



## **Mobilizing Collective Action to Address Climate Change: Prospects and Challenges**

For over a year now, the Bahá'í Chair for Studies in Development at Devi Ahilya University, Indore, has been organizing a series of webinars on the social and economic impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on India's most vulnerable populations. A theme that has often been discussed in these conversations is of the pandemic as one of the many unforeseen outcomes of human exploitation of the biosphere. New and virulent zoonotic diseases have arisen, and will continue to arise, as species of animals and birds that are forced out of their natural habitats due to deforestation and global warming come into increasing proximity with other species with which they have had little or no prior contact. In such conditions, pathogens pass from one species to another and before long they infect a human host. Any analysis of the incidence of the pandemic and of the possibility of other such pandemics arising in the future would thus be incomplete without taking into consideration the context of the profound ecological crisis that has set the stage for their emergence.

Of the various ways in which human activity has upset the balance of the biosphere, perhaps the most grave and urgent is the alarming increase of the earth's temperature due to the emission of greenhouse gases which, if left unaddressed, threatens the very extinction of all life on earth. The warming of the planet has already wrought havoc across the world through killer heat waves, droughts and famines, uncontrolled wild fires and the severe flooding of cities. A recent report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)<sup>1</sup> warned that most nations are unlikely to meet the target of net zero emissions by 2050 which would be necessary to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. Any increase above that will result in catastrophic and potentially irreversible disasters. The report warned that at the present rate of emissions, nearly half of the world's people will live in areas highly vulnerable to climate change, many coastal areas will be inundated by sea level rise, millions would face food and water scarcity, and there would be the mass perishing of species of plants and animals. In India, among other things, the report warned of unbearably high levels of heat and humidity in urban centres in the decades to come.

Preventing the catastrophic consequences of climate change in the short window of time available may well be the greatest challenge that India and all of humanity faces in the twenty first century, requiring drastic and urgent action involving the State, the market, policy makers, civil society organizations and the masses at the grassroots. In order to explore the implications of stimulating and sustaining collective action for the transformation of consciousness and of the systems of society that would be required to bring humanity back

---

<sup>1</sup> Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change's Sixth Assessment Report

into balance with the natural world, the Bahá'í Chair is organizing a webinar titled 'Mobilizing Collective Action to Address Climate Change: Prospects and Challenges'.

Given the urgency of the issue, various national governments (including that of India) along with businesses, financial institutions and civil society organizations have committed to a path towards the difficult target of ensuring net zero emissions and adopting renewable sources of energy.<sup>2</sup> Yet it is clear that to create and sustain the strong political will needed to take the decisive and drastic steps to address climate change will require a deepening and broadening groundswell of popular support. Without a mass movement of citizens who are deeply conscious of the dangers of climate change, it is going to be difficult to infuse momentum into the agenda towards change or protect the agenda from vested interests from the realms of politics or business seeking to derail it or slow-walk the movement towards change.

Further, the scale of the crisis calls for the masses of the world's people to play a role beyond merely extending passive support to technical solutions proposed by experts or governments. It will call for people's collective participation on an unprecedented scale as active protagonists of this process of change. The fuel that will drive this process forward will have to be the knowledge that exists and is generated on a vast scale deriving not just from scientific institutions but also from indigenous sources and local knowledge that people generate as they act and systematically learn from their actions. Whether mobilized through agencies of the state, or through voluntary action in geographic communities or through social movements, alliances and networks, people in local settings would need to work together and in concert with the State, with scientific institutions, with the private sector and with civil society organizations in identifying achievable milestones in the long-term process of change and in finding creative and context-specific solutions to their challenges. This will require, among other things, communities, groups and movements to be connected to each other through networks that facilitate the exchange of learning and resources.

The need for knowledge to be generated and applied in the process of addressing climate change cannot be underestimated. Addressing the multidimensional and complex issues related to climate change in the long term will, after all, require more than just strategies for mitigation or incremental adaptation. It will call for transformational change in basic processes of life including the way we grow food, build our homes, produce energy and interact with the environment. This in turn will call for a fundamental re-examination of the values and conceptions on which the existing systems of our societies are built. Indeed, effective action to address climate change in its broadest contours will have to involve a recasting of social, political and economic structures to bring them into ever greater alignment with the principles of the oneness of humankind, of humanity's interconnectedness with nature, of justice and of stewardship of the earth's resources.

How is this level of collective consciousness and collective action for the climate to be stimulated and sustained? In an era when trust in institutions of governance has been significantly eroded, how can institutions emerge that would win the trust and provide the leadership in guiding and coordinating this movement towards change? How can those who

---

<sup>2</sup> India has pledged to achieve net zero emissions latest by 2070 and to ensure that 50% of its energy will be from renewable energy sources by 2030. However, even if these targets are met it will not stop the world from crossing the dangerous threshold of 1.5 degrees by 2040.

are economically underprivileged, socially marginalized and those who are most vulnerable to climate change participate fully in this process of change, with their perspective given priority and their interests secured? How can faith in science and commitment to moral principles guide the process of learning that would advance this process of change? What kind of institutional structures would be needed to systematize and disseminate knowledge generated in local settings? These are some of the many complex and consequential questions that this webinar will seek to explore.