

# Climate Diplomacy: Implications and Prospects for Nepal

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## Abstract

Nepal has come a long way from the time of the ‘Kalapathar Declaration’ in 2009 for the 15<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Parties (COP) up to the COP 28 in 2022. With just 0.4% of the total global population and emitting only 0.025 % of total greenhouse gas emissions, Nepal is disproportionately affected by climate change and is listed as the fourth most climate-vulnerable country in the world as per the global climate risk index. The loss of lives due to climate-induced disasters within a decade (2001 – 2010) and in 2023 alone is reported to be more than 4000 and 393 people respectively causing an economic loss of USD 5.34 billion and 2.89 billion respectively. Since Nepal lacks institutional and technical capacity and financial resources to tackle the impacts of climate change, the pursuit of robust climate diplomacy is called for ‘to shape and reframe the core national interest at home and influence deliberations abroad’. Hence, climate diplomacy could be a strategic instrument of Nepal’s foreign policy in terms of energizing relations with friendly nations and mobilizing climate change-affected countries to take up a common stand for getting maximum international assistance and support.

*Keywords:* Kalapathar declaration, greenhouse gas emission, glacier retreat, fossil fuels, robust climate diplomacy, economic diplomacy.

## Background

Holding a cabinet meeting chaired by the then Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal at Kalapathar near the base camp of Mount Sagarmatha (Everest) in the year 2009 was followed by the ‘Kalapathar Declaration’ for COP 15 to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Copenhagen, Denmark. It was a wake-up call to the international community with the message that climate change needed to be taken with utmost seriousness being linked to the very survival of the affected countries as part of a climate diplomacy initiative. The ‘Kalapathar Declaration’ was followed by the constitution of the Climate Change Council which oversaw the preparation of the National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA)

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to Climate Change (2010) for COP 15. After signing the UNFCCC in 1992, Nepal came up with Climate Change Policy 2011 which was later replaced by National Climate Change Policy 2019 to provide policy guidance to government bodies and also to effectively address national and international issues on climate change (MOE, 2011).

The Paris Agreement was a landmark agreement entered into force on November 4, 2016, which aimed to keep global temperature rise in this century well below 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres's visit to Nepal's Himalayas in October 2023 helped draw global attention to the climate agenda of Nepal in the world forum. Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal's address at the global forum highlighted the gross injustice suffered by Nepal having to bear 'the direct, unequal and harmful impacts of climate change', and called on 'the international committee to help reduce the climate change risk' through the adaptation financing with high priority. According to Mr. Birendra Prasad Mahato, Nepal's Minister of Forest and Environment, Nepal's issues were discussed with priority at the UN Climate Summit (THT, 2023).

The South Asian Regional Climate Change Conference, "From Kathmandu to Copenhagen", was also held in the same year. National Adaptation Program of Action (NAPA), Nepal's national document prepared for the COP 15, Copenhagen, did convey the message to the international community that Nepal with just 0.4% of the total global population and emitting only 0.025 % of total greenhouse gas emissions was being disproportionately affected from climate change (MoE, 2011).

Further, the climate TRACE Data released by Al Gore, former US Vice-President and a climate champion at the UN Climate Summit-COP 28 (Nov.30-Dec.12, 2023) in Dubai, showed that the global greenhouse gas emissions increased by 8.6 % between 2015 and 2022, and just 5 countries-China, USA, India, Indonesia and Russia – accounted for 75% of those emissions (Agence France Presse, 2023). Hence, as the final COP 28 outcomes indicate, Nepal would continue to be affected by the global warming phenomenon due to carbon emissions by the industrialized countries.

In the above context, the paper contends that climate diplomacy, as an integral component of economic diplomacy, ought to play a key role in receiving international assistance to deal with the climate crisis in Nepal. The key questions to be answered are: What were Nepal's past efforts and accomplishments related to climate change? Were there any shortcomings and constraints at the policy and implementation levels while responding to climate change? How effectively did

Nepal put up its climate agenda at COP 28? How can Nepal pursue robust climate diplomacy to get international support in the context of the COP 28 outcomes ?

