

Warsaw UN Climate Talks: What is there to negotiate?

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The persistence of climate change negotiators huddled together in Warsaw from over 190 countries is laudable. Even when countries are failing to reign in their greenhouse emissions that is causing a rise in global temperatures, the negotiations keep going. This is their 19th attempt under the Conference of Parties (COP) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) which meets every year to get member countries to take action on climate change. But 'action' seems to be an elusive and a constantly receding goal.

The Warsaw gathering is not expected to lead to immediate actions that everyone is hoping for, namely collective and concrete measures, and financing to bring deep reductions in the global emissions. Instead it is expected to lay foundation for a global pact to deal with climate change beyond 2020.

Why 2020? At 2011 Durban climate conference it was agreed to establish a new global climate treaty which will set emission targets for all UNFCCC parties. This will replace the Kyoto Protocol, the first legally-binding agreement for developed nations and whose second commitment period ends in 2020. The blueprint coming out of Warsaw will be discussed at climate talks in Lima next year before a global accord is signed in Paris in 2015, and will likely to go into force in 2020. It is a long journey from Warsaw via Lima, Paris and other negotiation hotspots before we seen any substantive action to bring down emissions. To keep up the pressure, the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon will organize a global summit on climate change next September.

While concerns are being expressed about the architecture of agreement to be signed in Paris, whether it would be obligatory for all parties, and what the delivery mechanism are going to be, a lot depends on how much negotiators are able to narrow their differences in Warsaw, and raise ambition levels of member countries to take long-term action.

Why bring UN into the negotiations?

Climate change is a problem without passports. It affects everyone and yet no single country can provide all the solutions. International cooperation and collective action is inevitable to produce a climate safe pathway for the present and following generations. The UN because of its universal membership, legitimacy and convening power plays a pivotal role. It ensures that negotiations continue at the multilateral level and transparency is maintained in this increasingly complex universal problem. Avenues exist for civil society organisations to attend sessions as observers and exchange views with the delegates.

Multilateral processes can be cumbersome and slow. Each country, blocks and groups advance their interests in negotiations - trying to gain as much as possible while ceding little by building alliances, striking compromises, and introducing new submissions for deliberation. But the inclusiveness also makes the eventual outcome more effective. The breakthroughs usually happen incrementally, and require countless hours and sleepless nights during the conference of parties (COP) meetings to come up with a document that is acceptable to "all". This document then forms the basis for further negotiations and action.

Negotiations on the UN platform can be fast-tracked and action phase brought earlier if all member states demonstrate the political will to act and make reasonable compromises between national interests and collective interests, and between short-term gains and long-term advantages. Unfortunately this political will is eluding the climate change negotiations, and the pace of negotiations remain slow.

Emergence of UNFCCC and key achievements

It is 20 years since the UNFCCC came into force as one of the three "Rio Conventions" adopted at the 1992 Earth Summit. 195 countries have ratified the Convention. Its near-universal membership indicates that a consensus exists among members countries to act on climate change. The ultimate objective of the Convention is to stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations "at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic (human induced) interference with the climate system. This level should be achieved within a time-frame sufficient to allow ecosystems to adapt naturally to climate change, to ensure that food production is not threatened, and to enable economic development to proceed in a sustainable manner.

The Convention is nowhere close to achieving its main goal - to prevent "dangerous" human interference with the climate system. Between 1990 and 2012, radiative forcing or the warming effect on our climate by long-lived greenhouse gases increased by 32%, and fossil fuel-related emissions accounted for 80% of this increase. There are dire warnings that within decades world would breach the "carbon budget" needed to hold temperature rises to less than 2C above preindustrial levels.

In spite of the slow progress, UNFCCC has notched a few successes in its relatively short history. First, it succeeded in elevating climate change to the highest political level and keep the dialogue open. Negotiations have been happening every year since the coming into force of UNFCCC. Second, the Kyoto Protocol which set binding commitments on developed countries to reduce their emissions was a major victory in international diplomacy. The coming into force of Kyoto Protocol demonstrated that dialogues can transform into actions on climate change. Third, UNFCCC has retained its credibility by feeding member countries, at regular intervals, with scientific data and analysis received from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). This data is frequently used during negotiations on

long-term action and financing issues. The latest Assessment Report was on Climate Change 2007 and the Fifth Assessment Report is underway. Fourth, UNFCCC is able to resist pressures and maintain its independence. Even when the US, the bigger emitter, refused to sign the Kyoto Protocol and tried to undermine it by setting up parallel processes, the negotiations did not stall and the Kyoto Protocol came into effect in 2005. It marked a new era of global cooperation where collective interests took precedence over interests of dominant powers.

