

Climate Change: Not Vision, Not Plan

The National Action Plan on Climate Change is only half a beginning that is neither fully vision nor plan.

The long-awaited National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) is an important landmark in the climate change debate in India. It is not, however, an adequate response to the scale of the challenge.

This cannot have been an easy plan to write. India has faced considerable, and largely unfair, pressure from the industrialised world to take action for a problem substantially created by them. At the same time, India has much to lose from a changing climate, and much to gain for climate and non-climate reasons from enhancing the ecological sustainability of our development path. The plan's circumspect approach reflects these constraints. The NAPCC starts with an important commitment to re-direct growth objectives toward ecological sustainability, but provides a mixed bag of measures through which to do so. As a result, the NAPCC document is neither fully vision nor plan. And it fails to grapple squarely with the international deadlock in the climate arena, without which India's future security cannot be assured.

Despite these drawbacks, simply having such a plan is significant for climate related debates in India. The NAPCC is rooted in the science-based conclusions of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that climate change is indeed a global challenge, and that India faces potentially serious impacts. These include water scarcity due to glacial melt; declines in food production due to monsoon variability; increased potential for spread of disease; and heightened vulnerability to cyclones, floods, droughts, and coastal flooding. Indeed, India is among the nations most vulnerable to negative climate impacts. In its acceptance of this reality, the NAPCC suggests a possible break from the recent past of downgrading attention to climate in national policymaking. For example, the Integrated Energy Policy addressed climate change in the last section of its last chapter and climate failed to win even a mention in the Terms of Reference of the Working Group on Power for the Eleventh Plan. The NAPCC, it must be hoped, will limit the influence of any lingering climate sceptics and stimulate the deeper integration of climate considerations into national policy.

The plan's authors have provided some direction on how to achieve this integration. They suggest identifying measures that promote development objectives even while yielding "co-benefits" for addressing climate change. More evocatively, they call for a "qualitative change" in economic growth toward ecological sustainability.

This formulation could have been an invitation to a visionary rethinking of the links between ecology and development. Instead, the plan adopts a rather pedestrian interpretation, organised around eight "Missions" covering both mitigation of greenhouse gases, and adaptation to the impacts of climate change. Whether "Missions" will remain hostage to host ministries or truly encourage creative issue-linkages beyond government agencies remains to be seen.

The NAPCC's specific proposals fall into three categories. First, there are some bold new ideas, such as increasing the contribution of solar energy, but the details of how this would be accomplished are thin. Second, and more typical, are efforts to expand and deepen existing approaches, such as a renewed thrust on energy efficiency, an effort to promote integrated water resource management, and a focus on restoring degraded forest land. Here the devil lies in the details. The most forward looking and concrete measures lie in the area of energy efficiency, such as mandated reductions in consumption from facilities in energy consuming industries, a new building code, and improved urban planning. Third, much of the plan is simply old wine in new bottles, such as use of joint forest management committees to "green India". Some of these proposals are wine that has long since gone sour, such as reform of electricity and fertiliser subsidies for farmers.

The greater shortcoming is the failure of the NAPCC to articulate a vision, nationally or globally. While espousing a qualitative shift towards ecologically sustainable growth, the plan fails to develop, or even explore, a compelling vision of future development. Is it feasible, for example, for India to shift to a decentralised and renewable energy system organised around energy services, and how? How does climate change relate to energy security, a looming issue at a time when oil prices are at historical highs? Should government policies support Indian industries to build a competitive advantage in areas relevant to an increasingly carbon constrained world, and if so, how? The plan is silent on all these issues.

Part of the problem rests in an inadequate analytical foundation. The NAPCC's technical document refers to the Integrated Energy Policy and a slew of earlier policies and regulations as its base. How can a truly new approach be devised on the back of documents that either ignored or downgraded climate change as a consideration? In addition, given the long-term significance of the issue, the plan may have benefited from a more transparent

process, with scope for businesses, NGOs and citizens' organisations to express their views and insights.

Globally, the plan represented an opportunity to make a forceful yet constructive intervention to break the deadlock between the industrialised and developing countries at the international climate negotiations. The NAPCC reiterates the government's current position that India will restrict its per capita emissions to the average per capita emissions of the developed world. This is unlikely to help break the deadlock. On the back of a more vigorous NAPCC, the government could have urged the industrialised world to

demonstrate their serious intent to domestic action, consistent with the principle of "common but differentiated responsibility". The specifics of doing so will have to be worked out at the bargaining table. But the plan could be clearer on the larger objective.

The framers of the NAPCC are clear that this is a document that will "continue to evolve". As a marker in the debate and a discussion starter, the document is an important first step. As a plan and even more as a vision, the NAPCC falls far short. It will indeed need to evolve in the direction of robust implementation, a broader national vision, and a more engaged international perspective.