

Governance of Climate Security– An Opportunity for An Equitable World

Startling revelations by oceanologists at a recent Arctic Conference suggest that IPCC has downplayed the impact of climate change. Mr Christopher Rapley, director of Antarctic Survey claims that Arctic could become ice free by the middle of century. He says IPCC's report suggesting ice cover until the end of the century is misleading. It has been discovered that the denial machine which started functioning ever since a Swedish scientist claimed in 1896 that "we are evaporating our coal mines into the air" is now revving up full throttle. An oil company is reported to be paying \$10,000 for each article that runs down the recommendations of the IPCC.

Shrinking ice on the Arctic sea shows that global warming is outpacing the IPCC's projections and lives of polar bears and seals like the humanity at large are in grave danger.

The climate change scenario in high growth economies of China & India is even worse. The legacy of the environmental damage by these industrial juggernauts competing to become world powers is catastrophic. China is choking on its own success. China's Ministry of Health says that pollution has made cancer as the main cause of death in China. Ambient air pollution is blamed for hundreds of thousands of deaths each year. Chinese cities are wrapped in a toxic gray shroud most days. Only 1% of the country's 560 million city dwellers breathe air considered safe by EU standards. People rarely see the sun in industrial cities. Children are killed or sickened by lead poisoning. Large sections of the ocean no longer sustain marine life.

India's only glacier that feeds its rivers has receded by 13 meters during the last 5 years. It will flood India's waterways for the next 40 years and then dry up completely. So our grandchildren will have no fresh water and face severe drought conditions within half a lifetime.

There are already 25 million climate refugees displaced by climate-induced disasters such as those in the Papua New Guinean Carteret Islands. They have been forced to relocate because of the rising ocean level. Bangladesh is one of the most vulnerable countries in the world. 259 km of river delta islands near the Bay of Bengal have vanished in the last 30 years.

Yet, the action we are taking is nothing more than making a few movies, making big speeches, arranging band aids and engaging in symbolic acts. We have long been aware that there is no gain without pain. Global warming is not going to stop without our having to change our life styles. In fact , with the colossal increase in air travel and conspicuous consumption, the rate at which we are pouring CO₂ in the atmosphere has increased phenomenally reminding us of the young woman who complains of uncontrollable sneezing but opts for snuff as a cure. Yet, there is no effort to change lifestyles which are the real cause of this global warning.

The irony is that while the world has been polluted by the rich , the real sufferers of climate change are the poor people of Asia and Africa. A vigorous drive to combat climate change can act as a great equalizer. Indeed most solutions take us to the edge of a new frontier and open new vistas of opportunities for the rural poor.

Whilst there is no doubt that developing economies have a right to catch up with the west they don't have to adopt the same growth model. In fact survival in today's market place comes not by doing the same thing but doing different things. West has a moral duty to subsidise technological inputs to reduce the carbon footprint of the developing countries. It is only fair that the North meets the costs of the South's growth, at least upto the take-off stage. It was this moral compulsion that brought the concept of carbon credits. But over the years the price of these carbon credits has reduced so much that they have lost their shine.

The strategy to deal with climate change, is going to be different for poor countries. While carbon tax, financial incentives and increased insurance premia can force people to go green in developed countries,

the grim poverty of Asia and Africa calls for an integrated action plan, where the North implements the “polluter-pays” principle and provides scientific and technological know-how, as well as infrastructural support, and transfer of technology to the South to bring it to a level playing field.

The environmental footprint of the poor is a fraction of their rich counterparts. India’s ecological footprint i.e. the natural material used per person per year, is one twelfth of US and Europe. Creating wealth through unbridled consumerism and proliferation of products that create unneeded wants can be disastrous for the ecology. If the rapid rate at which the developing economies are growing translates itself into excessive consumerism, our mission of bridging the gap is going to result in an ecological catastrophe. We therefore need to change our growth model and move our economy from an acquisitional mode to an ‘experiential’ mode.

We have to find ways to dematerialise products and opt for minimalist designs. These innovations will enable developing countries to demand more credits from the North, credits for saving the environment by adopting a dematerialised, low carbon, experiential model of growth.

Such paradigmatic changes cannot take place without collective action. This is the job of the UN. In a recent statement Yvo de Boer, a top UN official on climate change said “momentum is building up for a tougher long term action to fight global warming beyond what is stipulated in the Kyoto Protocol. Negotiators from 100 countries are gathered in Vienna to build up a wider agenda for the upcoming environmental ministries meet in Bali.” All these meetings will be hollow if the UN planners do not take up the crucial issue of life style changes and curbing excessive consumerism by offering an alternative model of economic growth.

Just as it is real that climate has changed due to human activity, humans have the power and technology to reverse the damage. For this to happen business has to be brought to the forefront of the climate change agenda. Our focus has to be on galvanising businesses for a robust response to climate change in a way that opens new vistas of growth and development, advancing human happiness.

The 8th Environment Conference in Palampur brought to the fore an eleven point plan called PROACTIVATE. The acronym denotes the action required for regeneration of the planet. It calls upon businesses to Price natural capital; Radically increase energy efficiency; Opt for minimalist lifestyles that emphasise the value of experience as opposed to acquisition; Adopt zero waste and closed loop systems; Capture CO₂ through forestation; Turn to renewables; Invest in green issues; Vigorously pursue market mechanism to punish polluters; Activate women and children to drive the change; Train staff to eco-innovate and focus on Execution by example rather than exhortation. Climate change calls for a holistic and resolute approach designed to reduce the human footprint on the planet by committing to make a 180 degree shift in lifestyles. It challenges our current paradigms of wealth, happiness and prosperity. Who would prefer to be a billionaire with a parched throat in the arid world of 2050?

It is time we started recognising the price of natural capital – of greenery, rivers, mountains, oceans and glaciers and moved our natural assets way above the financial capital in the balance sheets. The pendulum of asset valuation has moved beyond tangibles. People have begun to question the very purpose of work and wealth creation.

We have a grander vision in promoting climate change agenda. We believe that the renewable technologies such as solar power, wind power, biofuel & hydel power can have a transformational effect on the poverty situation by transferring wealth to rural areas and “have not regions” and shifting the urban-rural divide. For Instance India has a potential of 600 million tons of agricultural waste can produce cellulosic ethanol which in turn can generate equivalent of 80,000 megawatts of electricity i.e. 60% of its installed capacity. This can create 30 million new jobs and empower rural India in a most unthinkable way.

Climate change, therefore, provides a real opportunity for social change that we have been waiting for. It can bridge the North South divide and reduce the urban & rural inequalities with the speed we could have never imagined. The key is to focus on the last item of the 11 point plan PROACTIVATE - the Execution.

***Dr Madhav Mehra is President of World Council of Corporate Governance, and President of World Environment Foundation, based in UK.**