

# Forging a national consensus on climate adaptation is key

Over the last six months, India's economic and policy systems have creaked and groaned under relentless pressure from extreme weather events. This underscores what we already know: We need a national conversation on how to adapt to these patterns, made more likely and intense by the climate crisis. This should drive us towards a consensus on how to strategically deploy the State to absorb climate stresses felt by India's poor, crystallised in a national adaptation strategy. But political signals in recent months suggest a failure in grasping the seriousness of the problem.

The warning signs have been hard to miss. Last week, it became clear that a severe rainfall deficit over north Indian states was devastating rice production. Between June 1 and August 21, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Jharkhand saw startling rainfall deficits of between 26% and 44%, according to the India Meteorological Department (IMD). It was reported to be one of the driest Julys in east and northeast India in the country's history.

This regional shock to rice production comes on the heels of a difficult season for wheat, with grain shrivelling on the stalk in the hottest March (and for some parts, the hottest April) ever recorded (records go back 122 years). These heat waves were thought to be a one-in-hundred year event, made about 30 times more likely by the climate crisis. This weakened wheat production estimates, prompting the government to abandon potentially lucrative export targets.

The heat also threw India's precarious energy system off balance, with a surge in cooling demand putting pressure on coal supplies and logistics. This contributed to power outages just as people needed cooling the most. And amid this dryness were the floods that killed hundreds across north, east, and northeast India in June and earlier this week. Ongoing floods in Pakistan show just how sudden and deeply damaging extreme flooding can be.

The severity and relentlessness of these events, and similar sequences in years past, suggest that India's development prospects are inextricably linked to the dexterity of its climate management.



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The response from the political class to these events has, however, been muted. In a review of 305 news articles about the heatwaves between March 1 and July 31 (129 in English and 176 in Hindi), for example, we found only 12 instances where politicians or senior bureaucrats had chosen to publicly comment on the heatwave. Of these, only one comment linked the heatwaves to the climate crisis, and none talked about long-term adaptation measures and India's climate future (though the prime minister did urge short-term heat adaptation measures in late April).

The reasons for this apathy are unclear. It might result from a lack of climate awareness. It could also reflect the fact that climate narratives have limited purchase in Indian electoral politics. There is also a credit attribution problem at the heart of adaptation politics: Credit is rarely given for damage averted, especially when precautionary action was taken many years ago. And even if it is, the policymaker may no longer be around to collect the rewards.

Whatever the reasons, this is a damaging failure in political imagination. For one, it stalls much-needed work on the machinery that

will protect the Indian economy in the long-run. India's stuttering national adaptation funding pipelines need an overhaul; India's federal framework needs to be reworked to give states room and money to respond to climate impacts; local universities and non-governmental organisations across the country need political support and funds to work with local governments on vulnerability and response. And, importantly, we need a national consensus around the adaptation effort: How much are we willing to invest, and through which institutions? And — this must be collectively addressed — how much are we willing to lose?

Casual neglect towards adaptation is also politically myopic. Ramping up the construction of irrigation canals, the restoration or creation of local water tanks and reservoirs, subsidies for cooling appliances, new seawalls, and climate-resistant crop varieties are all potentially popular actions, and some have been politically attractive in the past. Their benefits largely accrue to the most vulnerable and, among them, centrally to rural populations. A national strategy, with funding, could make these things easier to do. Climate-resilient infrastructure could be an attractive part of a new political compact with rural India, where politics is still relatively unsettled and anxieties about being left behind provide a political opening.

Adaptation is best seen as a long-term anti-poverty measure whose policy relevance grows as the zone of climate vulnerability expands on the Indian map. Adaptation should, in a poor country like India, be a public good built through the expansion of the existing welfare state. This is a radically different vision from it being a private good, delivered by two-tonne ACs and private seawalls, where only those with means can adapt. But this is a consensus that must be forged first. And that calls for an honest appraisal of India's climate future in the public discourse, led by the political class.



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