

South Views

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Unhappy first week at COP18; uncertainty over the final outcome

At the mid-way point in the UN Climate Conference in Doha, the situation is looking unhappy as there are battles (mainly between North and South) that are in deadlock, and the outcome at the end of next week is very incertain.

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By Martin Khor, Executive Director, South Centre

A big battle is taking place at the UN climate conference in Doha. In the first week of the two-week meeting, the developed countries have made it clear they want to close down the working group that has been the main negotiating forum on climate change actions without its having completed its work.

Moreover, the other main group, which negotiates on the Kyoto Protocol, made little progress. While developing countries are adamant that the remaining developed-country Parties in this protocol commit to ambitious emissions cuts, the latter are sticking to very low targets and with uncertainty on how legally binding the KP outcome will be.

Midway through this year's Conference of Parties of the UN Framework Climate Convention (UNFCCC), the battle lines seem to have hardened, and the outcome on the final day on 7 December is very uncertain.

The diplomatic deadlock contrasts with the planet's urgent need to maintain its climatic balance. The damaging effects of climate change are already being felt when the rise of the average global temperature is 0.8 degrees Celsius (compared to the pre-industrial period), yet the world is on a road to a 4 degree rise or more by the end of this century. The scenarios for such a rise are catastrophic.

At the heart of the battles at the UNFCCC are the differences among Parties on what is a fair and equitable sharing of the obligations and burden of mitigation (changing policies to curb emissions), and adaptation (spending money to cope with the effects of climate change).

At the start of the Doha conference last week, most developing countries made it clear their priority was to entrench the second commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol (KP) and to complete the work of the group on long-term cooperative action (LCA).

They laid down what needs to be done under the KP – to get commitments from developed countries to cut emissions deeply (40% or more by 2020 compared to 1990), and to get this started on 1 January 2013 for the next five or eight years.

Developed countries that have left the KP or its second commitment period cannot take advantage of the "flexibility mechanisms", such as paying other countries to reduce their emissions on their behalf, instead of taking their own domestic action.

The G77 and China, representing all developing countries, stated that the second commitment period must be ambitious and begin with effect from 1 January 2013 without any gap between the first and second periods and with the adoption of ratifiable amendments to the KP, to make it legally binding.

For the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), the overarching issue to be addressed in Doha is the ambition of Annex I Party commitments. However, many of the targets presented by developed countries were “plainly inadequate and inconsistent with pathways to the agreed global goal (of 2 degrees).

“The KP must not be an exercise in creative accounting, or a public relations exercise; commitments must be real and they must deliver effective emission reductions,” said the AOSIS.

It was gravely disappointed by developed countries that claim to be "helping" the process move forward, but are actually retreating from their KP commitments, or declining to take legally binding commitments under the KP's second period in the guise of freeing themselves for a future agreement we do not yet have. This is an abdication of responsibility owed to the international community, said AOSIS.

The Philippines, speaking for 24 developing countries, called on the developed countries in the KP to commit to cutting their emissions by at least 40-50% below 1990 levels by 2020 and at least 25-40% by 2017.

Currently, the ambition levels pledged are very low. Also, the other developed countries that are not in the KP or its second commitment period must undertake reduction commitments under the UNFCCC that are comparable. According to the 24 developing countries, “Those developed countries outside the Kyoto Protocol or opting out should not get away with low emission cut targets. It is this comparability that would ensure environmental integrity”.

The European Union, which contains most of the developed countries still active in the KP, said it would immediately apply the second commitment period, regardless of the timing of ratification. However, it also said that there were outstanding issues.

The developing countries view the EU's offer of 20% cut by 2020 as too low, especially because many countries are already within reach of this target, and the purchase of “offsets” from developing countries reduces further the real effort the Europeans have to make.

However, the much bigger problem is from the other developed countries that either won't join the KP or its second commitment period, and last week New Zealand announced it would join this group, together with the US, Canada, Japan, and Russia.

These countries should not be able to just get away with abandoning the KP, because a sub-paragraph in the Bali Action Plan under the UNFCCC implies that developed countries that are not in the KP have to do a “comparable” effort to those in the KP.

If this principle is to apply, then all the non-KP developed countries have to undertake obligations similar to the EU. They are meant to make their commitments under the Convention (which all are members of) through a decision of the LCA group.

