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Need for 'Mission Adaptation' in climate change strategy

Published On: 20-03-2023

Why is in news? In India's Budget for 2023-24, one aspect that deserves more discussion is the budget's allocation towards climate action. Climate change mitigation has received a clear mention. But climate change adaptation has been addressed only indirectly.

Budgetary provision for climate action

The key focus are mitigation strategy green growth initiatives targeted at reducing the carbon intensity of the economy such as green mobility, energy efficiency and the green hydrogen mission announcement

Certain budgetary allocations towards nature-based solutions such as the mangrove plantation initiative and the community-based wetland conservation scheme promise to have potentially positive impacts in mitigating climate change and climate adaptation.

The initiative to make India a global hub for millets is also likely to help reap adaptation benefits. Millets are more climate resilient and require less water compared to rice and wheat.

Importance of Adaptation

Climate shocks are anticipated to get more frequent and severe, and in the absence of resilience-building for communities and habitations, the impact could be devastating.

People all across the country are already coping with the impact of climate change.

If there can be a strategic, proactive approach to building adaptive capacity, it could prevent undue distress, and help India achieve its development needs despite the challenges of a climate-changed world.

Overview of adaptation measures

Adaptation has traditionally received far less attention than mitigation in the global climate discourse. Consequently, funding for adaptation has been far less.

In India, for example, as per one estimate by the Climate Policy Initiative, the ratio of funding for climate adaptation to mitigation stands at 1:10; Rs 35,000 crore and Rs 2,69,000 crore (2020).

Thus, even as mitigation itself remains underfunded with only 25 per cent of the requirement met (estimated as Rs 11,00,000 crore per annum), the gap for adaptation stands much higher, at only 7.9 per cent of the needed funds — estimated to be Rs 4,40,000 crore per annum.

However, Adaptation measures find less attraction in budget

As has been pointed out by experts, crucial concerns like accounting for climate change-induced risks such as Joshimath being the most recent example do not find explicit mention in the budget.

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Measures towards enhancing the resilience of communities and habitations to climate change's impact crucial given India's high vulnerability to climate change do not find an explicit mention either. This is concerning given the increasing frequency at which climate-related stress is occurring and is expected to occur.

Major funding sources of Adaptation

Given the uncertainties, complexities and risks, climate adaptation has largely remained a publicly-funded endeavour in India.

Indeed, nearly 100 per cent of the funding for adaptation in India comes from public sources.

Further, international funding has also remained scarce due to this skewed discourse on climate change. Perhaps this is also because mitigation has more directly ascertainable global consequences than adaptation, which is seen as more local in scope.

On the other hand, the domestic philanthropic funding landscape has been seeing more donors funding adaptation than mitigation, and the overall quantum of funding towards climate-adjacent sectors, such as water and livelihoods has also been increasing.

This is due to a recent increase in the adoption of an intersectional lens to funding, which breaks the development vs climate dichotomy towards embracing a more holistic lens understanding the interlinkages between non-climate and climate funding, and seeking to maximise joint positives.

Challenges in adaptation measures

An important reason for this is that adaptation solutions often do not give an immediately palpable return on investment (ROI).

Because of this, mainstream, interest-seeking capital flowing into adaptation is scant.

Adapting to climate change often requires highly local and nature-based solutions, and thus cannot ensure a classically-measured ROI.

This is unlike technology-based mitigation interventions, such as green energy or electric vehicles.

Given all these factors, the public sector will remain a crucial contributor to funding for climate adaptation.

The Way Ahead

Given the strategic imperative, the government should adopt "Mission Adaptation" to create a supportive ecosystem for all entities, including the private sector, non-profits and civil society, to come together and work towards developing and scaling up locally-sound adaptation solutions.

Governments need to "invest in their internal capabilities – building the competence and confidence to think boldly, partner with business and civil society, catalyse new forms of collaboration across sectors, and deploy instruments that reward actors willing to engage with the difficulties".

Conclusion

To make "Mission Adaptation" a reality, the government must work towards developing a more systemic understanding of resilience, its adjacencies with other goals, and suitable methods to measure these, as well as support efforts aimed at building such an understanding across the ecosystem. This would likely benefit all actors trying to enhance climate adaptation across contexts.