Climate crisis: No universal solutions

The IPCC report highlights two critical issues. First, while internalising climate change in development decisions may yield big gains, it may also require upfront investment. Second, governments need to build the capacity to manage these complex transitions.

The world is "sleep-walking" to a climate catastrophe, according to United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres as he introduced a new report from the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). This report on solutions follows earlier reports on the science and impacts of the climate crisis. IPCC reports are produced by scientists, but also reviewed and approved by 195 governments, in a painstaking line-by-line process that concluded this week.

As of 2020, 53% of emissions have been covered by dedicated climate laws across 56 countries; another 690 laws indirectly impact emissions, such as energy efficiency or land-use laws. At least one study suggests that the effect of all these laws and policies has been to reduce emissions by about one-tenth a year. The report goes further: Both rich and poor countries, it argues, should think about shifting development pathways toward sustainability. What this means is that broad economic and social shifts are as important to climate mitigation outcomes as adoption of low-carbon technologies.

By this metric, planning for urban futures are also implicitly climate decisions because they could make inner-urban areas more suitable for both business and living, thereby reducing transport costs and emissions. Strategies for job creation could take into account industries of the future, many of which include low-carbon options. For rapidly growing countries, it is particularly important to internalise climate futures, to avoid locking-in to a high-carbon pathway.

The IPCC report suggests that coordination across multiple sectors and scales, and limit the effects of disruptive changes on vulnerable populations require building a climate-ready state. Finally, the report makes it very clear that the way towards development transitions is going to be specific to each country; there are no universal solutions. The report does, however, provide the ingredients that policymakers in countries can use to devise context-specific ways forward — frameworks, institutions, policies and technologies.

The world is certainly not on track to achieve the mitigation goals set by the international climate negotiation process. But the response to that should be to redouble efforts and limit harm to the extent possible, drawing on the assessment provided by IPCC.