

Saving our Planet

By Amb Ajai Malhotra

In recent decades there has been heightened appreciation of the importance of rising above national priorities and differing ideologies and giving primacy to the long-term interests of our planet, its ecosystems, and its diverse plant and life forms. There has also been a growing desire, across generations, for healthier, more sustainable lifestyles, and more harmonious relations between human beings and nature. Contemporary global environmental concerns arising out of anthropogenic activities, such as depletion of the ozone layer, desertification and deforestation, land, marine and air pollution, global heating and climate disruption, and the worrisome trend in biodiversity loss, have contributed in bringing about such an attitudinal change.

A year ago the world was girding up to better tackle the challenges of global warming, climate change and biodiversity loss, when it was blind-sided by the COVID-19 pandemic. It exposed weaknesses in public health delivery, highlighted the need for more effective and affordable health care, and drew attention to the interdependencies between economic, environmental and social outcomes.

Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), unanimously endorsed by all countries in 2015, had started stalling before the COVID-19 pandemic began and the lockdowns that countries put in place to prevent its spread led to a sharp global economic downturn. As per the World Bank, the pandemic could result in an additional 88 million to 115 million people falling back into extreme poverty in 2020 alone, with the largest number of the “new poor” emerging in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. An early global bounce back from the pandemic would be crucial if the world is to achieve the SDGs by 2030. This would also require more effective partnerships between governments, civil society, and the private sector.

As regards global warming, governments agreed by the Paris Agreement on Climate Change (2015) to keep temperature rise to well below +2°C, aiming for +1.5°C. The global economic downturn accentuated by COVID-19 did cause a seven percent decline in the burning of fossil fuels last year; however, as WMO Secretary-General Petteri Taalas put it, this represents “a tiny blip” in the continuous buildup of greenhouse gases in the air caused by human activities. We have to flatten the global warming curve on a sustained basis.

India's response to these crises has been to lead by domestic example, support development partnerships and buttress multilateral global environmental action. The harsh consequences of climate change have deepened India's developmental challenges, given the number of its poor who depend on climate sensitive sectors for their livelihood. India is one of the more disaster-prone countries (close to 85% of its landmass is susceptible to one or multiple hazards) and is particularly vulnerable to accelerated sea level rise (14.2% of its population reside in coastal districts or its islands). In spite of the enormous task of eradicating poverty and ensuring electricity, housing, and food security to all, India is pursuing mitigation efforts that deliver early benefits while reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. These include switching from conventional fossil fuels to renewable energy sources, by energy conservation and more efficient energy usage (e.g., via more fuel efficient vehicles, spread of Metro mass transport, widespread use of less energy consuming LED bulbs and home appliances, and deployment of roof-top solar systems), reducing energy wastage, as well as better urban planning and building design. It is also pursuing adaption efforts, e.g., by improving ecosystem resilience and helping local communities, to meet some climate change risks.

Biodiversity loss is of special concern to India, a biodiversity rich country, given it has an economic cost, could harm food security and human health. India has taken several steps for its conservation, including so as to minimize the impact of climate change on coral reefs and forest ecosystems.

India has long promoted development partnerships with fellow developing countries. Under its Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation programme started in 1963 it has been providing credit lines, grant assistance, technical consultancy, disaster relief, humanitarian aid, educational scholarships and a wide range of practical capacity building programmes. These South-South cooperation programmes are motivated by a shared sense of solidarity, eschew conditionality, and seek to bolster plans, programmes and priorities of the beneficiary country. India has also been ready to share its technologies with others, developing a satellite specifically for South Asia and offering free-of-cost remote sensing satellite data to SAARC countries.

India's rich contribution to multilateral action on global environmental issues has been rooted in its strong civilisational link to nature. At the UN Conference on the Human Environment (1972) at Stockholm, India drew

attention to the link between environment and development, highlighting that “the environment cannot be improved in conditions of poverty”. It drafted and presented the 1990 London Amendments to the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer (1987), without which global efforts to tackle ozone depletion would not have taken off. It played a crucial role in drafting the Biodiversity Convention (1992) and actively participated in the negotiations leading to the adoption of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC; 1990), the Paris Agreement on Climate Change (2015) and its follow up.

