

Climate Change and Sustainable Development: Views from the South

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The World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) is likely to see the Kyoto Protocol finally coming into force. While this will be a moment to celebrate, there is no cause to be complacent. Although a step in the right direction, the Kyoto Protocol was always an imperfect agreement and has been made all the more imperfect by the fact that the world's largest polluter has decided to stay out of the consensus and those who have agreed to join have demanded and received changes that have weakened the Protocol considerably. It is time, therefore, to begin thinking about the shape of the global climate regime in its post-Kyoto phase.

1. Introduction

The last two Conferences of the Parties (COP-6 and COP-7) to the United National Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) have managed to resuscitate what had seemed to be a sinking Kyoto Protocol, despite the US decision to abandon the agreement. However, the decisions taken at these meetings leave the Protocol riddled with all the many problems that had dogged the original agreement while diluting its content significantly. While the survival of the Protocol may be something to celebrate, from the South's perspective the Protocol, which had been imperfect to begin with,

is now all the more imperfect (Agarwal et al., 2001; Najam and Page, 1998; Najam, 2001). At the same time, however, it does seem that the 'delivering' the Kyoto Protocol may well become the most important legacy of the forthcoming World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), to be held later this year in Johannesburg, South Africa. This is partly because the WSSD agenda is itself riddled with trouble and uncertainty; but more importantly it is because the European Union seems set to use the visibility of Johannesburg Summit as a means to push Kyoto's ratification.

The Kyoto process has been focused – even obsessed – with the short-term need to launch the policy process and get the industrialised countries to agree to some targets, no matter how meagre. It is time now to refocus on the longer-term objectives of the UNFCCC, particularly on its stated goals regarding sustainable development. In this regard, the WSSD provides both challenges and opportunities to the developing countries of the South. The challenges emerge from the fact that developing country concerns, which had always been marginal to the thrust of the UNFCCC, have become even more marginalised in recent COPs as the focus has been concentrated on getting the Northern countries (those listed in Annex 1) to accede to the Kyoto Protocol. This has happened at the cost of sidestepping, if

KEY CHALLENGES:

- Even if the Kyoto Protocol is implemented in full, the impacts of global climate change will start being felt within the next few decades and the most vulnerable communities and countries are those which are already the poorest and least able to adapt to these changes.
- It is time now to refocus on the longer-term objectives of the UNFCCC, particularly on its stated goals regarding sustainable development. In this regard, the WSSD provides both challenges and opportunities to developing countries.
- WSSD provides an opportunity to re-initiate the discussion on the larger architecture of the future climate regime. The goal of the post-Kyoto phase should be clearly tied to atmospheric stabilisation with a defined focus on emissions limitation and a clear sense of the rules for the future entry of developing countries into the regime. In all likelihood this will require moving to per capita emission targets and a 'contraction and convergence' policy scenario.



not outright ignoring, Southern priorities (Najam, 2001; Sokona, 2001). On the other hand, the supposed sustainable development focus of the Johannesburg Summit gives the developing countries an opportunity to re-establish the link between climate change and sustainable development (Huq and Sokona, 2001). Such a link is enshrined in the text of the UNFCCC but has been systematically ignored in its operational provisions, most especially in the Kyoto Protocol (Najam and Sagar, 1998).

2. Southern concerns

The original UNFCCC was not exactly viewed as a great victory by the developing countries (Dasgupta, 1994; Hyder, 1994; Rajan, 1997; Sagar and Kandlikar, 1997). Since then, the climate regime has become even less sympathetic to the concerns of the South (Agarwal et al., 2001; Huq and Sokona, 2001; Najam, 2001). This has largely been a case of neglect and inattention, rather than outright assault. For the most part, this has been a direct result of the overwhelming preoccupation by policy makers, scholars, and activists with getting Annex 1 countries to agree, and then accede, to the Kyoto Protocol. In focusing on this short-term objective, the longer-term goals of the UNFCCC – especially those related to sustainable development – have tended to slip. The result has been a systematic marginalisation of the core interests of the developing countries.

While developing country governments and scholars have raised a number of specific concerns regarding the direction in which the global climate regime has evolved, these relate generally to three large categories of concerns:

- First, the principle of equity – both inter- and intra-generational – which was so central to the discussions of global climate change up until the adoption of the UNFCCC has been sidelined in the discourse since then, especially since the Kyoto agreement.
- Second, the focus of the regime has become skewed towards minimising the burden of implementation on polluter industries and countries, instead of giving priority to the vulnerabilities of the communities and countries at greatest risk and disadvantage.
- Third, the regime has now distinctly become a system for managing the global carbon trade and has lost sight of its original mandate of stabilising atmospheric greenhouse gas concentrations.

