

Introduction

Climate change is definitely the biggest story of the 21st century. But its sheer complexity and urgency is defeating us

For the past 19 years – the first intergovernmental negotiation took place in Washington, DC, USA in early 1991 – the world has been haggling about what it knows but doesn't accept. It has been desperately seeking every excuse not to act, even as science has confirmed and reconfirmed that climate change is real: it is related to carbon dioxide and other emissions, in turn related to economic growth and wealth in the world. In other words, it is human-made and can devastate the world as we know it.

We all know today the threat of climate change is urgent. We know combating this threat will require deep and drastic cuts in greenhouse gas emissions. The question before the world is: how to recommit the industrialised world to serious reduction in its emissions?

We also know the poor are feeling the pain of a changing climate – increased variations in rainfall, intensities of tropical cyclones; in many ways, they are more vulnerable and less able to cope with daily survival. Emerging economies (at whom fingers are pointed for their growth and emissions) have already agreed at Bali to take on national actions for mitigation. But it will cost: that is the nub of the matter.

Therefore, will the rich world, responsible for the stock of emissions already in the common atmosphere, find the resources to pay the victims of its economic excesses? Will it find the resources to pay for the much-needed transition to low carbon economies? The issues are clear. But the answers are lost in prevarication and pretence.

International negotiations on climate change, to put it politely, stink. The mood is mean and belligerent. But it is not because of the unwillingness of the poor or the emerging rich that negotiations are deadlocked. It is because the industrialised world has still not learnt the first lesson of climate change – to share atmospheric space so growth can be shared equally. But this will require political sagacity, leadership and courage. Global warming is possibly the biggest and most difficult economic and political issue the world has ever needed to confront.

RELATED TO ECONOMIC GROWTH

The reason is simple: climate change is related to economic growth. It is, as is famously said, the 'market's biggest failure'. In spite of years of protracted negotiations and targets set under the Kyoto Protocol, no country has been able to de-link economic growth from the growth of emissions. No country has shown how to build a low carbon economy, as yet.

The inconvenient truth is not that climate change is real, but that climate change is about sharing that growth between nations and people. The rich must reduce so that the poor can grow. It is about creating ecological space; it is about cooperation. Climate change teaches us more than anything else that the world is one; if the rich world pumped in excessive quantities of carbon dioxide yesterday, the emerging rich world will do today. But cooperation is not possible without equity and fairness. It is a pre-requisite for an effective climate agreement.

SCIENCE IS CERTAIN BUT NOT SIMPLE

Science is not just certain but 'unequivocal' about climate change; devastation is now inevitable. The only question is if we can avoid catastrophic changes. But along with the still-obtuse science, we must also see climate change in the faces of the millions who lost their homes in the Alia, Sidr or Nargis tropical cyclones which ripped through India, Bangladesh and Myanmar in the last three years. Thousands have died because the rich have failed to contain the emissions they think necessary for their growth.

Climate complexity is at the edge of chaos here. We will never be able to predict with certainty, or correlate directly events we see around us and this now inevitable warming of our planet. But in a still unequal world, prevarication and denial will be the name of the game. This is the real context to the Copenhagen meeting: the science is certain but the politics stinks.

SHARED VISION

There cannot be a vision of how the world will combat climate change without sharing the common atmospheric resources. Equity is the first pre-requisite for an effective climate agreement. So, the world must accept equal per capita emission entitlements so that the rich reduce and the poor do not go beyond their climate quota.

The facts are clear. Between 1990 and 2006, carbon dioxide emissions of the industrialised rich countries (Annex I, without the economies in transition) have increased by 14.5 per cent. This is unacceptable. The shared vision must force rich countries to take hard and binding interim targets for emission reduction. Accepting a long-term target (2050) based on a shifting baseline year is a self-goal that the world cannot afford.

MITIGATION

Between 1980 and 2005, the total emissions of the US were almost double that of China and more than seven times that of India. In per capita terms, such injustice is even more unacceptable, indeed immoral. We have seen no real change, none that we can believe in.

The developing world is not running away from its global responsibilities. It knows that it must find low carbon growth strategies without compromising on its right to develop. And it also knows that this can be done. Countries like India and China provide the world the opportunity to 'avoid' additional emissions, for they are still in the process of building energy, transport or industrial infrastructure. We can invest in leapfrog technologies to 'avoid' pollution. Build cities on public transport. Predicate energy security on local and distributed systems – from biofuels to renewable – using the most energy- and pollution-efficient technologies.

But technologies for energy efficiency and transition to low carbon futures are costly. It is not as if China and India are hell-bent on first investing in dirty technologies. We invest in these, as the now rich world did: first add to emissions, make money; then invest in efficiency. This pathway can change. But the world must give real change. Change we can believe in.

ENERGY IS THE KEY

This, then, is the challenge. After years of talk, the proportion of new renewable energy – wind, solar, geothermal, biofuels – comprises just about 1 per cent of the world's primary energy supply. It is misleading to say renewable sources add more electricity than nuclear power. It is an old renewable – hydroelectric power – which makes the world light up.

What is tragic is the world is hiding behind the poverty of its people to fudge climate maths. The renewable sector is made up of biomass combustion: cowdung or leaves and twigs used by the desperately poor in our world to cook food and to light homes, providing the world space to breathe. So let's stop the boast and take up the challenge.

THE AGENDA

Deep and drastic emission reduction targets for the developed world: we suggest 40 per cent reduction over 1990 levels by 2020. Developing countries must agree on national mitigation actions: what these will be, what they will require in terms of finance and technology transfer.

Such actions to be paid, not through a convoluted, cheap and corrupt mechanism like CDM, but through a rights-based mechanism. We set up a global trading system based on equal per capita entitlements, or agree on a carbon tax on the developed world, so that the fund can pay for national actions to mitigate emissions, including avoiding emissions from deforestation.

Agree on the fund for adaptation, based not on charity, but the right to development of the poor and the victims of climate change. The world, that has spent US \$11.9 trillion to bail out its banks and industry, cannot find ways to compensate the victims of its excesses? Unacceptable.

Sunita Narain