

Email Subject line: SouthViews: Comment on IPCC's Final Climate Report

SouthViews

No. 114, 10 November 2014

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Comment on IPCC's Final Climate Report

By Martin Khor

The IPCC's final report, known as the Synthesis Report, indicates the world is doomed if present climate and emission trends continue, but the key solutions are as elusive as before.

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Imagine our world getting more and more polluted, and little space left for the Earth to absorb more pollutants before all kinds of disasters take place.

And imagine that we have not yet found the solutions to really slow down the emissions or to prevent the catastrophe that lies ahead.

This look into our scary future was evident at the recent meeting in Copenhagen to finalise the last climate change report of the IPCC (inter-governmental panel on climate change).

The IPCC produces the most comprehensive reports on the state of climate change. Over a thousand scientists came together to produce three huge reports on science, adaptation and mitigation.

And then a synthesis report was finalised at the Copenhagen meeting, with hundreds of government representatives going over, debating and finally approving a "summary for policymakers" (SPM) together with the authors.

The synthesis report and its SPM make very interesting reading. You can find information on the damage that climate change has already caused, and the many more harms that lie ahead.

But the most interesting scientific picture is found between the lines. The report reveals that between 1750 and 2011, cumulative anthropogenic (human-induced) carbon dioxide emissions to the atmosphere were 2,040 giga tonnes (one giga tonne, or Gton, equals a billion tonnes).

About 40% of these emissions, or 880 Gton of CO₂, have remained in the atmosphere. The rest was stored on land (in plants and soils) and in the ocean. The ocean has absorbed about 30% of the CO₂, causing acidification of the seas.

Emissions have continued to increase in recent decades, reaching a 2010 level of around 49 Gton of CO₂ equivalent.

Total CO₂ emissions since 1870 have to remain below about 2900 Gton, if global warming is to be kept at less than 2°C (relative to the period 1861-1880) with a probability of over 66%. However, about 1,900 Gton of CO₂ has already been emitted by 2011.

From the above figures in the IPCC synthesis report, you can do the simple maths, and it's frightening.

If total emissions since 1870 till now and the future have to be kept at 2,900 Gton, and 1,900 Gton have already been emitted, then there is "space" for only 1,000 Gton of CO₂ to be emitted from now to the future.

But the IPCC report also says that in 2011, the emission level was 49 Gton of CO₂ equivalent.

Thus, in 20 to 25 years, if the current rate of emissions continues, the ability of the Earth to absorb the gases (within the limit of keeping warming below 2°C) would have been exhausted.

Even at this scenario of 2° warming there would be widespread and serious damage, with a rise of extreme weather events. With more warming, say 3°C, it would be catastrophic.

While the IPCC synthesis report is rich in scientific data and with scenarios drawn from computer models, it is unfortunately very thin on how to achieve the global solutions.

It does assess the technologies and physical changes needed to reduce emissions in various sectors. It also gives estimates of the economic costs needed to make mitigation work.

But it is shy about even hinting at the kind of global deal that is needed to get both developed and developing countries to seriously take actions.

At the negotiations in the United Nations climate convention, the developing countries have long made the point that they require funding and technology to support policies that shift their economic growth towards environmentally sustainable pathways.

The climate-related actions they take should blend with their continued development, and not be at the expense of development.

The synthesis report hardly deals with the key issues of finance and technology for developing countries. Indeed, there were attempts by some developed countries to even strike out the term "technology transfer" from the report's summary. It took quite a battle by several developing countries to re-insert that term.

The North-South tangle was most evident in a working group to draw up a box in the report on the key relevant messages to be transmitted by the IPCC to the climate convention and its negotiators.

The draft by the IPCC authors was filled with data and required mitigation pathways, but developing countries' delegates complained that there was almost total absence of any mention on sustainable development, finance, technology and adaptation.

After days of discussion, the scientists finally agreed to include a paragraph on sustainable development and a few lines mentioning financing, technology transfer and adaptation.

However, when the new draft was brought to the plenary, whose closing had to be postponed for a full day, it was rejected by several developed countries.

Thus, the IPCC's final report is missing on what was to have been its most important message – the box on IPCC's relevant findings for the climate convention.

My conclusion is that the science of climate change has made progress in showing why we have to act, but that getting action agreed to as a community of nations and people is still a long way off.

The next conference of the climate convention will be in Peru at the end of this month. Hopefully, some progress will be made there on the much-needed action.

Author: Martin Khor is the Executive Director of the South Centre. Contact: director@southcentre.int.

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For more information, please contact Vicente Paolo Yu of the South Centre: Email yu@southcentre.int, or telephone +41 22 791 80 50.