

Whose net zero future?

The Indian prime minister's speech at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in Glasgow powerfully articulated the the global south's concerns about climate change. The West for its own reasons is fixated with the net zero target. But India showed with great clarity that climate action could not be separated from securing inclusive and equitable prosperity.

"Our common planet" cannot be visualised by climate warriors with selective amnesia. Doing so makes climate inaction "a weapon on the weak" — if the world does not care about Bangladesh being inundated since its inception, but now cares about favourite beaches of the rich being inundated due to global warming, then why should Bangladesh care? A stunted malnourished Indian child will take the ravages of global warming as her lot in life; it is the healthy, well-nourished Norwegian child who will suffer most incrementally. Concern for our common planet cannot therefore be confined to things on which collective action is required, because they impact the children of the rich.

On October 21, India spoke of the need to focus on "pathways to net zero" rather than fixating on the year a country would achieve net zero. This was ignored simply because climate warriors and rich countries do not care a fig about pathways, as their behaviour towards their own poor and disempowered citizens shows. This is why the focus of climate science has been on energy. Energy is an intermediate good, it can be used to light a school or a brothel. The rich do not care about use, as long as the energy source is renewable. As a result, there is no public transport in many parts of rural Britain on Sundays, which means only those with cars can enjoy a day out. That is fine for net zero as long as the cars are electric. The car is the bedrock of rural Europe and as long as people transit to electric cars no one cares about those who do not have cars. The energy transition is divorced from the choice of pathway. Recycling vegans happily drive their kids to school and to the

doctor, and long distances on holiday. As long as they are doing it in electric cars by 2030, they couldn't care less about those who cannot afford cars.

India is in a fortunate position in that almost every action to improve productivity and equity will be carbon reducing. Manual scavenging, open-cast coal mining, water-intensive green-revolution agriculture — these and many other activities leave millions of citizens with precarious, low-remuneration employment. Switching to more productive ways of doing these things like zero-budget natural farming, biodiversity activities, and better sanitation and building practices would improve productivity and lower the carbon footprint. But such transitions require financing, and it is here that the utter selfishness of the rich countries comes into play.

In rich countries, it is old people who own the assets, not the young. Measured by asset ownership, the under-40s in rich countries are the poorest generation of that cohort since the 1930s. These old people have a lot of savings and they seek to live on the returns. Returns are high in countries with young people,

like India, so it is logical that finance should flow from rich to poor countries, which could then make the productivity and climate transition. Note this is not an argument for aid, but a commercial proposition that would be extremely valuable if the public good inherent in it were to be valorised as people are constantly trying to do with carbon credits and carbon taxes.

But the old rich have miserably failed on this count, preferring safe low returns to investing in the climate and productivity cause. The global financial system and western governments have collaborated in this failure. India quite rightly pointed out that given this failure, the meeting of net zero targets would not happen. G7 leaders are not credible even to the British monarch on this front. She said, "It's really irritating when they talk, but they don't do".

The prime minister's speech in Glasgow also raised

serious questions for introspection within our country. Growth since 1991 has been unequalising, but inequality continues to rise even as the economy has decelerated over the past five years. I have repeatedly argued that the 1991-sparked India story is over and we have to find new pathways to inclusive transformative prosperity. These involve important policy trade-offs. For example, a hydrogen-powered railway network will improve transportation productivity and enrich tomorrow's hydrogen producers (who have the money to invest in this technology because they are today's fossil fuel barons). That is fine, except when you ask, who will the railways transport? If the answer continues to be large numbers of migrant workers from the north and the east of India to the prosperous peninsula, then this would be a perpetuation of an inequality enhancing growth pathway. Alternatively, green activities in north and east India would reduce the demand for rail transport, thereby reducing the carbon footprint and increasing equity and prosperity across the country. Investing in dry-land and natural farming would reduce the need for millions of tonnage to move grain from Punjab to the rest of India again, improving equity and Punjab's ecology and reducing the carbon footprint.

So India's lessons about pathways at Glasgow are important as we look within. Inclusive and inequality reducing choices about what we produce, where and for whom will renew the India story, increase social cohesion, reduce inequality in many dimensions and, almost as a by-product or externality, rapidly reduce carbon emissions. If we successfully tread this transformative path, I have no doubt that we, the people of India, will reach net zero well before 2070. But if we persist with pathways that produce gated communities, immiserising employment opportunities and accentuating regional inequality, and achieve net-zero by 2070 by giving the rich electric cars and replacing coal-powered energy for lifestyle consumption with solar energy, then we would have saved our "common planet" but failed future generations of Indians.



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