Issues of **equity and responsibility between and within generations** have been amongst the central themes in the policy as well as scholarly discussions on global climate change (see Weiss, 1989; Agarwal and Narain, 1991; Jamieson, 1992; Gadgil and Guha, 1995; Shue, 1995; Banuri and Sagar, 1999; Meyer, 1999; Baer et al., 2000; Carraro, 2000; Munasinghe, 2000). The discussion on this issue was particularly heated during the years leading up to the UNFCCC. Although it still figures as a recurrent theme in the scholarly literature, it seems to have lost its salience in the policy discourse. Indeed, equity seemed to be amongst the first causalities of the Kyoto process, where

even the pretence of some form of equity between emission reduction targets was quickly abandoned amidst the arbitrariness and global horse-trading on which the agreement was ultimately based (Reiner and Jacoby, 1997; Najam and Sagar, 1998). While intra-generational equity was always deemed a problematic notion by Northern policymakers, even the lip-service that had routinely been paid to inter-generational equity seems to have gone out of fashion.

The abandonment of the equity principle – particularly in regards to the least developed countries, and particularly in the context of the related principle of ‘common but differentiated responsibility’ – is of grave concern to the South. Indeed, the essence of the term equity has been convoluted by the U.S. Congress demanding ‘equity’ between the percentage emission cuts for Annex 1 countries and their developing country counterparts. It remains both comical and sad that in the very same breath, the U.S. is both willing and able to deny any call for equity in emissions themselves. As the desire for efficiency overwhelms both equity and responsibility the distinction between ‘luxury’ and ‘survival’ emissions is lost and any discussion of global or generational fairness becomes all but irrelevant (Agarwal and Narain, 1991).

The third assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC; see especially Working Group II report) has made it abundantly clear that even if the Kyoto Protocol is implemented in full, the impacts of global climate change will start being felt within the next few decades and that **the most vulnerable communities and countries are those which are already the poorest and least able to adapt to these changes**. The threat is especially pressing for the least developed countries (LDCs) and the small island developing countries (SIDs), where any economic development they may be able to achieve in the next few decades is in real danger of literally being swept away due to human induced climate change. In the past, climatic disasters such as floods, cyclones and droughts may have been attributable to nature alone; in the future they will definitely have a component that is human induced. More importantly, it is also clear that the contribution of these countries to the climate change problem is minuscule. The result is that those who have been least responsible for creating the crisis are most at risk from its ravages (Rayner and Malone, 1998; Banuri and Sagar, 1999).

The reconvened sixth COP at Bonn last year did agree to set up a number of funds including the Climate Change Fund (to capacity building and transfer technology) and the LDC Fund (to assist LDCs in climate change adaptation). While the intent of these funds is noble, it is difficult to place too much confidence in their potential, because: a) they are voluntary, b) they are to be managed via the still-controversial Global Environmental Facility (GEF), and c) they remain poorly funded (Huq and Sokona, 2001). Similarly, the solution proposed in the Kyoto Protocol – participation in carbon trade via the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) – is unlikely to benefit the poorest countries, which are unlikely to attract private sector funding in any case. It is more than likely that the CDM will follow the path of foreign direct investment – the much-trumpeted benefits will accrue to a handful of the larger

developing countries, leaving the bulk of the South on the side-lines of the global carbon market.

Flowing directly from the above is the concern that the so-called ‘flexibility mechanisms’ of the Kyoto Protocol have turned it into a **global carbon trade regime that has lost sight of the original mandate of the UNFCCC** – i.e. the stabilisation of atmospheric greenhouse concentrations. Significant problems with the Kyoto regime – including the issue of ‘low hanging fruit’, trades in ‘hot air’, the exclusion of poorer countries and marginal groups, and the sheer inadequacy of the Kyoto targets (Malakoff, 1997; Najam and Page, 1998; Sokona et al., 1998; Agarwal et al., 1999; Banuri and Sagar, 1999; Meyer, 1999; Banuri and Gupta, 2000) – have long been known and highlighted. These lingering concerns were tempered by the belief that despite all the holes in it, the Protocol was a step in the right direction. However, it was and remains quite clear that the problems inherent in the Protocol will need to be addressed somehow, and soon. Moreover, the concessions made in the last two COPs (especially on the issue of sinks) and the absence of the world’s largest carbon emitter from the regime have made an already inadequate agreement all the more inadequate (Najam, 2001).

