

'Down' but not 'out': Growth needs fuel India's coal addiction

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India's resistance to more ambitious curbs on dirty energy is driven by its need for cheap fuel to power a booming economy and lift hundreds of millions of its citizens out of entrenched poverty.

Even as its capital was blanketed by toxic smog, India led the charge to

weaken anti-coal pledges at the COP26 summit, with experts saying it is prioritising its economic growth over the planet's future.

The world's third-largest emitter teamed up with China to water down language on [fossil fuels](#) at the Glasgow conference, forcing a compromise: a [climate deal](#) that bound countries to "phase down" but not "phase out" coal use.

India's resistance to more ambitious curbs on dirty energy is driven by its need for cheap fuel to power a booming economy and lift hundreds of millions of its citizens out of entrenched poverty.

"We have a huge population which has still not reached a basic minimum standard of living," Samrat Sengupta, a climate change expert with the New Delhi-based Centre for Science and Environment, told AFP.

Coal consumption has nearly doubled in the last decade—only China burns more—and the fuel still powers 70 percent of India's electricity grid.

The government has dragged its feet on tougher regulations for [coal plants](#) and just last year announced a series of commercial mining auctions to boost domestic production.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi committed to weaning his country off coal, but told Glasgow delegates India would only aim to be carbon-neutral by 2070—a decade after China and 20 years after the world's other big emitters.

But without decisive action sooner, experts warn India's emissions will soar in coming years and scuttle worldwide efforts to rein in [global warming](#).



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'Stiff target to meet '

The effects of India's fossil fuel addiction are already keenly felt, with a shroud of thick grey haze enveloping New Delhi each winter.

Coal plant emissions and vehicle exhaust fumes combine with smoke from farm fires to choke the megacity's 20 million residents.

On the same day that COP26 delegates were finalising the global climate accord, Delhi shut its schools for a week to keep children inside.

Smog is blamed for more than a million deaths in India annually, and a recent University of Chicago study found that air pollution was likely to reduce life expectancy by more than nine years for four in every 10 Indians.

Modi's government aims to mitigate the problem by scaling up renewables, pledging to make [solar power](#) as big a share of the energy mix as coal by the end of the decade.



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But India lacks the high-tech capacity to meet demand for [solar panels](#) and relies heavily on expensive components from abroad.

It has tried to spur domestic manufacturing of solar tech by hiking import duties, raising the cost of renewable energy.

The 2030 solar goal "is a huge and a very stiff target to meet", said Sengupta of the Centre for Science and Environment.

"It requires a lot of cheap finance and technologies to be made available."

India has long argued that historical polluters such as the United States and Europe are obligated to provide the technical expertise and funding for climate mitigation.

Its environment minister told COP26 delegates on Saturday that developing countries were "entitled to the responsible use of fossil fuels".

Bhupender Yadav said nations with little historical responsibility for climate change should not be held to the same standards as the world's biggest per-capita emitters.



India aims to reduce its dependence on coal by scaling up renewables but lacks the high-tech capacity to meet demand for solar panels.

"In such a situation, how can anyone expect developing countries to make promises of phasing out [coal](#) and fossil fuel subsidies?" he asked.

The weakened COP26 commitment was adopted with deep reluctance by other nations, which were anxious to get the deal over the line after two weeks of marathon negotiations.

Other developing nations—including Pacific island countries facing the existential threat of rising sea levels as a result of global warming—bristled at the suggestion that India's last-minute intervention was done on their behalf.

Fiji's attorney general Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum expressed "not just our astonishment, but immense disappointment in the manner in which this has been introduced".

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