

No cooling off on climate change

► *The rise in carbon dioxide levels is associated with an increase in average global temperature, which, if unchecked, could result in irreversible damage. There is, thus, good reason to go green now, as adjustment later will only be more painful.*

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The 35th summit of the G-8 held in L'Aquila, Italy, the town ravaged by the recent earthquake, was notable in that it was forced to face squarely the challenge of global warming facing mankind. The G8 consists of eight major industrialised countries (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the UK and the US).

Recognising the ineffectiveness of trying to deal with global problems by themselves, the group was expanded to include the Outreach Five (O5): Brazil, China, India, Mexico, and South Africa.

These countries have participated as guests in previous meetings, a second-class status that has been questioned.

Proposals on how to expand the G-8 to fully include members of the Group are under consideration. G-8 summits have invited other countries to participate, as well as leaders of major international organisations.

INNOVATIVE CHANGES

There were some innovative changes in the current G-8 summit's working method. The numbers of participants varied according to the subject under consideration.

After an initial meeting of the 'historic core' leaders of what is understood as the traditional G-8, the agenda was broader and the number of participants was expanded accordingly. The leaders of G-8 countries and G5 countries were joined by a delegation from Egypt and a representative group of African countries.

Italy's Prime Minister, Mr Silvio Berlusconi, the flamboyant host, has sought to focus the talks on the economic crisis, re-launching international trade, climate changes, development in the poor countries and in Africa, and the resolution of regional crises.

Both Italy and France, being in the front line of migration from Africa, have an obvious interest in issues of development in Africa.

Earlier, the G-8 Foreign Ministers meeting in Trieste was dominated by events in Iran. The Ministers deplored the violence in Iran post elections, and have given Iran until September to respond to a US offer of direct talks on Tehran's nuclear programme. The recent thaw in relations between the Obama Administration and Russia could perhaps help induce a positive response from Iran.

The ministers also discussed other issues such as non-proliferation, piracy, Africa and its regional crises, North Korea and West Asia. The G-8 ministers joined some 40 countries and aid organisations in the region for talks on stabilising Afghanistan and Pakistan.

They called for credible presidential elections in Afghanistan on August 20 and an ambitious plan to undercut the Taliban by replacing poppy growing with legal agriculture.

As expected, the G-8+O5 agreed to restart the stalled Doha round of trade talks, and warned against resorting to protectionist measures in the face of the global slowdown. The G-20 summit in Pittsburgh on September 24 would hopefully see further movement in bridging the knotty divergences on agricultural subsidies, and other difficult issues.

THE SCIENCE BEHIND IT

It was widely expected that the G-8 meeting would give momentum to global efforts to tackle climate change, coming just a few months before the crucial Copenhagen UN conference on climate change and given recent scientific evidence that the path to disaster could soon become irreversible.

But given the Chinese President, Hu Jin Tao's absence from the G-8+5 due to unrest in western China, results on climate change



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proved to be meagre. The science underlying this key issue deserves a more detailed explanation.

Presently the level of carbon dioxide (the main contributor to global warming) is around 387 parts per million (ppm) compared to 280 ppm pre-industrial levels, and is going up at the rate of 2 ppm per year. The warming effect of carbon dioxide can get amplified by temperature-induced increase in atmospheric water vapour, a potent greenhouse gas.

If carbon dioxide levels are allowed to peak at 450-600 ppm, the effects would be irreversible for over 1,000 years, according to a recent study by NOAA.

But the oceans comprise 75 per cent of the earth's surface and hold about 93 per cent of global carbon, and their role remains an area of scientific uncertainty.

The oceans could potentially absorb huge amounts of carbon dioxide, but the challenge is to find an

environmentally sustainable technology to do this.

The rise in carbon dioxide concentrations results in increased retention of solar energy in the form of heat trapping by the atmosphere. The heat trapping is due to various atmospheric gases, mainly water vapour (36-70 per cent), carbon dioxide (9-26 per cent) and methane (4-9 per cent).

The rise in carbon dioxide levels has been associated, according to experts, with an increase in average global temperature, which could, if unchecked, be in the range of 1.5 to 6.4 degrees C by 2100.

The US President, Mr Barack Obama's new policies on climate change have enabled a hesitant consensus to emerge among industrialised countries on emission reductions, in order to try to limit global temperature rise to 2 degrees C beyond which damage could become irreversible.

Pressure is building up for agree-

ment on cutting greenhouse gas emissions by 50 per cent by 2050 — with developed nations reducing them by 80 per cent.

To succeed, a global accord would need to include massive international flow of finance and green technology to developing countries.

CRITICAL ISSUES FOR INDIA

The situation raises certain critical issues for India. India's per capita greenhouse gas emissions are extremely low, compared to the developed countries.

However, if development proceeds along the traditional path, India's per capita income and emissions levels will rise.

Long before reaching the present day per capita levels of developed countries, development would come to a halt due to depletion of traditional sources of energy.

Therefore, India would do well to embark immediately on a long-term plan of action to integrate available green technology and processes to reduce emissions to the utmost.

This would, as in the case of Denmark, give rise to a globally competitive service industry in this sector, which could find markets. A comprehensive package of emissions taxes, and incentives for investment in green technology and processes, is needed.

While it is justified to oppose import restrictions in developed countries tied to emission footprints of products, we need to keep in mind that public action in the developed countries could result in consumer boycott of products seen to be contributing to climate change.

Thus, there is good reason not only to go green now, but also to be seen as green, as adjustment later on would only be more painful.

Governments have to realise that climate change is a major national threat requiring a long-term vision and strategy, and wide-ranging public support across the political spectrum. The challenge is to develop such an "inclusive" commitment.

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