Activist speaks out on climate change

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Few Australians may know her name, but Sunita Narain is probably one of the most influential political voices in the global debate on climate change.

She was voted among India's 50 most powerful people by a national newspaper poll and ranked by Time magazine among the world's most influential and successful political activists.

She's also inspired a Bollywood film, Corporate, based on her legal battles with Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola over claims which both companies deny that independent laboratory tests detected pesticide residues in some of their products.

"If you want to achieve real societal change, you must keep at it like a dog with a bone, or an ant on an elephant. You must push hard, and not expect things to be easy," she said.

Ms Narain, who has been director of India's politically independent Centre for Science and Environment for the past 25 years, visited Canberra this week to meet political leaders and deliver the Narayanan Oration at the Australian National University last night. The lecture, named in honour of former Indian president Kocheril Raman Narayanan, attracts some of India's leading public intellectuals to outline key economic and social reforms for the country's future. In her address, "Why Environmentalism Needs Equity", Ms Narain argued Western nations were externalising the problems caused by climate change, blaming "those less fortunate and able to deal with its excesses". For the past 16 years since the first global intergovernmental negotiations on climate change in Washington "the world has been haggling about what it knows but does not want to accept" and has been "desperately seeking every excuse not to act".

There was now a "well-orchestrated" political campaign to paint developing nations like China and India as "the dirty villains on the block" although the Western world had created the problem.

"The West's hysteria is growing, but so is their inaction. The irony is that these countries had agreed in 1997 to make a small cut in their gargantuan emission, in the interest of us all. These emissions cuts were nowhere close to what was needed, then or now, to avert climate change.

"The fact is that after years of talk, no country has been able to delink its growth with the growth of carbon dioxide emissions. No country has shown how to build a low-carbon economy, as yet."

Poor and emerging countries had the opportunity to avoid the environmental mistakes made by richer nations by investing in "leapfrog technologies" to avoid pollution.

"As yet, the rich world has found small answers to existential problems. It wants to keep its coal power plants ... it wants to build new coal power plants. It believes it can keep polluting and keep fixing. This time, the answer it has hit upon is carbon capture and storage to pipe the emissions underground and hope the problem will just go away."

The challenge for developing countries, like India and China, was to avoid the Western model of "creating pollution, then trying to clean it up" and build energy security and social equity on cleaner, more inventive technologies.