### **Climate Change Threats for Nepal**

Nepal is listed as the fourth most climate-vulnerable country in the world as per the global climate risk index (MOSTE, 2013). The average maximum annual temperature within the country is estimated to increase at an annual rate of 0.04% - 0.06%, more pronounced in the mountains compared to the Terai and Siwalik regions. Recent climatic trends suggest temperature would increase by 1.7<sup>o</sup> C and 3<sup>o</sup> C by the years 2050 and 2100 respectively compared to a pre-2000 baseline.

Several studies related to climate projections indicate that global warming has been contributing to the occurrence of multiple hazards in Nepal. These are water-induced disasters such as floods, landslides, flash floods, debris flow and glacial lake outburst floods – GLOFs (MCCRMD, 2014). Decreasing snow lines indicate warmer and wetter Himalayas; the drought risks, general rise in temperature and high river flows are also on the increase. Crippling cold waves in the Terai region and increasing recurrence of thunderstorms in the hills and mountains could be seen as the manifestations of climate change. The glacial retreat would be changing seasonal snow melt and causing uncertainty in water flows. This would mean grave consequences for food security, the livelihood of the people and the eco-systems (MoE, 2011).

The loss of lives caused by the climate-induced disaster within a decade from 2001 to 2010 was reported to be more than 4000 people, causing an economic loss of USD 5.34 billion. As many as 393 persons lost their lives to disasters, especially landslides and floods in 2023 causing economic loss of Rs. 2.89 billion (MoE, 2010).

### **Past Climate Initiatives and Accomplishments**

#### **1. Constitution of the Climate Change Council**

The ‘Kalapathar Declaration’ was followed by the constitution of a 25-member Climate Change Council, consisting of 8 experts, under the chairmanship of the prime minister. It paved the way for climate change to be included in the national development agenda as evidenced by the fact that the Interim Constitution of Nepal (2007) and Three Year Interim Plan (2008-2010) addressed the issue of environmental management and climate change. The Climate Change Management Division was also established in the Ministry of Environment in the year 2010. In addition, a multi-stakeholder Climate Change Initiatives Coordination Committee (MCCICC) was also formed. Although those institutional arrangements paved the way for the expansion of climate change-related programs, there was also a realization that more efforts need to be made to mobilize the needed funds (MoE, 2011).

## **2. The National Adaptation Program of Action (NAPA)**

The NAPA - Nepal's national document prepared for COP 15 in Copenhagen in 2010, was an important policy and programmatic initiative formulated through wider and extensive consultative processes involving the line ministries, local bodies, academe, NGOs, indigenous communities and civil society representatives. The then Ministry of Environment (MoE) is the focal ministry that adopted the thematic working group approach for the NAPA preparation related to the various themes. The NAPA Project team developed nine combined project profiles which included both "urgent/immediate and long-term adaptation strategies", and the total financial requirement was estimated as USD 350 million (NAPA, 2010).

As per the Local Governance Act 1999, the municipal bodies were expected to come up with the preparation of the 'Periodic Plan' covering the multi-sectors – social, economic, spatial, environmental, financial and institutional. Hence, the Periodic Plan provided a basis for mainstreaming the NAPA, having covered various thematic areas, within the municipal periodic planning process (Malla, 2011).

## **3. The National Climate Policy Initiatives**

Nepal signed the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) on June 12, 1992, and became a party to it in 1994. The scientific evidence put forward by the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was instrumental in creating such an international legal instrument. After joining the UNFCCC, Nepal came up with Climate Change Policy 2011 with the vision and mission focussed on: sparing the country from the adverse impacts of climate change; improving livelihoods; and achieving climate-friendly physical, economic and social development, adopting a low carbon and keeping up the commitments to national and international agreements related to climate change. The Government of Nepal later came up with a new policy document – National Climate Change Policy 2019, to provide policy guidance to government bodies 'for developing resilient society by reducing the impact of climate change' and also to effectively address national and international issues of climate change (MOE, 2011).

