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# Make India climate smart: We have big infrastructure plans but forget to review them through a climate change lens

January 24, 2019, 2:00 AM IST Rohini Nilekani in TOI Edit Page | Edit Page, Environment, India | TOI

India will invest billions of dollars in public infrastructure over the next few years. Government policies also aim to massively increase private investments across sectors – manufacturing, services and agriculture. Each of these policies and investments will have time horizons spanning five to 50 years.

Examples of planned infrastructure include – 100 new airports with an investment of \$60 billion, interlinking of rivers at a budget of Rs 5.5 lakh crore, a linked network of ports through Sagarmala at an outlay of Rs 4 lakh crore. At a different scale, just one project – the 29.2 km coastal road planned in one city, Mumbai – will cost Rs 10,000 crore.

All these initiatives will impact the lives and livelihoods of millions, and will compete for finite and scarce public resources. But are any of them being screened against the biggest existential threat humanity has ever faced – climate change? Unfortunately, the answer is NO.

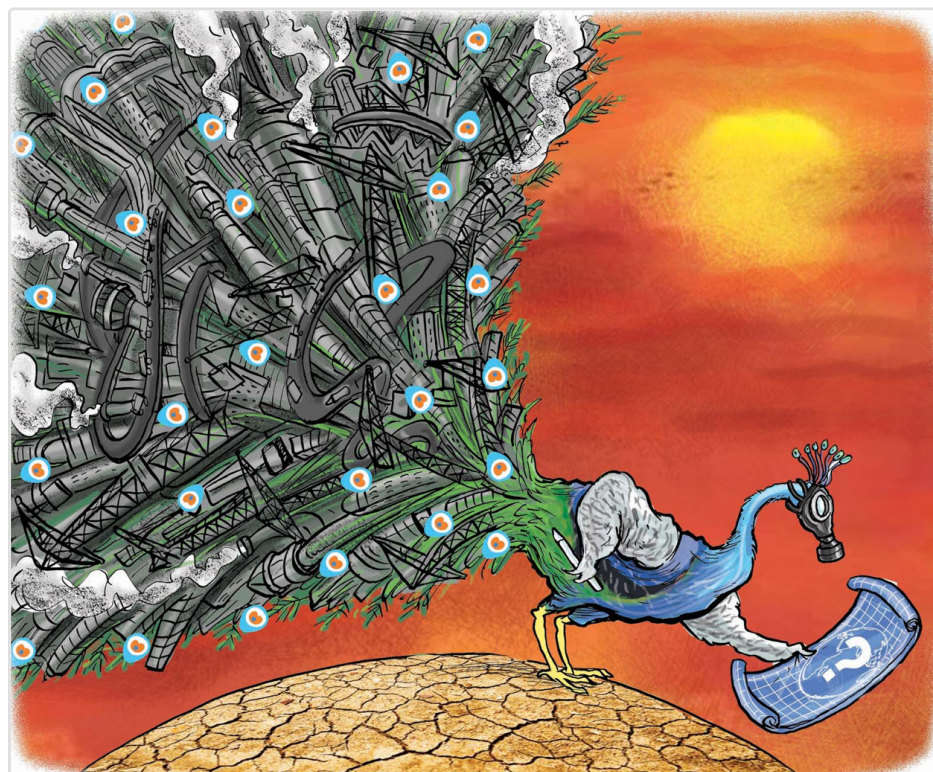


Illustration: Chad Crowe

There is currently no formal process by which projects of a certain scale would have to go through a risk assessment and a cost-benefit analysis of the potential impact of climate change related effects. This question does not seem to be raised either in Parliament

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debates, nor does it find mention in the 15-20 substantive laws that are enacted each year at the central level and in states, nor does it preoccupy any of the standing committees.

Climate change is already upon us, and its effects are being felt with increasing intensity. It is no longer about the distant future; decisions made today will impact us in our lifetimes.

A recent analysis published in Science reported that the oceans are warming at a 40% faster rate than was estimated just five years ago. And 2018 was the fourth hottest year on record, according to the World Meteorological Organization. Almost one-third of India's coastline was lost to soil erosion between 1990 and 2016, according to the National Centre for Coastal Research.

One could go on. Ordinary citizens too are directly experiencing climate uncertainty in their lives, especially from extreme events. Just in these past months we have had the Kerala, Assam and Odisha floods, and the cyclone in the Andamans. No one has an exact count of the loss of assets, the slip-back into poverty and the burden of disease unleashed by these calamities.

Yet massive tourism infrastructure is envisaged right at the shrinking coastline, including in highly vulnerable areas such as the Andamans. The river interlinking project continues though Himalayan glacier melts will seriously affect river flows.

On climate mitigation, India has made commitments through the Paris agreement to reduce its carbon emission intensity by 35% by 2030. With an ambitious renewable energy programme, we may well be on track to deliver against the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) of the accord. Under the National Action Plan for Climate Change (NAPCC), there are eight missions under relevant ministries that are doing solid work.

But there is no evidence of the output from NAPCC being integrated with mainstream decision making. And when it comes to climate adaptation, India's track record remains weak. What may happen if we do not put a climate change lens on policy design and investments?

At the very least, we may be left with massive stranded assets, with the attendant waste of scarce financial resources. At the worst, we could create a negative impact on hundreds of millions of people, especially when it comes to water resources, fisheries, food, agriculture and rural livelihoods, and coastal and urban habitats.

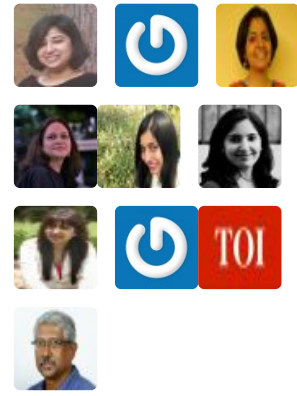
This writer was in Uttarakhand three months before the floods of 2013. It was a disaster waiting to happen. Dams were built back-to-back without any holistic plan; a haphazard tourism policy allowed infrastructure right on the banks of the mighty rivers. Some places i stayed in were completely wiped out. Who is accountable for decisions there that went wrong? Why were the voices of scientists and researchers unheeded?

We must incorporate climate modelling in future plans and investments. Whether it is policies on crop procurement, skilling and job creation, urbanisation or even beach tourism, climate adaptation pathways will have to be imagined.

Other countries do put a climate change lens on policy formulation. Many coastal cities are aggressively de-risking from sea level rise and extreme events. 'Climate Ready Boston' is a good example of an adaptation initiative with extensive community participation. Such efforts globally have yielded many useful, publicly available resources for planners anywhere to use.

India can use these resources or create context-relevant toolkits of its own to build widespread capacity to understand, assess and plan for climate related risks. We have to formalise processes to deliberate the pros and cons of policy formulation, using currently available data on climate change.

Operationalising this can become more effective with innovative approaches. These



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include using new technologies for participatory planning, creating digital public goods for modelling, analysis and decision support, and knowledge exchange platforms between the scientific community and decision makers at all levels of government.

Putting a climate change lens on policy making offers a huge opportunity to make smart decisions about India's future. But this cannot wait. Climate change has the potential to swallow up all other issues of development.

Given the credibility of this threat, it is both a moral and a strategic imperative to bring climate change to the centre of the planning paradigm.

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