

EXPRESS VIEW: IT'S OFFICIAL — 2023 WAS THE HOTTEST YEAR ON RECORD

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Degradation - GHGs, Ozone Depletion and Climate Change

For the better part of 2023, it was all but certain that the year would be the warmest on record. Beginning June, the average global temperature registered a record high every month. Now the EU's Copernicus Climate Change Service (CCS) has confirmed that in 2023, the planet was 1.48 degrees hotter than the period when the large-scale burning of fossil fuels commenced. Scientists at the CCS have warned that the 12-month period ending in January or February 2024 could be 1.5 degrees above the 1850s. This does not mean that the threshold set by the Paris Pact is likely to be breached soon — the landmark agreement pertains to averages over a much longer time. But the weather pattern this year sets a worrying precedent, especially because the average temperature in 2023 was 0.17 degrees higher than in 2016, the previous record year — in global warming terms, a very large increase.

By all accounts, renewable energy installations have increased appreciably in the past five years. However, this does not seem to have had a meaningful impact on the decarbonisation of the planet. CCS data show that GHG concentrations in the atmosphere reached a record level in 2023 — this along with El Nino has driven most of the warming. The rate of increase in methane emissions was lower than in the past three years. But carbon dioxide in the atmosphere increased at a rate similar to that observed in recent years, indicating that RE deployment is being offset by the use of unclean energy. Blaming the Third World and emerging economies for this increase in the emissions burden would be simplistic, and unfair. According to a study published in the journal *Nature* last year, historically, the combined share of emissions (1850-2021) of the US and the EU is more than 32 per cent. India's share, in contrast, is less than 3.5 per cent.

Of course, this does not mean that countries in the Global South do not have work to do. India's remarkable growth in total RE capacity in the last nine years — from 35 GW in 2014 to close to 180 GW — means that it is well placed to attain its goal of 500 GW RE capacity by 2030. However, like most parts of the world, India is yet to develop technology that enables storing of excess energy when the sun isn't shining or the wind isn't blowing. In recent times, the US-China rivalry has hobbled RE supply chains. Last year, China wielded its national security rules to impose export bans on rare earth minerals — it dominates the world market in these commodities that are critical to the green energy transition. In a somewhat similar vein, the Biden administration has blocked US subsidies to Chinese battery manufacturers. In the last two months, the two countries have indicated their willingness to overcome tensions on the climate front. The weather record of the last year indicates that climate diplomats, especially in the big powers, need to be much more nimble.

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