What is there to negotiate?

Even if the climate negotiations were fast-tracked to bring deep reductions in greenhouse gas emissions in a few years, the impacts of climate change will continue to affect generations to come. It is because emissions decay slowly and have been historically accumulating since the dawn of industrial revolution in the 18th century. This makes the negotiations complex as the impacts are inter-generational.

The specifics of climate negotiations may be complex but the basic issues are not difficult to comprehend and are discussed in subsequent sections. The issues which repeatedly stall the negotiations are: who should reduce emissions and by how much, should the cuts be binding for all, how much financing is needed and who should finance, and will it work?

Common But Differentiated Responsibilities

Vast quantities of fossil fuels used by developed countries to power their economies and bring affluence and consumerism are threatening lives and livelihoods of generations to come, and especially those in developing countries who have not experienced their share of growth and development. Since developed countries are responsible for bulk of historical emissions they need to undertake deep cuts in their emissions. While some developing countries are now increasing their emissions, it is important that environmental space is available to all developing countries to industrialise and accelerate to higher economic growth and development.

While all countries have to make efforts to check climate change, the responsibilities have to be common but differentiated. And those who have most responsibility for greenhouse gas emissions, and most capacity to act, must cut emissions first. This will ensure that the fundamental principles of fairness and equity are maintained. As developed countries have advanced technology and more financial resources they also have the most capacity to act.

Emission reduction : Binding or Voluntary

The climate change convention calls for legally binding commitments to reduce emissions, starting immediately from the developed countries and to be adopted after a time lag by the developing countries. Many developed countries are against mandatory and rigid targets as they fear it will hinder their

economic growth. And major developing countries have refused to adopt binding targets unless they are convinced that developed countries are meeting their obligations and support is available to developing countries during the transition period.

The approach favoured by many developed countries is to have flexibility at the national level to set their own norms and commitments instead of internationally agreed binding reduction targets. This means bringing emission reductions through pressure of public opinion and incentive to emerge as a leader in low-carbon and environment-friendly technologies.

So far both mandatory and voluntary options have failed to reduce global emissions. Either countries have kept a very low ambition under binding commitments, or have simply opted out of the commitments. Given the scale of challenge ahead, the solution may lie in pursuing both options: having binding targets but encouraging countries to go beyond them.

To mitigate or to adapt?

While actions are being debated on reducing emissions to mitigate climate change, the impacts of climate change are already being felt. Since poor people live in more environmentally fragile areas and do not have social safety nets, the impacts of climate change are felt disproportionately by developing countries. Climate change is causing loss of agricultural land and crop damage that is leading to hunger, loss of livelihoods, migration and greater stress in lives of people who have to constantly rebuild their lives.

Developing countries want to keep focus on adaptation as they see it as an enormous challenge and a drain on their resources, just when they have been able to make a dent in the poverty levels through the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Accordingly, their national climate change policies and action plans continue to be guided by their priority to eradicate poverty and promote sustainable development.

However, the initial response within the UN to climate change was on mitigation - on how to slow and eventually stop global warming. The Kyoto Protocol and IPCC reports have focused squarely on mitigation. Developed countries too have allocated greater financing and attention to mitigation issues. They believe that focusing on adaptation may mean increase emissions and dampen mitigation efforts.

The issue gets more complicated as issues such as agriculture comes under both mitigation and adaptation. While agriculture produces emissions that need to be cut, it is also a source of food and provides livelihoods to a majority of people in developing countries. Agriculture has to be viewed from an adaptation perspective to feed the growing population and protect livelihoods of people even when increase in emissions are likely by agricultural-based economies.

Developing countries also want the issue of “loss and damage” suffered as a result of the effects of climate change, to be addressed. But these have been largely excluded from the scope of the adaptation issue in the Convention. Rich countries have rejected loss and damage issues as their domestic emissions are falling while those from developing countries are rising rapidly. They have also been resistant to encourage any notion of liability of countries responsible for a significant stock of emissions in the atmosphere.

