

# Time to Dust Off the Climate Plan?

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The Uttarakhand disaster invited much criticism, but to say that the state government was unaware of the possibility of such a disaster would be unfair. In 2012 the Uttarakhand Action Plan on Climate Change, based on wide consultations, assessed possibilities and steps needed to avert such disasters. Despite the extensive information provided in the document, it fails to be “implementable” due to issues of financing and bureaucratic initiative among others.

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It has been some months since the disaster in Uttarakhand unfolded. A tragedy of this magnitude has, quite justifiably, invited criticism on state response mechanisms, institutional inadequacies, development trajectories, prediction techniques, and a slew of other concerns targeting growth and governance in the state. But, lost in these criticisms is the fact that Uttarakhand had begun the process of preparing and planning for such events, even if implementation lagged behind.

In June 2012, the state had finalised the Uttarakhand Action Plan on Climate Change (UAPCC), a document that took into account several of the underlying concerns that led to the disaster. The question going forward is whether exercises such as this, if done properly, can help Uttarakhand and other fragile states be better prepared to tackle such disasters in the future.

Far from being a demand-driven, single-sector, one-department-led planning

exercise, the UAPCC is multi-sectoral in approach and substance. It draws on available scientific information on extreme weather events and suggests more downscaled studies specific to Uttarakhand. It was participative in process (though in the post-draft stages), and crucially, takes a candid look at the state’s development, ecological and agro-climatic situation. While the draft plan is perhaps constrained by a number of issues, it certainly provides a basis to build upon. It would therefore be prudent to make course-corrections in the document rather than discard the yearlong effort altogether. Let me elaborate.

The cloudburst in Uttarakhand and certainly the destruction it wrought cannot be linked singularly to climate change, it is however, a reflection of broader climatic shifts expected to intensify in the future. The UAPCC clearly acknowledges this. The document cites an all-India model-based study by the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MOEF) predicting “an overall increase in intensity of rainfall as well as the number of rainy days in the Himalayan region” in the 2030s (using 1970 as the baseline). For places like Uttarakhand that probability is a 50% increase. Local perceptions of people in the state also

indicate increasing instances of cloud-bursts resulting in heavy losses of life and property. Further, the plan talks of recent instances of unpredictable weather in the state such as drought-like conditions in 2007-08 and 2008-09, followed by extreme precipitation in 2010 which caused flash floods and landslides, with the destruction of life and property resulting in the state borrowing Rs 6,530 crore from the centre alone.

D Raghunandan of the Delhi Science Forum in a recent piece stated that the Uttarakhand disaster unfolded not just because of the extreme weather event but because of “poor civil administration, unplanned infrastructure and the absence of disaster preparedness”. This also reinforces the relevance of the UAPCC. Like other State Action Plans on Climate Change (SAPCC) in India, the document predominantly addresses issues of sustainable development rather than climate change alone. Climate resilience is treated as a co-benefit of development and environmental gains. The UAPCC, in fact, notes that its objective is to promote “climate resilience”, “inclusion” as well as “sustainable growth”. Moreover, it seems to have a good handle on Uttarakhand’s development-related ecological, and natural resource problems. It goes beyond the mandate of the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) in focusing on sectors such as tourism, roads, health, and disaster management. For example, the document notes that 88% of the state’s geographic area is witnessing soil erosion exacerbated by building of roads and other unplanned construction. Further in 2010, the number of tourists was 300% more than the population of the state. This number is expected to double by 2017. Given that the Himalayan ecosystem is under pressure from tourism, construction and water scarcity, the plan also notes that Uttarakhand does not have a State Water Policy in place.

It is worth noting that the process of preparing the plan – at least on paper – diverged from current institutional practices endemic to state development plans that are often criticised for being insular and path-dependent. UAPCC invited experts, scientists, and civil society organisations in looking and commenting

on the draft plan (though this was facilitated by a multilateral agency and a consultant organisation in its second iteration). In addition, sectoral chapters were formulated by multi-sectoral working groups. Further, the UAPCC incorporated scientific as well as perception-based studies by the MOEF, the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), World Wildlife Fund, Kumaon University to name a few.

Acknowledging the magnitude of the problem at hand, sectoral recommendations are also exhaustive, some understandably adapted from other sectoral plans. A few, immediately relevant to the recent disaster, include conducting a vulnerability analysis for the state, setting up an Uttarakhand Environment Directorate and, drafting a tourism master plan that also encompasses climate concerns.

### An Assessment

So how far has the state progressed in implementing the plan? There are no answers to this question, at least in the public domain. It is quite likely that the plan’s “implementability” has been constrained by a number of factors endemic to other SAPCCs.

First, plans are typically housed in a nodal department or a semi-autonomous agency (in Uttarakhand’s case this is the forest department) that do not rank high in departmental hierarchy, unless senior bureaucrats in the department wield some influence or are given political space to drive the process. The process then is at the mercy of political and bureaucratic flux.

Second, Uttarakhand (like several state plans) presents a sizeable wish list of sectoral outcomes, with no real framework in place to prioritise actions. In addition, action plans are often framed at the level of objectives rather than actions. For instance, under “activities”, the UAPCC states “habitat management”, “strengthening of institutions” for disease surveillance, “upgradation of centres and training of personnel” for emergency preparedness, “disaster-safe construction practices”, etc. While sectors like transport and water resources are more specific in scope, the overarching document is still a mega-list of

broad sectoral intent. Moreover, stated budgets are largely indicative and this is compounded by ambiguity on the source of finance.

Third, external participation was sought after the first cut of the draft was prepared, limiting engagement by technical experts and civil society organisations during the initial framing of the draft. Moreover, Uttarakhand likely faced the daunting task of integrating these comments in the final action plan.

Finally, most SAPCCs tend to skirt around measures that are economically or politically untenable, even if they achieve substantial climate gains. In the case of Uttarakhand, this pertains to re-assessing hydropower. Given concerns of how erratic weather events could impact infrastructure and hydropower production in the long term, this is a crucial topic. However, the closest the document comes to addressing this is a “state level committee to take a cumulative review of future directions of the power sector”. There is no specific mention of the current and future trajectory of hydropower in the state. One criticism levelled at SAPCCs therefore is that they do not always address climate change in any transformative manner.

For all the above reasons, it may be argued that in its current avatar, the UAPCC (like other SAPCCs) is a voluminous knowledge document not immediately implementable. But despite its limitations the draft is a multi-departmental effort that clearly maps the state’s climatic, developmental and environmental concerns. At best, it can inform critical decisions on sectors such as disaster management, tourism, forestry and urban planning. At worst, the tragedy serves to reveal gaps and missing pieces in the document’s sectoral and institutional approach, thereby meriting another iteration.

With over 22 SAPCCs in various stages of completion, domestic climate policy in India is proliferating. The exercise needs to be built upon and taken forward. Not in the least because, as the disaster at Uttarakhand has demonstrated, climate resilience needs to be built into existing development and environment plans.