Most importantly, there is a danger that Kyoto has now become so much of a mechanism for managing global carbon trade that the issue of real emission cuts has been marginalised. Without actual and meaningful emission cuts by the world’s largest polluters, the stabilisation of atmospheric concentrations will not only be more difficult, but unlikely (Malakoff, 1997). This concern is most pronounced for the most vulnerable coastal countries for which the delay in actual emissions cuts could have dire consequences – especially if the much touted flexibility mechanisms of the Kyoto Protocol fail to deliver the expected benefits of carbon trading. For the emitter countries of Annex 1, it makes full sense to pin their hopes on a successful global market in carbon trade; for low-lying LDCs, most vulnerable to climate change, the possibility of failure is both unacceptable and unimaginable.

3. Southern interests

While the South’s concerns about the climate regime have evolved as the Kyoto Protocol has taken shape, the longer-term interests of the developing countries have remained relatively unchanged over the last decade or longer. While specific (and generally shorter-term) interests of particular countries and regions vary, the key interests of the developing world as a whole can be characterised within three categories:

- The creation of a predictable, implementable and equitable architecture for combating global climate change that can stabilise atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases within a reasonable period of time, while giving all nations a clear indication of their current and future obligations based on their current and future emissions.
- Enhancing the capacities of communities and countries to combat and respond to global climate change, with

particular attention on adaptive capacity that enhances the resilience of the poorest and most vulnerable communities.

- The efforts to combat global climate change and the pursuit of sustainable development are two sides of the same coin. For either process to work, each must reinforce the other. To be at all meaningful, any global climate regime must have sustainable development as a central goal – at the declaratory as well as operational levels.

Most environmental issues require a long-term perspective. This is particularly true of climate change. The test of any climate regime is not simply what it will or will not do in the next few years, but also what it is likely to achieve over the coming decades, even centuries. Any policy architecture put into place today is likely to remain with us for a very long time (Jacoby et al., 1998). It is, therefore, very important that **the policy architecture we construct is robust enough to stand the political as well as the climatic tests of time**. The Kyoto Protocol, even though it is a step in the right direction, leaves much to be desired in terms of its implications for long-term policy; all the more troublesome since it is also unlikely to produce many short-term benefits (Cooper, 1998). Moreover, the arbitrariness of the Kyoto targets and the lack of any objective basis for their selection leaves the countries of the world – developing as well as industrialised – largely directionless on what might be expected of them in the future (Najam and Sagar, 1998).

An alternative, more robust, architecture would be one that defines its targets not in terms of symbolic short-term measures, but long-term atmospheric stabilisation; which gives all countries a clear signal on what is likely to be expected of them in the future; which is based on clear and objective principles derived directly from the UNFCCC; and which is seen to be fair and equitable by all countries, North and South. WSSD provides an opportunity to re-initiate the discussion on the larger architecture of the future climate regime. This is not to suggest an abandonment of the Kyoto Protocol; rather, this is to build on the Kyoto promise by returning to UNFCCC basics. In all likelihood this will require moving to per capita emission targets and a ‘contraction and convergence’ policy scenario aimed at atmospheric stabilisation in the post-Kyoto phase (Agarwal et al., 1999; Meyer, 1999). Such targets could be applied to all countries, North and South, thereby responding to the U.S. demand for treating all countries equally. Instead of a convoluted system of arbitrary percentage cuts for different countries, having a standard global emissions budget linked directly to the atmospheric stabilisation would not only be more elegant and equitable but also more manageable in the long-term. Indeed, such a system could be a first step towards a more meaningful clustering of related agreements around a broader regime for all issues related to the atmospheric commons (Najam, 2000).