Two other international Indian initiatives need acknowledgement. The ‘International Solar Alliance’ - jointly launched in 2015 by India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi and France’s President Emmanuel Macron - is working to make solar energy available round the clock at an affordable cost to all. At the UN Climate Action Summit 2019, Prime Minister Modi announced the setting up of the ‘Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure’, a global partnership to promote resilience of new and existing infrastructure systems to climate and disaster risks.

India was not a major GHG emitter when the UN FCCC was agreed to in 1992 and its per capita GHG emissions remain a fraction of that of all major emitters. Indeed, India’s historic and current levels of GHG emissions per capita place it last amongst all twenty G20 countries. India also has one of the lowest rates of energy intensity of GDP growth. It has in the past indicated that its per capita emissions would never exceed those of the developed countries, including their historical emissions. India does not want to follow the GHG “peaking path” approach followed by some.

India’s Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC), announced in 2015, envisages reduction in the emissions intensity of its GDP by 33-35% by 2030 from its 2005 level. It also foresees changing India’s share of non-fossil fuel in its total installed capacity from 30% in 2015 to about 40% by 2030. India also adopted an ambitious target of creating an additional carbon sink of 2.5 to 3 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent through additional forest and tree cover by 2030. Preliminary estimates show that over US\$ 2.5 trillion would be required during 2015-2030 to implement India’s climate-related plans.

In the context of the G-20 Summit convened online from 20-21 November 2020, ‘Climate Action Tracker’ (CAT), a respected and independent science-based assessment, has rated India’s climate action NDC target as “2°C compatible”, indicating that India’s climate commitment for 2030 is

regarded as a fair share of global effort based on its responsibility and capability. No G-20 country received a more favourable rating from CAT. Nonetheless, all countries would need to enhance their climate pledges in future stocktaking reviews if global warming is to be capped at +2°C, let alone +1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.

At the Climate Ambition Summit held on 12 December 2020 on the fifth anniversary of the Paris Agreement, Prime Minister Modi stated that India was not only on track to meet its climate targets but is set to “exceed them beyond expectations”. This affirmation reassures that India would be in the frontline of nations that will continue to act responsibly on global warming and climate change concerns. The Prime Minister also reiterated India’s pledge to increase its renewable energy capacity to 175 GW by 2022 and 450 GW by 2030.

Many developing countries look to new and additional financial flows from the rich, developed countries to top up their resource gap beyond domestic funding. Enhanced action on development of clean technologies and their transfer on preferential and concessional terms will also be central to fulfilling the NDC of many developing countries. The delivery by developed countries on their commitment to annually mobilise \$100 billion climate finance by 2020 to support resource constrained developing countries has been most disappointing, especially for Least Developed Countries (LDCs), Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and other climate-vulnerable developing countries. In the run up to COP26 in Glasgow in November 2021, the world is looking to commitments by developed country not only to net zero carbon emission by 2050 if not earlier, but also to enhanced climate finance flows, technological and capacity building support to the developing world. For LDCs/SIDS, adaption to climate change is an urgent necessity and they await the promised funding to make it a reality. As USA shortly rejoins the Paris Agreement, it is also hoped it would start its fresh innings with a ratcheted up NDC.

We have to save our planet from our own harmful and destructive ways. After all, it is excessive levels of anthropogenic emissions and a somewhat deficient human response when confronted by such excess that has brought us to the present pass. We are staring at a climate emergency that needs to be urgently and effectively remedied. The decarbonization of the global economy needs to be relentlessly pursued, but while drawing upon principles that are fair, just and equitable. In this context, much of the world is rallying around UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres’s call for net zero carbon emissions by 2050 and his planned “Global Coalition for Carbon

Neutrality”. The new international mantra swirling around is to ‘build back better’ or ‘build forward better’. Indeed, the global recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic must lead us to a more sustainable, inclusive and resilient future – one that respects human rights, enhances climate action, strengthens biodiversity protection, addresses desertification, deforestation, land, water and air pollution, and puts the world on track to achieve the SDGs by 2030. We must vigorously pull together in the same direction to overcome the overlapping crises presently confronting our planet if we want to give the current generation the opportunity to live a dignified life in a clean, safe secure and healthy world and pass it on to future generations.

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