This clause, together with the principle that developed countries have to undertake stronger mitigation commitments than developing countries (there is a clear distinction between the legally binding commitments of developed countries and the mitigation actions of developing countries supported by finance and technology), is the main reason why the US is leading other developed countries to shut down the LCA working group that negotiates the Bali Action Plan, without even allowing the Doha Conference to adopt new decisions on unfinished issues.

Other principles agreed to in the launch of the Bali Action Plan (which the LCA group has been negotiating) are that the financing of developing countries' actions by developed countries and the transfer of technology would be operationalized; and that adaptation actions by developing countries would be given priority and also operationalized.

In the four years of negotiations of the LCA group, the developing countries have also highlighted the issues of equity, the adverse effects of unilateral trade measures, and the potentially negative effects of intellectual property on technology transfer.

On a long-term global goal for emission reduction, many developing countries have argued strongly that numbers attached to such a goal should be accompanied by a framework for equitable sharing of responsibilities between developed and developing countries. These countries argue that when this major issue is to be transferred to another body after the LCA group closes, this transfer should be together with the context and framework of equity that has been brought up.

Because of the clear principles in the Bali Action Plan (that reflect those in the UNFCCC) and the complexities of the contexts surrounding the key issues, it would appear that some of the developed countries (if not all) would like an early or even premature closure of the LCA group before it can wrap up its work or arrange for a proper transfer of outstanding issues to other bodies.

“If you are adamant in doing away with the life in the body, at least make sure there is a proper allocation of its property and continuity of its heritage, and then give it a proper burial” seems to be a popular refrain of the developing countries about the LCA group in the corridors. After all, when the Bali Action Plan and Bali Road Map (i.e. the Bali Action Plan together with the plan for the Kyoto Protocol second period) were launched in December 2007 in Bali, they were hailed as the newest and brightest stars of the global climate change regime, and they should not be unceremoniously ushered out without a proper conclusion of their work.

Last week at the Doha meetings, the developed countries aggressively attacked an attempt by the Chair of the LCA group, Aysar Tayeb, to suggest how to carry forward the important unresolved issues of the group before it disbands.

He provided a paper containing suggested texts of decisions on issues including mitigation of developed countries (and comparable emission reduction targets among them); technology transfer (including the effects of intellectual property rights); several issues on finance for developing countries; unilateral trade measures using climate change as a reason.

Many developing countries appreciated the Chair’s paper and wanted it to be the basis for negotiations. But the developed countries, led by the US, were hostile, claiming there was no need for any further work in the LCA, which should close down.

The hostility turned to aggression and rudeness in a session on technology. The developed countries (including the US, Japan, EU) refused to discuss the substance of the Chair’s paper. Instead they challenged the procedure of the Chair producing texts when there was no agreement. The US view seemed to be that if there is no agreement on an issue, it should be dropped off.

The developing countries on the other hand insisted that an important issue should continue to be discussed if there are no agreed conclusions yet. And they considered technology transfer is crucial for their climate actions.

There is also deadlock in finance, an issue which is of central importance, since the developed countries had agreed to finance climate actions in developing countries, and to mobilise \$100 billion a year by 2020.

Last week, the G77 and China proposed that developed countries make available new funds of \$60 billion by 2015 and that most of it should be from public sources. It explained that the \$100 billion promise was for 2020. But funds should be guaranteed from 2013 to 2020.

It added that the new Green Climate Fund remains an “empty shell” without money in it and that even \$60 billion being targeted is puny compared to what is needed.

In response, the United States said the G77 and China proposal was not relevant. Though finance is important, all the issues had already been settled and there was no need for any decision to be taken in Doha. This was supported by Canada, Japan, Russia and the EU.

AOSIS in contrast said a decision and the need for clarity on the post-2012 finance will “make or break” this Conference. And the least developed countries said financing should be sustainable and predictable. “The AWG-LCA must be closed in a manner that does not leave our people in danger,” they said.

The situation at the end of Week One in Doha is thus bleak. The emission reduction targets of developed countries are low, the Kyoto Protocol process is in trouble, yet the developed countries are still blocking proposals from developing countries in the LCA group., while not wanting to commit anything of substance in finance or technology transfer.

The frustration is building up among the developing countries. Unless there is a turnaround in Week Two, which is unlikely, the UN Climate Conference may end with a very weak outcome or even without agreement on crucial areas.

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