‘Capacity building’, much like technology transfer, has been a much abused term in the rhetoric of climate policy. Both North and South reiterate by rote the importance of building capacity, yet neither has shown much willingness

to invest meaningfully in doing so (Banuri and Sagar, 1999). In introducing the twin concepts of 'adaptive' and 'mitigative' capacity (by working groups II and III, respectively) the third assessment of the IPCC (2001) has made a significant contribution to the policy discourse by outlining what types of capacities are required, by whom, when. The most pressing challenge in this regard is to **strengthen the social, economic and technical resilience of the poorest and most vulnerable against extreme climatic events**. This highlights the need to focus on issues of adaptation, especially in LDCs and SIDs where the threat of climate change is more immediate as well as more intense (Huq and Sokona, 2001). As already mentioned, COP-6 has already made a rather symbolic gesture in this direction by setting up a set of voluntary funds. WSSD would be an appropriate place for the world to put its money where its mouth is.

While the developing country interest in capacity enhancement is self-evident, the new element is our growing understanding of *where* capacity needs to be enhanced and *what* capacities need to be supported and strengthened. In short, the capacity to adapt to climatic impacts – i.e., social, economic and technical resilience – is needed most desperately where the vulnerabilities are the most pronounced; i.e., at the local and community levels (Bohle, et al., 1994; Ribot et al., 1996; Burton, 1997; Rayner and Malone, 1998; Downing and Bakker, 1999). However, effective capacity building at this level will require rethinking both *how* we do capacity building and *who* we do it with. The shift towards strengthening the social, economic and technical resilience of vulnerable local communities will come from working directly with civil society and community organisations. This will be more difficult as well as more expensive. However, the payoff of such an investment will also be higher both in terms of climate policy and in terms of sustainable development.

Sustainable development remains the pivotal interest not just for the South, but for the entire world. Indeed, as the most recent IPCC assessment (IPCC, 2001) has made clear, the supposed dichotomy between climate policy and sustainable development policy is false (also see Munasinghe, 2000). **Combating climate change is vital to the pursuit of sustainable development; equally, the pursuit of sustainable development is integral to lasting climate change mitigation.** The pursuit of sustainable development is a clearly stated goal of both the UNFCCC and the Kyoto Protocol (see, for example, the preamble and Articles 2 and 3 of UNFCCC and Articles 2 and 10 of the Kyoto Protocol). Yet there has been a clear hesitancy from those operating in the 'climate arena' to deal with sustainable development seriously. While the third assessment report of the IPCC has included a chapter linking the two, the linkage is far from integrated into the bulk of the report (IPCC, 2001). Indeed, despite much developing country impetus, the IPCC seems reluctant to pursue the links between sustainable development and climate change at any serious level.

This systematic denial of sustainable development's importance to climate policy may or may not impact the future of sustainable development but will nearly certainly adversely impact the future of the global climate regime.

Stated most simply, sustainable development is needed because it can provide the conditions in which climate policies can be best implemented (Munasinghe, 2000). It is unfortunate that sustainable development is now being portrayed as being only the South's interest. In fact, the so-called Rio compact placed sustainable development quite clearly as a common interest of all countries, developing as well as industrialised; a common interest around which related North-South bargains could then be built on other issues, including climate change. Unfortunately, this has not yet happened. However, the WSSD and the prominence it is likely to give to climate issues provides the opportunity to forcefully re-establish the link between sustainable development and climate change. Doing so will provide us the opportunity to build on the synergies of the two; not doing so will make the WSSD yet another wasted opportunity.

4. Towards a Johannesburg bargain?

Could the WSSD provide an opportunity for revitalising the global climate regime by expanding its intents and contents beyond the narrow confines of the Kyoto Protocol? Could the WSSD provide the impetus for a new Johannesburg bargain that explicitly links the goals of combating climate change with those of sustainable development, designs a new and more inclusive architecture for the climate regime, and invests in meaningful capacity development for adaptation and societal resilience in the poorest and most vulnerable communities and countries? Yes, it can. But all indications suggest that it will not.

At this point, there is no clear strategy from the South to demand and negotiate for such a bargain, and certainly no will from the North to voluntarily offer it. However, while substantive headway on such a bargain is unlikely to emerge from Johannesburg, it is both likely and desirable for the debate to begin on these issues.

Once the task of bringing the Kyoto Protocol into force is completed, we will have to start thinking immediately about what is going to follow Kyoto. Johannesburg clearly has a mandate to begin discussions about life after Kyoto. Developing country negotiators will do well to start thinking about that very question. In the past, the South has been routinely reactive in its environmental negotiations with the North (Najam, 1995). It is well past time that they change their strategy. The task of devising and putting forth proposals that match their interests lies squarely with negotiators from the South. They may not get a better opportunity than Johannesburg to do so. ●

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