The proposed institutional framework consists of 1) Formation of the Climate Change Council at the national level with the coordination responsibility given to Ministry of Forest & Environment Ministry (MFEM); 2) Constitution of an Inter-Ministrial Coordination Committee; 3) A sectoral ministry looking after the environment entrusted with climate change affairs within the provinces; 4) Creation of the climate change focal points within the sectoral ministries at the center and the local government levels; 5) Establishment of a Climate Change Research Center. The national policy initiative provided a basis for the enactment of the related legislation and strategy documents. Some of those are listed as follows:

1. Environment Conservation Act & Regulations 2076 BS (2019 AD)
2. Local Adaptation Plan of Action 2076 BS (2019)
3. GESI Strategy & Action Plan related to Climate Change (2077-2087 BS)

### **A Glimpse of the Past COP Events**

The Paris Agreement was a landmark agreement as it charted out a new course in the global climate effort. Its central aim was to strengthen the global response to the threat of climate change by keeping a global temperature rise this century well below 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase even further to 1.5 degrees Celsius (UNFCCC, 2015).

The COP 26 was held in Glasgow, Scotland in 2021. Nations agreed to work to reduce the gap between existing emissions so that the rise in global temperature could be limited to 1.5<sup>o</sup> Celsius and they also promised to fulfill ‘the pledge of providing USD 100 billion annually from developed to developing countries’ (Shrestha, 2024). One of the top concerns reported at COP 26 is the need to augment climate finance for low-income countries urging the developed countries to extend the financial support they committed to the least developed countries (LDCs) which are highly vulnerable to climate change (Business 360, 2021).

Nepal raised the issue of ‘Himalayas at Risk’. It was pointed out that the Hindu-Kush Himalaya (HKH) region was serving 1.9 billion people and, hence, the global community ought to be ready to support this region to minimize the risk because of climate change. Nepal highlighted that ‘Himalayas and Mountains were the Pulse of the Planet’ (Business 360, 2021).

The COP 27, convened in Sharm el Sheikh, Egypt in 2022, reaffirmed its commitment to contain the global temperature rise within 1.5<sup>o</sup> Celsius. The creation of the Loss and Damage Fund was ‘a breakthrough agreement’ to provide loss and damage funding for vulnerable countries suffering from natural disasters (Shrestha, 2024). This was an important realization that developing countries including Nepal despite their minimal contribution to global emissions are more vulnerable to the effects of climate change.

### **Nepal’s Climate Agenda at the COP 28**

Nepal’s representation by Prime Minister Dahal at the summit was significant in the sense that he could raise the issue of the country’s high vulnerability to climate change despite its emission of negligible amounts of greenhouse gas. He drew global attention to the the gross injustice suffered by Nepal having to bear ‘the direct, unequal and harmful impacts of climate change’, and called on ‘the international committee to help reduce the climate change risk’. The prime minister’s pledge to

maintain 45% forest cover of Nepal to counter climate change was noteworthy to draw global attention to Nepal's genuine efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and to allow the country to benefit financially through the global carbon market mechanism set up through the Article 6 of the Paris Agreement (Pokharel, 2023).

Nepal had its own pavilion at the summit which helped to hold deliberations and interactions on her climate change-related issues effectively. A panel discussion was organized by The National Trust for Nature Conservation (NTNC) titled "Building Blocks of Climate Ambition: People, Nature and Action" which brought about the following pertinent climate-related issues and solutions to be considered by Nepal:

- To develop Nepal's resilience to climate change despite its vulnerabilities, nature-based solutions need to be adopted as strategic actions at the grassroots level which benefit the well-being of both human beings and biodiversity.
- Specific measures include 'allocating resources for nature-based solutions, collaborating with environmental organizations and implementing a robust monitoring and evaluation system.
- There is a need for aligning global interventions with local actions for nature-based solutions, considering challenges and emphasizing external finance for the developing countries.
- To promote the country's ownership of climate projects, the role of 'direct access modality' needs to be emphasized (THT, December 8, 2023).

### **The COP 28 Outcomes and Implications for Nepal**

The world for the first time approved a call to transition away from fossil fuels – the top culprit behind climate change. The agreement calls for 'transitioning away from the fossil fuels in energy systems, in a just orderly and equitable manner'. It asks for greater action 'in this critical decade' and recommitments to no net greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 in hopes of meeting the increasingly elusive goal of checking warming at 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels.

