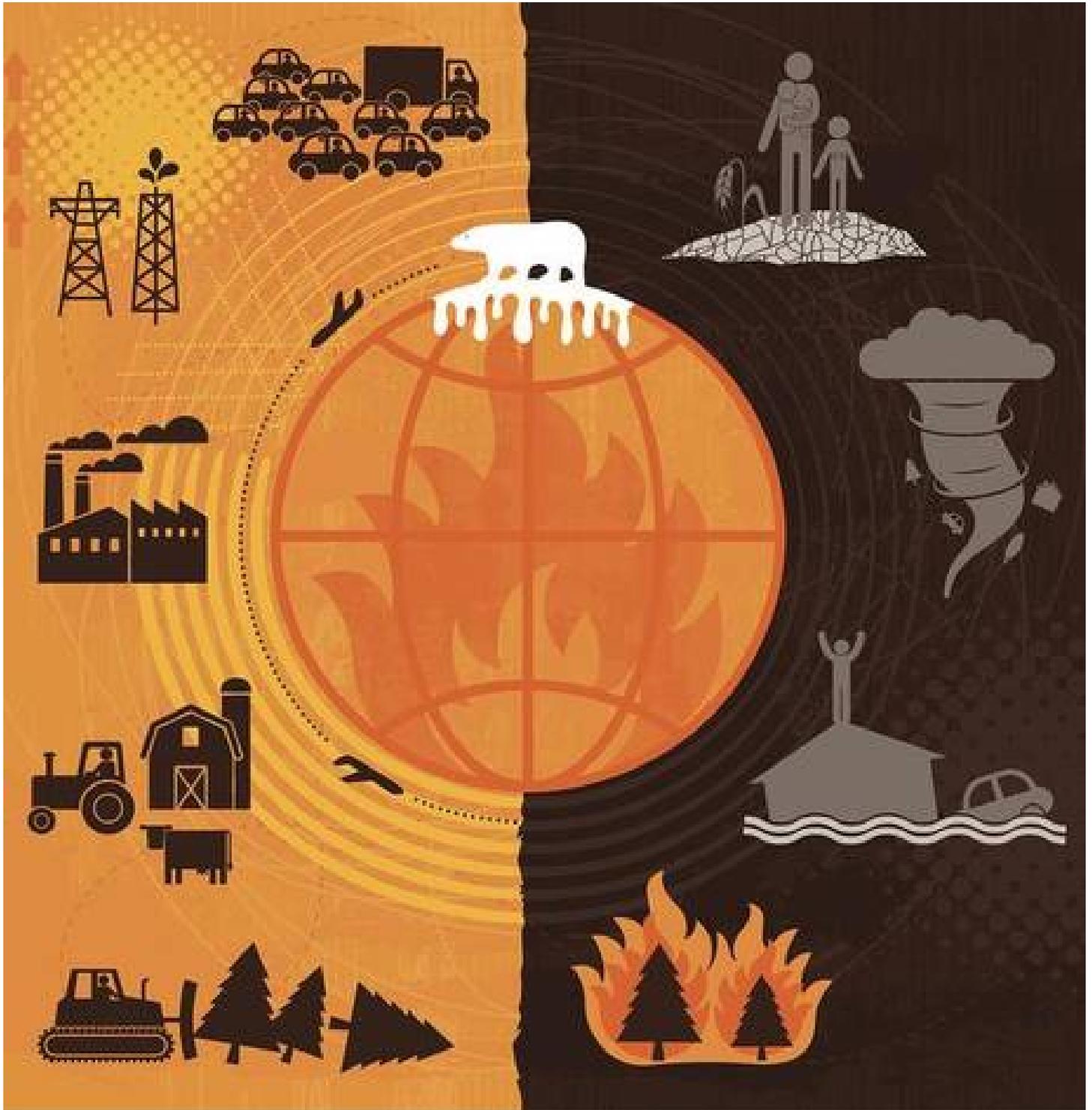


COMMENT

An unequal burden



Sujatha Byravan

MAY 23, 2017 00:05 IST

UPDATED: MAY 23, 2017 00:20 IST

The Paris Climate Agreement recognises that all countries have responsibilities. However, the developed world needs to shoulder the major funding requirement

The Paris Climate Agreement (PA) was signed in December 2015 in an attempt to limit the release and the effects from greenhouse gases (GHGs) in the atmosphere. Ahead of the meeting, various countries developed and submitted pledges or national commitments, referred

to in climate parlance as Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), which are effectively the actions each country is now required to take. The Conference of the Parties-22 (COP-22) in Marrakesh in November 2016 continued discussions on the implementation of the PA and specific aspects continue to be deliberated upon in interim meetings such as the recently concluded one in Bonn.

