



Climate Change is a Development Priority

Climate change has for too long been viewed as largely an environmental or scientific problem when it is just as much an issue of development, says Matthew Clarke.

Climate change has at different times been discussed as either a scientific, economic or ethical issue. But climate change should be considered first and foremost a development issue.

In the past, developed countries have been responsible for most greenhouse gas emissions. But emerging economies like China and India have become increasingly significant emitters as they undergo energy-intensive growth. China is now the second largest greenhouse gas emitting economy in the world – second only to the United States. India is now the world's fifth largest emitter – emitting more greenhouse gases than Germany, the United Kingdom or Canada.

Total carbon dioxide emissions from the consumption and flaring of fossil fuels has increased over 30 per cent since 1980. However, emissions in Asia and Oceania increased by over 80 per cent during the same period. This is because Asia's GDP growth rate has been about double that of the world average for the last four decades. Rapid economic growth in Asia has been accompanied by a sharp increase in greenhouse gas emissions.

The lesson from this isn't that economic development in Asian countries should be slowed to cut emissions. The consequences of such an action for the millions of poor living in the region would be abhorrent.

But there are important steps that could be taken to foster economic development while also ameliorating its effects on climate. Minimising and adapting to this cost should be a central concern of Australia's aid program.

Helping countries to mitigate and adapt to the costs of climate change should be a central concern of Australia's aid program.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. TAKE THE LEAD ON CAPPING GLOBAL EMISSIONS

Australia must represent the wider Pacific region in negotiating post-Kyoto Protocols that include stringent caps on total greenhouse gas emissions. Australia must also provide leadership in reducing its own emissions as a sign of good faith.

2. TRANSFER CLEAN TECHNOLOGIES TO DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Pacific island nations are not responsible for increasing emissions, but their Asian neighbours are. Australia should consider the provision of clean technologies as part of its aid program and assist developing countries to reduce emissions whilst allowing them to achieve the economic growth they need to reduce poverty.

3. ASSIST THE PACIFIC TO MITIGATE AND ADAPT TO CLIMATE CHANGE

Pacific island nations are vulnerable to climate change. Australia must provide practical assistance that will offer protection from extreme weather events and rising sea levels. Australia must also be willing to accept large numbers of migrants if climate change threatens their livelihoods.

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Recent work suggests that much more could be done to improve energy efficiency in emerging economies. It is estimated that, between now and 2030, greenhouse gas emissions from fuel combustion will grow by 6.4 per cent a year in China, 4.7 per cent in India, and 4 per cent in other developing countries. This compares with an annual growth rate of just 0.9 per cent for OECD countries, such as Australia. By 2010, it is estimated that China will increase its share of world energy demand to 19 per cent, from just 8.5 per cent in 1990.

This disparity is a result of high levels of economic growth, but also comparatively low levels of technology in energy production. Most Asian countries rely on outdated technology that is inefficient and highly polluting. Throughout the world, energy efficiency has improved by around 7 per cent since 1980. Yet in the Asia and Oceania region, efficiencies have actually worsened by 40 per cent. This indicates that inefficiencies such as outdated technologies are not being replaced as energy consumption increases. This is a huge cost to the environment – but it also offers the potential for significant improvements through technology transfer.

If we assist poor countries in Asia to produce energy more cleanly and efficiently, we will enable them to grow their economies at a much reduced expense to the environment. The Australian government has the opportunity to support such investment through its aid program. A strong case can be made that technology transfer promotes both the economic development and welfare of recipient countries as well as improving the prospects of those countries most at risk from the effects of climate change, including our neighbours in the Pacific.

Greenhouse gas emissions from Pacific island states are negligible. But Pacific island countries are amongst the most vulnerable countries in the world to the effects of climate change. These countries have widely dispersed populations living on low-lying areas. Not only are these populations threatened by any increase in sea-levels, they are also at risk from extreme weather events, particularly as their governments simply

do not have the resources to invest in any infrastructure that might offer protection. In addition to the direct physical threats posed by global warming, these countries are also extremely vulnerable to the effects of any change in climate. The economic base of these countries is narrow, and the majority of those living in the Pacific are reliant on subsistence farming to support themselves. Fluctuations in sea levels or weather patterns due to climate change will have a direct impact on their survival.

As a result, it is vital that Australia's aid program tackle climate change as a development issue.

To do this it must adopt a three-pronged approach: we should put in place policies to contain the growth in greenhouse gas emissions in Australia; we need to help developing countries to grow using clean energy technologies; and we must help poor and vulnerable nations in our region to cope with the effects of climate change.

On the first, Australia can take the lead in representing the wider Pacific region to negotiate post-Kyoto protocols that include stringent caps on total greenhouse gas emissions. We can also show leadership by reducing our own emissions.

On the second, our aid program can help developing countries to implement clean energy technologies that reduce emissions whilst allowing these countries to achieve the economic growth needed to improve living standards and eliminate poverty.

On the third, the aid program can provide practical assistance to Pacific nations to help protect against extreme weather events and rising sea levels. Ultimately, we may need to help our neighbours to resettle in new countries, including Australia, when the inevitable happens and climate change forces many Islanders to leave their homes.

The same economic growth that lifts people out of poverty in Asia threatens the very existence of others living in the Pacific. A co-ordinated aid program must understand that climate change is a development issue and respond accordingly. Because climate change is not just about science and the environment – it is about people.