful consumption aligned with Mission LiFE, a greater emphasis on developing resilient infrastructure and communities, and implementing effective heat action plans to address extreme heat will be essential.

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