For about three-fourths of the 165 listed NDCs, implementation of pledges is conditional upon assistance on the finance and technology fronts. These countries depend on help from industrialised economies to build capacity for implementation.

Keep in mind that even if all the NDCs were implemented, estimates show that the planet would warm up by about 3°C from pre-industrial temperatures – well above the goal of staying below a 1.5°C or a 2°C rise. This implies that all the NDCs ought to be implemented, and the support required should be provided, so that countries can build the trust and confidence needed to further raise the bar for future targets. Such periodic raising of the stakes is built into the process of PA implementation, which would collapse without support.

Improving energy efficiencies across various sectors and expanding the use of renewables are among the necessary activities that will enable us to move along low-carbon development pathways. But we have to go well beyond that and shift to a radically different pattern of living that no longer involves GHG emissions. Upfront capital investments are crucial for sustainable futures, and without them poorer countries have few options.

Recent policy actions by U.S. President Donald Trump indicate that the U.S. may not be able meet its own NDC targets. This by itself is a threat to keeping global warming within safe levels. However, further danger is also posed by the fact that under Mr. Trump Washington is not likely to fulfil its obligation to provide support for the implementation of NDCs by other countries. Therefore, not just the U.S., but other countries too may fail without the means to implement their proposals.

The Green Climate Fund

The Green Climate Fund (GCF) is an international mechanism set up at the Conference of the Parties-16 (COP-16) in Cancun in 2010. As per the international agreement, advanced economies should provide an annual assistance of \$100 billion, through public and private sources, by 2020 – the deadline is now extended to 2025. The fund currently has pledges worth \$10 billion from various developed countries and there is a commitment to fund projects that enable the lowering of emissions and help in dealing with the effects from climate change.

India, early in its NDC statement, had estimated a requirement of \$2.5 trillion to carry out its climate actions until 2030. However, it is clear that the least developed countries, small island states and African countries, which are all very vulnerable to the effects of warming and have contributed little to the GHGs, ought to receive the first priority.

In April 2017, the GCF Board approved eight projects for a total funding of \$755 million. The number of projects they have supported now adds up to 43, and the total amount is \$2.2 billion in GCF funds that have a value of \$7.3 billion, if one were to include co-financing.

A project to rejuvenate tanks and enhance renewables in Odisha was recently approved by the GCF for \$34 million. While this is but a small fraction of the required funding, it is expected to improve climate resilience in 15 of the most vulnerable districts of the State. The GCF has the ability to bear risks, support innovation and leverage its own funds for further support, therefore making it a vital agency for poor countries. While there are some reports that private funding for the GCF will increase, these are not likely to support adaptation and will focus on actions that bring returns on investments. Thus, funds from advanced economies remain crucial.

In January, former U.S. President Barack Obama transferred \$500 million to the GCF. This was the second payment towards the fulfilment of a \$3 billion pledge made in 2014. So far, more than 40 countries, including a few developing economies, have made contributions to the GCF, the major contributors being the U.S., Japan and the U.K., but still the U.S. pledge is only \$9.41 in per capita terms – many times lower than that of several European countries.

These recent transfers neither fulfil the U.S. pledge nor its obligations as the largest cumulative emitter of GHGs. If Mr. Trump is unwilling, perhaps Congress could approve the funds. Countries in Europe will need to pick up the slack, along with other private contributors. Constraints in the flow of funds will prevent even the minimal level of support to deal with climate change.

Stocks and flows

With regard to emissions, it is useful to think of them in terms of stocks and flows. Stocks are what are there in the atmosphere and flows are what are released annually. It is true that China now leads in the annual emissions, but these appear to be plateauing. The U.S. is a close second, and India a distant third. Still, India's emissions are a tenth of those of the U.S. in per capita terms.

The stocks in the atmosphere, released since the fuelling of the industrial revolution, led to immense prosperity for many countries, which have subsequently become the advanced economies. When the world calls for funding for the GCF, it only asks these nations to deal with problems they have caused. It is not the responsibility of a poor fisherman in Bangladesh or a woman in Sub-Saharan Africa or an islander who loses her house to storms in the Pacific to bear the burden of emissions from rich countries.

The fact that all countries have responsibilities has been recognised in the Paris Agreement and we are all pulling the ship, but the rich countries, especially the U.S. and European nations, have to do their fair share for the world to set along a new path towards zero emissions. India or any other developing country simply recommitting to implement its NDCs will not accomplish much, since without help we cannot go far and need the assistance that is owed to us.

Sujatha Byravan is principal research scientist, Center for Study of Science, Technology & Policy, Bengaluru