

The Road Ahead: Paris 2015

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Post Warsaw 2013

The recently concluded 19th yearly Conference of Parties (COP19) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) held in Warsaw, Poland was originally scheduled from 11 Nov to 22 Nov 2013. The two-week conference was however extended by 1 day after some participants worked through 30-hour marathon meetings to reach last-minute deals. The outcome was the agreement on the broad outlines of a proposed system for pledging emission cuts and a new treaty mechanism to address the effects of global warming due to human activities.

Given the great diversity of needs of the different countries, commercial entities, non-government organisations, green activists and other interest groups, the 10,000 participants from 200 nations took home with different degree of satisfaction, disappointment and frustration. During talks about "Loss and Damage", representatives of the UN Group of 77, a loose coalition of developing countries walked out after the EU, Australia, the US and other developed countries insisted that the question of who should pay compensation for extreme climate events be discussed only after 2015.

Making matters worse, Australia and Japan who had committed to make meaningful reduction in carbon emissions at the COP18 last year decided to back-paddle this year. In the case of Australia, media reports alluded that Australian negotiators at the conference from the newly elected pro-coal government headed by Prime Minister, Tony Abbott took on hard-line stand and being non-constructive on various proposals. Japan reneged on its earlier pledge due to the impacts of the earthquake and tsunami.

Road Bumps Ahead

Although the participants agreed on a roadmap for a new climate agreement and on fundamental aspects of financing climate actions, there are still several road blocks to navigate before the UN Climate Change Conference in Paris in 2015:

Loss and Damage

This issue is a contentious one as it is generally understood as the range of damages and losses suffered by developing countries that are particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change. The accountability is make complex for two key reasons. Firstly, climate change is not a function of current emissions but of concentrations resulting from accumulation of emissions over the years. Although the US, EU, Japan, Canada, Australia and other developed nations were responsible for the bulk of the past emissions; developing countries such as China, India and Brazil have over the past 10 years become major emitters with China surpassing the US as the top country for carbon emissions. With emissions from developed nations hovering around past levels and exponential growth in emission by developing countries, the US has rejected the whole concept, calling it "blame and liability".

While the parties agreed to create a Warsaw International Mechanism to address the issue, agreement on the details of the mechanism will have to wait till after 2015.

Cutting Emissions

One of the key agendas of the talks in Warsaw was aimed at building momentum for a global deal to come into force in 2020 on cutting emissions.

Besides Australia and Japan that have receded on from their commitments at COP18 (Doha) in 2012, conflicts between developed and developing nations surfaced again as in

all yearly climate talks. Major disagreements over the word "commitment" were raised and as a compromise, "contribution" was used instead. With this agreement, the participants were supposed to back to their respective countries to "initiate" or "intensify" domestic preparation for their nationally determined "contributions" to the new deal that might emerged in Paris in 2015, the text of the agreement was clear that whatever each country off, this will be "without prejudice to the legal nature of the contribution".

To many, it is obvious that the participants at the conference has settled on the importance of cutting emission as essentially a voluntary role (contribution) for nations as opposed to the obligation that arises from a commitment.

Finance

Although the Warsaw meeting resulted in announcements of forthcoming contributions of public climate finance from developed nations such as the UK, EU, US, Japan, South Korea, etc; concerns were raised by developing nations on the time line and criteria. These concerns were valid as the question of when and how developed countries will meet the commitments they made in COP15, Copenhagen in 2009 to deliver US\$100 Billion per year of financial assistance to developing countries in 2020 to help with mitigation and adaptation has seen little progress on this front.

Moving Forward

While there have been a number of stalemate and back-tracking of positions at the climate talks in Warsaw, one major positive development was in addressing deforestation in developing nations. The "REDD" track (Reduce Emissions from Deforestation and Forest degradation" was negotiated for several years but the COP19 adopted REDD+. Under this enhanced REDD, clear rules were established for developing countries to receive financial assistance for protecting forests. Other than the pledge of US\$ 280 Million by the US, UK, Norway and Germany in the World Bank Biocarbon Fund, the scheme was formulated based on a result-based system before any country can get the financial assistance.

As forest and vegetation are carbon sinks to absorb some part of the annual carbon emissions, deforestation contributes to the effects of global warming. Hence, the REDD+ is definitely a positive development in the mitigation efforts by the UNFCCC in its fight to avoid a 2-degree global average temperature increase.

Although it is easy and convenient to blame the UNFCCC for being ineffective and incapable of getting countries to close the gap between the threats of global warming and the political objectives of some major members that have stalled concrete outcome for more than twenty years of negotiation, it must be recognised that the diversity in needs of the 200 nations will not be easily addressed.

The increase in public awareness of the threat of global warming and the demand for collective action will hopefully help cover up the major potholes along the way to Paris in 2015.

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