

Climate Change and Sustainable Development Beyond Kyoto

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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. Southern concerns

The original UNFCCC was not exactly viewed as a great victory by the developing countries. Since then, the climate regime has become even less sympathetic to the concerns of the South. 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.

Significant problems with the Kyoto regime have long been known and highlighted. These lingering concerns were tempered by the belief that despite

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 its stated goals regarding sustainable development.
- 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.



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.

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. 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.

2. 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:

1. 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.

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. 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.

2. 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 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. 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.

3. 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.

Combating climate change is vital to the pursuit of sustainable development; equally, the pursuit of sustainable development is integral to lasting climate change mitigation. Yet there has been a clear hesitancy from those operating in the 'climate arena' to deal with sustainable development seriously. 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.

3. 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. 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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