

Climate: impacts, adaptation and politics
By Sunita Narain, director, Centre for Science and Environment
At the UN Thematic debate, July 31, 2007, New York

Thank you Madame President, delegates and special invitees for inviting me to this very important, indeed critical, thematic debate of the general assembly.

1. Let me begin adding my voice to the call for urgent, indeed desperately urgent, response to this extraordinary challenge of climate change.

2. I come from a part of the world, which is devastating vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Let us be clear, not only has scientific evidence now concluded that the world is beginning to be hit by climate change induced impacts, but that these impacts are indeed inevitable. Even if the world was to stabilise its emissions at current levels, the emissions already in the atmosphere, will lead to increased warming of 0.7 degree C.

3. It is clear that the poor – who have not created the problem – are the worst victims. In my country, recent studies in the Himalaya by Indian scientists confirm glaciers are receding, at unnatural rates. This means our northern rivers, fed by glacier melt, will first see floods and then shortages of freshwater flows. Science says that heavy precipitation events will increase. The worst affected are the poor, already living on the margins of survival. They depend on the rain for their livelihoods – it is their finance minister. What happens now when the rain comes in fewer days (hours)? We are beginning to see floods in our cities, in our deserts. Science also says that droughts will increase, as will heat waves. Coastal communities are most at risk. Crop productivity in these regions will be affected.

Remember, this is not about abstract facts, but about people. Think of climate change, think of the poorest in the world – last person, invariably a woman.

4. We need to do two things – and do them simultaneously.

- a. We need to invest in adaptation – this is not rocket science – but it means we have to invest in everything we know that means development – in water management, in crops that will withstand drought, in good soil conservation.
- b. We need to invest in mitigation – reduce the already very high emissions of the rich countries and work to ‘avoid’ the emissions of the growing rich countries.

If we can do all this in ways that are good for development, we can get a climate bonus

5. But this will require political sagacity and leadership. It will require courage. You will agree with me, that global warming is possibly the biggest and most difficult economic and political issue the world has ever needed to confront.

6. Why?

- a. Climate change is related to economic growth. It is market's biggest failure. Emissions of carbon dioxide are directly linked to economic growth. And in spite of years of protracted negotiations and targets set under the Kyoto Protocol, no country has been able to de-link its growth with the growth of emissions. No country has shown how to build a low carbon economy, as yet. No country has been able to re-invent its pathway to growth, as yet.
- b. Climate change is about sharing that growth between nations and between people. The rich must reduce so that the poor can grow. It is about creating ecological space.
- c. Climate change is about cooperation. The fact is that climate change teaches us more than anything else that the world is one; if the rich world pumped in excessive quantities of carbon dioxide yesterday, the emerging rich world will do today. But cooperation is not possible without equity and fairness. It is a pre-requisite for an effective climate agreement.

7. I also believe that it is possible to build such an agreement – one that aggressively and proactively pushes the entire world to reduce its emissions.

It is possible to change

8. What then should be the way ahead? I am putting forward a possible framework on an effective climate change agreement. Let me underline the word effective and add the word urgent.

The world has as yet (in spite of hours and years of negotiations) done too little and too late.

9. We must accept that the rich world must reduce emissions drastically. Let there be no disagreements or excuses on this matter. There is a stock of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, built up over centuries in the process of creating nations wealth. It is a natural debt. This has already made climate unstable. Poorer nations will now add to this stock through their drive for economic growth. But that is not an excuse for rich world not to take on tough and deep binding emission reduction targets. The principle has to be they must reduce so that we can grow.

10. The second part of this agreement is that poor and emerging rich countries need to grow. Their engagement will not be legally binding but based on national targets and programmes. The question is to find low-carbon growth strategies for emerging countries, without compromising their right to develop.

This can be done. It is clear that countries like India and China provide the world the opportunity to “avoid” additional emissions. The reason is that we are still in the process of building our energy, transport or industrial infrastructure. We can make investments in leapfrog technologies so that we can avoid pollution. In other words, we can build our cities on public transport; our energy security on local and distributed systems – from biofuels to renewable; our industries using the most energy and so pollution efficient technologies.

11. We know it is in our interest not to first pollute, then clean up; or first to be inefficient, then save energy. But we also know that technologies that exist are costly. It is not as if China and India are bent on first investing in dirty and fuel-inefficient technologies. We invest in these, as the now rich world has done: first add to emissions; make money; then invest in efficiency.

12. The question is why the world is not able to find ways to fund these technologies in the emerging world? Why is it that it talks big but gives small change? Let us be clear that the current design of the clean development mechanism (CDM) is flawed. The CDM is designed to get the cheapest options for the industrialised world. As a result the price of CERs – the certified emission reduction unit used in this transaction -- has never reflected the cost of renewable and other high technology options. It is a cheap and increasingly corrupt development mechanism. It is also a convoluted development mechanism, in which rules bind governments not to do big changes. This must change. You must make it change for effective action.

13. But a new CDM or any other such mechanism is still not the full answer. There is no space for complacency. There is very little space for any further emissions, if we want to avoid catastrophe. The world has to reduce emissions drastically. The only way ahead is to reinvent growth itself. It is not enough to talk about efficiency and technology. It is important to restructure economies so that consumption is cut. Sufficiency is as important as efficiency.

Again, this can be done. We know we have to reduce cars, reduce transportation for goods. It is about reinventing mobility patterns in our cities. Investing in public and mass transport. Big time.

14. Finally, let us be clear, climate change is not an ordinary crisis. It is an extraordinary crisis, which will demand an extra-ordinary response. The responsibility is ours. Let us not let the world down.