

Vietnam should walk the talk in climate actions

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Nguyen Dang Anh Thi

At least 50 million people in Vietnam will be exposed to the impacts of rising sea levels and more powerful tropical storms and typhoons, among other threats.

That 'red code' has been flagged in a 2018 report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that modeled a scenario of 1.5 degrees Celsius rise in global temperatures above pre-industrial averages.

It lists Vietnam among the nine countries most vulnerable to climate change.

Other studies support this. The Global Climate Risk Index 2020 ranked Vietnam as the sixth most affected by climate variability and extreme weather events in the last two decades.

Climate change is projected to increase the frequency and intensity of natural disasters and extreme weather events in most areas, while droughts could become more severe in Vietnam due to rising temperatures and decreasing rainfall.

Even worse, these events will occur earlier than anticipated and be increasingly difficult to predict.

Born and raised in central Vietnam, my childhood was full of scary experiences in dealing with a dozen of tropical storms and floods, year over year. I couldn't imagine how my family and friends there could live their lives with such enhanced natural disaster threats.



Speaking at the high-level open debate on climate security in the U.N. Security Council on September 23 in New York, President Nguyen Xuan Phuc said consecutive natural disasters have caused great losses to life and property in Vietnam.

The Mekong Delta, the heart of Vietnam's agricultural production, is witnessing record saline intrusion and lack of freshwater, jeopardizing the livelihoods and daily life of 20 million people and the food security of the country and region, he said.

He said climate change is "[war without gunfire](#), so to speak, that causes economic damage and loss of life no less dire than actual wars and conflicts."

This echoed a statement delivered by U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres a week earlier.

Launching the 'United in Science' Climate Report, he said we need to prevent further irreversible damage and warned governments that "we are out of time."

"Unless there are immediate, rapid and large-scale reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, we will be unable to limit global heating to 1.5 degrees Celsius.

"The consequences will be catastrophic."

The report highlighted that all countries need to present more ambitious and achievable nationally determined contributions that will by 2030 cut global greenhouse gas emissions by 45 percent compared to 2010 levels.

Nothing less will do.





People use an aluminum boat to travel through a flooded street in Bao Vinh town in Thua Thien-Hue Province, central Vietnam, November 2020. Photo by VnExpress/Vo Thanh

How Vietnam has been doing in dealing with climate change?

In the updated Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) submitted to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in September 2020, Vietnam has unconditionally committed to reducing GHG emissions by 9 percent below business-as-usual (BAU) levels by 2030.

It committed to a conditional reduction to 27 percent below BAU if it gets international support.

However, even the latter is rated as "critically insufficient" against the fair share contribution by countries around the world by Climate Action Tracker, an independent scientific analysis that tracks government climate action and measures it against the globally agreed Paris Agreement aim of "holding warming well below 2°C, and pursuing efforts to limit warming to 1.5°C."



The "critically insufficient" rating indicates that Vietnam's GHG target in 2030 "reflects minimal to no action and is not at all consistent with the Paris Agreement's 1.5°C temperature limit.

"If all countries were to follow Vietnam's approach, warming would exceed 4°C."

In other words, Vietnam is clearly considered a contributor to the climate disaster.

In fact, GHG emissions have been increasing quickly in Vietnam in the last decade. Even worse, its NDC shows that in 2030 GHG emissions are expected to be more than double, reaching an increase of 228 percent from 2010 levels if it achieves the unconditional target.

With the conditional target, an increase of 172 percent is expected.

Walk the talk

GHG emissions have not been reduced by even a gram in the past, and there is no hope of a reduction in the next three decades with Vietnam's current high carbon-intensive economic growth model.

So what are the key drivers of the upward trend in GHG emissions in Vietnam? The very short answer is coal-fired power plants.

In the past decade Vietnam's coal-generated power skyrocketed by 5.3 times from 3,941 MW in 2010 to 20,867 MW in 2020, while the national electricity system capacity only increased by 3.4 times during the period.

As a result the country's GHG emissions doubled within a decade even as global emissions only increased by 15 percent.

Coal is now responsible for 54 percent of GHG emissions from fossil fuel burning in Vietnam, according to Our World in Data.

The surge in Vietnam's GHG emissions is expected to continue for the next 25 years.



The VIII Power Development Plan proposed by the Ministry of Industry and Trade plans to double the electricity generated from coal within just the next decade by developing 22,000 MW of additional capacity, and then build another 8,000 MW capacity in 2030-45.

This coal addiction will result in a doubling of GHG emissions in the next decade and a tripling of GHG emissions by the middle of this century.

This power plan development does not make any sense in dealing with the climate change that Vietnam's leaders are calling the world to reverse.

In fact, Vietnam is now rated a global 'coal superpower' or 'a coal tiger'. According to Global Coal Plant Tracker, Vietnam ranks sixth in Asia and 11th in the world in terms of coal-fired power capacity.

"If Vietnam goes forward with 40GW of coal, if the entire region implements its coal-based plans right now, I think we are finished. That would spell disaster for us and our planet."

This was a statement made by World Bank president Jim Yong Kim five years ago. But it was apparently not strong enough to persuade energy policymakers in Vietnam.

Coal is currently the single largest contributor to climate change and the most polluting fossil fuel.

The International Energy Agency's Net Zero 2050 report pointed out that an end to new coal and a rapid phase-out of existing capacity is the foundation for a below-1.5°C future.

Referring to this report in March this year Guterres urged all governments, private companies and local authorities to "end the deadly addiction to coal" by canceling all global coal projects in the pipeline.

He made it abundantly clear that phasing out coal from the electricity sector is "the single most important step to get in line with the 1.5-degree goal of the Paris Agreement."

Now it is the right time for Vietnam to rethink about their energy future and climate actions. I fully believe listening to these urgent calls by phasing out all planned coal



projects would be the first crucial step to decarbonize its economy. Renewable energy has been proved to enhance national energy security, reduce the need for imported fuels, and help conserve the nation's natural resources while emit no or low GHG.

The sudden electricity shortage crisis in China would be a timely lesson for Vietnam. Overrelying on coal, China's power sector and economy have been exposed to vulnerabilities when this dirty fuel prices have skyrocketed in the past few months.

The Vietnamese people have already been experiencing pain from climate change impacts. Cutting GHG emissions in the country must be achieved through practical and responsible climate actions using the best available resources.

I believe Vietnam could do better in dealing with climate change if its policymakers walk the talk of sustainability.

**Nguyen Dang Anh Thi is an expert on energy and environment. The opinions expressed are his own.*

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Great article!Countries like Vietnam are trying to boost their property,economy etc.etc.unfortunately they try to grow the old trialled way where pollution is not so important as Growth !.Thousands of heavy polluting factories have or are being build,without most of them even have recycled water/waste managements in place as the Government just very lax .So how do we expect them to really make progressive laws to clean up the mess! Lots of talk and when it ... [+](#)

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