Climate justice calls for recognizing and addressing the fact that those least responsible for climate change are experiencing its greatest impacts. Large scale assistance is needed to stem their ongoing losses and simultaneously make efforts to climate proof the livelihoods and economies.

Transfer of clean technology

While developed countries polluted their way to economic development, other countries do not need to follow the same path. They can follow development paths that are less greenhouse emissions intensive, such as relying on renewable energies, making homes and building more energy efficient, adopting new technologies that cut down emissions, and modernizing their transportation sector. Given the large population of developing countries, adoption of cleaner and greener technologies can significantly reduce future greenhouse gas emissions.

But move to low-carbon economies require technologies, financial support and time. Developing countries with large proportion of their population still mired in poverty do not have the resources needed to move to this path on their own. Support has to come from developed countries to make this move happen.

Developed countries have been unwilling to provide developing countries access to technologies at affordable or concessional rates. Despite the central role technologies can play in meeting energy, transportation and consumption needs of developing countries while simultaneously limiting greenhouse emissions, there has been little progress on climate friendly technologies under the UN climate convention.

Technology transfer options have been successfully carried out under the financial mechanism of the Montreal Protocol to limit the ozone depleting substances. The largest portion of the Fund was allocated to practical interventions in various sectors including air conditioning, refrigeration, solvents, agriculture, foam and aerosols. The technology transfer was remarkably fast and resulted in switching of production facilities, technologies and products in developing countries to ozone friendly substitutes. A similar drive and political will is missing among developed countries in case of climate change.

Financing climate change

Financing is one of the most contentious issue. Unfortunately, there is no link between multilateral negotiations, agreed goals and financing that becomes available. Long term action on climate change requires predictable and adequate financing. Financing is needed to develop cleaner technologies, switch to low-emission technologies, develop energy-efficient projects, climate proof the livelihoods, manage migration and social unrest resulting from climate change, and to monitor and measure the impact of efforts being taken.

At the 2009 climate talks in Copenhagen developed countries agreed to work towards mobilizing US\$ 100 billion per year by 2020 to assist developing countries in adaptation and mitigation. A “Fast-Start Finance Fund” was established as a step towards meeting this target from public and private sources by 2020. Between 2010 and 2012, major developed countries contributed \$30 billion this Fund, including \$2.5 billion annually from the United States. Firm commitments of funding for the period from 2013 to 2020 are not forthcoming.

Developing countries demand that this gap be filled up, with a benchmark of \$60 billion by 2015, and a work plan put into motion on how to meet the commitment of \$100 billion per year by 2020. Developing countries also want priority to be given to funding for adaptation. But developed countries prefer financing for mitigation over adaption. Adaptation accounted for less than 25% of financing under the fast-track fund whereas 67% was for mitigation.

Developing countries want climate funds being made available to follow the procedures listed in the Climate Convention. The funds should have national ownership and be channelled through the nationally designated authority to ensure alignment with national priorities. Furthermore, a structured mechanism for monitoring public flows of funds from developed countries is needed to ensure greater accountability, and that the funds are additional and are not double-counted. Climate financing under the Convention is not about development financing, and any climate change related aid should not be counted as commitment under the Convention.

Developed countries give more emphasis to private sector financing. But private sector financing has limitations and its priorities may differ. The private sector may not be interested in financing the immediate adaptation needs of climate-vulnerable countries. Developed countries can bring in public funds if they rally behind the climate change cause. For instance, the EU extended a €100 billion rescue line of credit for Spanish banks this year to rescue Spain's stricken banking sector. Developed countries can surely do better than that for the climate sector.

From “Applicable to All” to “Acted Upon by All”

As the Warsaw negotiations move to the Ministerial phase, countries have to show urgency in tackling the climate issue. Historical responsibilities, differences in capacities to act, and issue of equity and climate justice mean that the responsibilities have to be “common but differentiated” so that the climate negotiations do not roll back the development dividends from other UN-led initiatives, including the MDGs.

We have to move from “applicable to all” situation to come up with a global accord which can be “ratified by all” and then “acted upon by all”. So far, UNFCCC has been successful in keeping the multilateral process alive and in keeping climate change on the international cooperation agenda. What is missing is the soul of the negotiations namely genuine political will, actionable commitments, and financing which can match the scale of the challenge ahead. A lot rests on the shoulders of the negotiators in Warsaw to make this happen.

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(The article is written in his personal capacity).