The text stopped short of a phase-out of oil, gas and coal, which together account for around 75% of the emissions responsible for the planetary crisis (AFP, 2023). The achievement of COP 28 is that a landmark decision on the operationalization of the Loss and Damage Fund was adopted in its opening plenary session with a pledge of USD 400 million. (Pokhrel, 2023). It appears that Nepal will continue to face the brunt of the climate crisis, and it will have to deal increasingly with emerging climate-related challenges.

### **Nepal's Persual of a Robust Climate Diplomacy**

Climate change is not a home product of Nepal. It is a global concern and lopsided attempts will hardly meet the challenge. It is beyond the capacity of Nepal to

tackle the impacts of climate change with its efforts since it lacks institutional and technical capacity and financial resources. Hence, the application of climate diplomacy is ‘crucial in embedding climate change in the decision-making process to shape and reframe the core national interest at home and influence deliberations abroad’ (Shrestha, 2021).

Nepal’s climate diplomacy initiatives can be taken up at various levels as follows:

1. At the global level within the UN system, Nepal could play a proactive role in mobilizing the climate-affected countries, both the mountain and island countries, to take up a common stand for getting maximum international assistance and support. This would also help increase the bargaining power for more climate benefits from the developed and industrialized countries.
2. At the regional level, the countries within the Hindu Kush Himalaya region could be mobilized for more concerted climate actions with the help and support of the International Center of Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD). The regional groupings (SAARC, BBIN, BIMSTEC) and other international bodies related to climate change could also be mobilized in this endeavor.
3. At the national level, Nepal can take up climate change initiatives with several bilateral agencies and multilateral organizations (World Bank, ADB, UNDP).
4. At the local community level, the Local Adaptation Plans of Action (LAPA) can be undertaken with the support of the local government bodies.

### **The Way Forward: Measures Aiding Robust Climate Diplomacy for Nepal**

While there is a need for a sound policy as well as institutional and legal framework concerning climate change, there is also a need for technical guidelines, manuals and tools for dealing with the scientific and technological applications related to climate actions. The Ministry of Forest and Environment is the lead ministry dealing with climate change issues.

The Climate Change Policy 2011 envisioned establishing a Climate Change Center as an effective technical institution for research and monitoring and for providing technical and policy advice to the Government of Nepal; initiating local adaptation plans of action (LAPA). The Climate Change Policy 2019 proposed the Climate Change Research and Development Center for dealing with scientific & technology-related research activities.

Possibly, two types of bodies might be needed - one catering for policy studies and the other one for scientific & technology (S&T) research. An autonomous body, the Centre for Climate Change Policy Research, could be established as a think tank for climate change and environment-related activities. The center dealing with S&T aspects could be placed within the university system conferring academic

degrees and could also promote scientific research activities in collaboration with the National Academy of Science and Technology (NAST).

Nepal's participation in the global Pilot Program for Climate Resilience (PPCR) with support from the Climate Investment Funds in the year 2013 is a glaring example of a need for proper institutional infrastructures as stated above which ensures continuity to the launched projects/programs (MOSTE, 2013). The study conducted on indigenous practices for climate change adaptation, as a knowledge management sub-program of the PPCR, showed that how local knowledge and practices can quickly adjust to the changing dynamics of climate change and its impacts (MOSTE, 2015).

### **Conclusion**

Given the gravity of climate change impacts, will Nepal be able to come up with appropriate response measures in terms of mitigation and adaptation actions? Given the state of the political economy, does Nepal have the capability to pursue effective economic diplomacy for receiving benefits from climate funds and other bilateral and multilateral sources?

The following statement by US Climate Envoy John Kerry would be most reassuring in the Nepali context, "We're not going to get it done alone, that's for sure. No one nation can get this done. This gets done by the best of diplomacy and the best of international engagement coming together".

The best of diplomacy and the best of international engagements could be the answer to Nepal's efforts to deal with the climate crisis. Trade, tourism employment, investment and technology transfer are important aspects of development (economic) diplomacy (NCWA, 2021). Climate diplomacy, as an important component of economic diplomacy, needs to play a key role in receiving international assistance to deal with the climate crisis in Nepal. Hence, climate diplomacy could be a strategic instrument of Nepal's foreign policy in terms of energizing relations with friendly nations and mobilizing climate change-affected countries to take up a common stand for getting maximum international assistance and support.

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