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## 'Code Red for Humanity': What Next for Mankind?

*By Margareth Sembiring*

### SYNOPSIS

*Amidst repeated warnings against the devastating consequences of climate change, a stronger commitment to climate adaptation measures is what is next for mankind.*

### COMMENTARY

THE IPCC – Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) – released its [latest report](#) in early August this year, ominously dubbed as '[code red for humanity](#)'. The report re-affirmed the attribution of climate change to human activities and re-emphasised the perils brought about by the changing climate. The report maintains similar high alert tone that characterised related reports released previously.

For example, following the 2018 IPCC report that outlined possible impacts of a 1.5°C warmer world, the 2019 UNEP Emission Gap report estimated that greenhouse gas emissions must go down by 7.6 per cent annually between 2020 and 2030 to avert the Earth from warming to such temperature by the end of the century. A goal that was daunting, if not almost impossible to attain, because historically, the world had never sustained such a drastic emission reduction over a prolonged period.

### Push for Climate Mitigation Measures

The adoption of renewable energy technologies has been regarded as a key strategy in mitigating climate change. It has been growing globally in recent years thanks to reduced costs. Regardless of the positive trend, it has thus far fallen short of the speed and the scale needed to keep the temperature rise below 1.5°C by the end of the century.

As the time window to meet the Paris target is fast closing, the pressure to expand

renewable energy technologies is mounting. This is done under the calculated conclusion that a more ambitious adoption of renewable energy technologies will bring global warming under control. Such push is reflected in the 2021 IPCC report that exhorted countries to engage in immediate, rapid, and large-scale reductions in greenhouse gas emissions.

Prior to that, the [Climate Ambition Summit](#) held in December 2020 called on countries to step up their climate mitigation commitments through stronger Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and long-term strategies to net zero emissions.

Similarly, the [Leaders Summit on Climate](#) convened by US President Joe Biden in April 2021 encouraged countries to pursue more aggressive climate action. In a bid to incentivise more rapid deployment of renewable energy technologies, the meeting highlighted the simultaneous economic benefits such measures would bring.

### **Building Up Towards COP26**

Within this agenda, various countries have come forward to pledge stronger emission reductions in recent months. In September 2020, China announced its plan to go carbon neutral by 2060. The following month, South Korea declared its intention to reach carbon neutrality by 2050.

Likewise, Japan has pledged to increase its emission reduction target from 26 per cent to 46-50 per cent below 2013 levels by 2030, and Canada from 30 per cent to 40-45 per cent from 2005 levels by 2030.

All these are feeding into the upcoming 26th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP26) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in November 2021. This conference is significant because it will mark the fifth year after the signing of the 2015 Paris Agreement. Countries are due to submit their updated NDCs by then.

These developments give a reason to hope, but it remains to be seen whether the new, presumably more ambitious pledges, and their subsequent implementations, will be sufficient to decarbonise the world within the stipulated timeframe.

### **Drivers Unaddressed**

There is a slight catch, however. While much effort is being pursued to promote and accelerate the use of renewable energy technologies, little thought is given to parallel realities that need equal attention. For example, although renewable energy technologies emit no carbon, the productions of their parts are not carbon-free. This is because such productions are currently being supported by fossil fuels.

Furthermore, at present, the use of electric vehicles depends heavily on the electricity generated by fossil fuel-fired power plants. In other words, the ongoing low-carbon transition comes with carbon footprints. This will take place for a time until renewable energy systems reach the capacity sufficient to be on par and overtake existing fossil fuel-fired power plants. Until then, emission reduction is likely to be gradual if at all.

Similarly, the focus of climate mitigation efforts on renewable energy development tends to obscure an underlying reality of differentiated carbon emissions across different segments of society. Of total global emissions, 50 per cent was generated by 10 per cent of the world's richest. 40 per cent was contributed by the middle 40 per cent, and the remaining 10 per cent by 50 per cent of the world's poorest.

This '[champagne glass](#)' phenomenon that was observed in 1990, and again in 2015, bears semblance to the rate of consumption of the Earth's depleting resources that is much [higher](#) in rich countries compared to developing countries.

The deeper causes of such imbalances are the drivers of rising emissions and environmental destructions, and they are unlikely to get addressed by a worldwide shift to renewable energy technologies alone. Therefore, while low-carbon transition offers a technical solution to reduce emissions, a lack of attention to these drivers can slow down transition progress or even give rise to other externalities that will require other set of measures to deal with.

### **What Next for Humankind?**

Against this backdrop, the next important question is what is there then for humankind. While various endeavours are being made to honour the Paris Agreement, the current fight against COVID-19 pandemic has shown that mankind probably just needs to learn to live with it at one point.

In practical terms, this means allocating more resources to take more aggressive climate adaptation initiatives. Disaster response capacity needs to be strengthened, and possible recovery pathways must be carefully charted. Equipping populations with the mindset and the skillset necessary to face more frequent weather-related events and disasters is imperative.

Furthermore, sufficient attention has to be given to the different capacity to adapt across societies. Societies with more resources will find it easier to adapt compared to those having less. This needs to be addressed early to prevent issues such as climate migrations and conflict situations.

There is a question of timing too. Adapting too early may render the measures obsolete by the time the anticipated events take place, or they may never happen all. Evaluating adaptation measures regularly and updating them according to the latest developments are necessary.

Warnings after warnings have been issued throughout the years. It is time to have stronger commitments to prepare for what may come.

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