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Madrid COP 25 event highlights critical challenges to sustainability

By Dr R Seetharaman

The COP 25 Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCC) meeting is underway in Madrid, Spain, this month. The UNFCCC had non-binding limits on greenhouse gas emissions for individual countries, and no enforcement mechanism. Various extensions to this treaty were negotiated during recent COPs, including most recently the Paris Agreement, adopted in 2016, in which all countries agreed to step up efforts to limit global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial temperatures and boost climate action financing. COP25 is the final COP before we enter the defining year of 2020, when many nations must submit new climate action plans. Among the many elements that need to be ironed out is the financing of climate action worldwide.

According to global carbon budget 2019, the global CO2 emissions are expected to rise more slowly in 2019. Emissions from burning fossil fuels are projected to grow by 0.6% this year to reach almost 37bn tonnes of CO2. This projection is down from 2.1% in 2018 and 1.5% in 2017. The global fossil CO2 emission projection of +0.6% includes separate global projections of the emissions from coal (-1.1%), oil (+0.9%), natural gas (+2.5%) and cement (+3.7%). We cannot rule out a decline in global emissions in 2019, given uncertainties in the projection. The lower growth rate in emissions in 2019 is due to various factors, including substantial declines in coal use in the US and the European Union; weaker economic growth and lower growth in electricity demand in China; weaker economic growth combined with a strong monsoon in India; and weaker overall economic growth globally. Forest fires also have driven CO2 emissions up in 2019: 6bn tonnes of CO2, about 0.8bn tonnes more than the last year, were driven partly by fires in the Amazon and Indonesia.

Earlier, the 24th Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP24), was working on rules to implement the Paris Agreement, which will come into force in 2020, the rulebook on how governments will measure, and report on their emissions-cutting efforts. The section of the Paris Agreement known as Article 6 has proven to be especially difficult to resolve. Article 6 governs how countries can work across borders to meet their climate change targets, particularly through markets where countries can trade carbon emissions credits. If one country is well ahead of their target for curbing emissions, they could sell the credit for the overshoot to another country struggling to hit their own target. Ideally, such mechanisms would allow countries to adopt even more ambitious greenhouse gas reduction targets than they would otherwise. It would also help conserve tropical rainforests that soak up and store vast quantities of carbon. COP25 is expected to lay the foundation for next year's climate meeting when the next round of climate targets are due. The COP in Glasgow in November 2020 will mark five years since the signing of the Paris Agreement, and it's the meeting when countries are expected to present their next round of commitments to curb their contributions to climate change. That means even more aggressive cuts to greenhouse gas emissions, less reliance on mechanisms like emissions trading, and more details about how they will achieve their goals.

Amidst the global developments, in Qatar recently, the Gulf Organisation for Research and Development (Gord) has signed a number of agreements with international and national organisations to promote sustainability practices. Gord signed several agreements with organisations such as Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy (SC), UNESCO and Doha Bank. This reveals Qatar's thrust on sustainable development.

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