



Climate crisis: No universal solutions

The latest IPCC report says the world is not on track for achieving the mitigation goals. The response to that should be to redouble efforts and limit harm to the extent possible

The world is “sleepwalking to a climate catastrophe” announced United Nations (UN) Secretary-General António 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.

So exactly how bad is the climate crisis? 2010-2019 witnessed the largest decadal emissions in history. Although the pace has slowed, unless there are deep, immediate greenhouse gas (GHG) reductions across regions and sectors, limiting warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius is out of reach.

Is this a doomsday message? No,

but it suggests a subtle reframing of how we should think about the challenges ahead. Rather than focusing on a specific number, whether 1.5 degrees Celsius or 2 degrees Celsius, it is more useful to find ways to work urgently to reduce warming to as low a level as possible: For example, 1.5 degrees Celsius is better than 1.6 degrees Celsius, which is better than 1.7 degrees Celsius, and so on. To do so requires deep cuts before 2030, in the range of 27%-43% globally for the 1.5-2 degrees Celsius range, in addition to future net-zero targets that tend to get the headlines.

Most of the report is, therefore, focused on signs of progress and future solutions. A wide range of policy options across energy, land, building, transport and demand measures are available to reduce emissions by 25% by 2030 at under \$20 per tonne of carbon dioxide equivalent (tCO₂e) or even with net benefits, and another 25% at under \$100 per tCO₂e. Moreover, the costs of key technologies such as solar power and batteries have fallen 85% since 2010, with wind power down by 55%.

There is evidence that these opportunities are being realised. Many more policies have been implemented around the world, with growing evidence that they are enhancing energy efficiency, reducing deforestation and accelerating renewable energy

deployment. 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 flip side is also true — without more mitigation, development progress will increasingly be undercut by climate impacts. Mainstream development decisions, in other words, are also climate decisions, and vice versa. Thinking of the relation-



The IPCC report highlights two critical issues. First, while internalising the climate crisis 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 REUTERS

ship between the climate crisis and development in this way opens up many more low-carbon pathways that also yield socially positive outcomes.

This is not to suggest that implementing this approach is easy or straightforward. Indeed, it is arguably more challenging to consider these interlinked problems than take each separately. But it is also to say that, given the nature of the climate crisis, it is now also necessary.

The report highlights at least two additional factors that need to be addressed to go down this path. First, while internalising the climate crisis in development decisions may yield big future gains, it may also require substantial upfront investment costs. The report notes that financial flows are currently 3-6 times lower than the projected needs by 2030, although this ratio is much higher in some parts of the world, notably in developing regions.

Second, governments need to build the capacity to manage these complex transitions. To strategically think through low-carbon opportunities,

coordinate 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.

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