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Argumentative Indians? Understanding India at the Paris COP21

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India has been at the centre of attention in the opening days of COP21. Prime Minister Modi sent a flavour of his opening speech in an op-ed published by the Financial Times in the very morning of the first day of the Paris gathering.

Then, when addressing the plenary and his 151 Heads of State colleagues, he stressed two concepts that cause some unease to many: “carbon space” and a right to develop based in fossil fuels. The carbon space notion risks bringing us back to the paralyzing zero-sum game where everybody tries to get a better position than others. It does

not provide for effective action and, taking into consideration India's size, it would not avoid the need for Indian action. No one challenges the right to develop, but we need to break the link between burning fossil fuels and development, not insist on it.

It is not clear why PM Modi took this approach.

India's GDP is 56% below that of China. India has 68.9% of the population below the international poverty line, compared to 28.9% in China. India is also extremely vulnerable to climate change, as evidenced by recent floods in Chennai. Studies have shown the dependency, for example, of the Indian equity market and agriculture in particular on the monsoon. With its high development needs, studies project a significant growth in energy demand in India until 2030 under its INDC.

India therefore has enormous development needs, challenges, and opportunities. The crucial question is what the international climate agreement could do to *enable* this sustainable development; rather than how to ensure that the agreement does not *constrain* it. More than ensuring carbon space, the agreement can ensure the solution space for sustainable development.

It's then clear that India's development and prosperity needs are huge, access to energy will be key and, as stated in its own INDC, India is willing to launch a potentially ground-breaking solar alliance to drive down the cost of this technology and scale up solar in poorer, sunny countries.

Even more, India has also secured in the past the recognition of equity and right to development as main primary basis of the climate agreement.

So, we could think of a very powerful storyline to be built around its national efforts, a legitimate call for development and its need to get support in order to ensure a proper conciliation between climate and development needs.

India has a significant mitigation potential, much of which can be tapped by 'smart development' through efficient urbanisation, pollution, education, and innovation policies. India is still to construct more than 70% of the infrastructure that will be in place in 2030. In this context, India's development choices will determine its emissions trajectory. Smart development could also have significant co-benefits. It is hard to imagine the local air pollution effects if India follows a carbon intense development path: India's population density is three times greater than China's!

Let us digress briefly to take the example of solar power. Between 2005 and 2011, Germany was responsible for on average 41% of global solar PV installed capacities. Subsequently, this has fallen to 22% in 2014, as other countries, including India, have expanded their use of solar PV. This has been due notably to massive cost cuts resulting from the—initially German driven—technology learning which have brought the technology into the cost range of developing countries. India now has a target of 100 GW of solar by 2022, compared to *global* capacity of 172 GW today. This is a microcosm of the dynamic that the agreement and related initiatives like Mission Innovation and the Solar Alliance can create across technology, investment, and policy.

Criticism of India's stance is therefore a little misplaced. The Paris agreement can provide a framework in which collective action can help to promote the solutions for sustainable development. But nothing is to be taken for granted before time. And smart arguments and approaches when dealing with the negotiation positions do change the mood in the room and the probabilities to succeed. A right to burn coal does not make sense; a right to prosperity and a smart international cooperative track is a much more sound basis. For this to be the case, the Paris Agreement does need to contain an adequate framework for financial, technology and adaptation cooperation.

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