

The Long Road to Paris 2015

Sherman Tan, PMP

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The Summit Delivered?

The 1-day UN Climate Summit held in New York on 23 Sep 2014 concluded with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon declaring, "I asked for bold announcements from governments, business, finance and civil society in five key areas. The summit delivered".

So what happened at the 69th UN Assembly that was attended by over 120 world leaders to discuss topics on climate change?

Although President Obama attended the summit, noticeably absent was Australia Prime Minister, Tony Abbott who had been criticized by various green movements and NGOs for his party's unwinding of the Carbon Tax legislation in Jul this year and India's President, Modi, whose country is one of the largest carbon emitters besides US and China. At the summit, President Obama called for large polluters including China to lead in the reduction of carbon emission. While the US president did not offer new emission targets for his country, he updated that the US would meet its target of reducing carbon emissions in the range of 17% below 2005 levels by 2020.

The Chinese government represented by its Vice Premier, Zhang Gaoli has for the first time, announced that China would set an emissions target, aiming to reduce its emissions of carbon per unit of GDP by 45 per cent by 2020, compared with 2005 levels.

This contrast greatly to Australia's intention to stick with its low target of 5 per cent reduction of GHG by 2020 as Australia, according to its Foreign Affairs Minister, Julie Bishop told members that the target was an ambitious one considering that Australia was responsible for only 1.5% of the world's GHG emission. Her revelation was met with criticism from Pa Ousman Jarju, Gambia's Climate Change Minister, who represents the 54 least developed nations at UN climate talks. Responding to the Climate Change Analysis website later, he said ""What the Foreign Minister said was as good as not coming. It's nothing ... as good as not attending."

On the other hand, India, one of the world's largest GHG polluters still considered itself a developing nation and maintained its stand that it would not be committing to any emission targets.

On funding issues, the Green Climate Fund that was set up in 2010 with contribution from developed nations to help developing countries in adaptation and mitigation practices to counter climate change was far from its original goal of US\$15B for 2014. Four years on, the Green Fund registered only US\$2.3B after including US\$1.3B that was pledged at the summit is no way near its revised US\$10B target.

More Convincing Needed?

In South-east Asia, solutions to the annual haze situation continues to be evasive despite its impact on public health, tourism, businesses, schools, and air traffic; and the recent ratification by the Indonesia government of the 2002 ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution. Headlines screaming "Up to 216M threatened by rising sea levels", reported in a new study released by Climate Central and 3 separate studies confirming that the savage heatwaves that struck Australia in 2013 were almost certainly a direct consequence of GHG released by human activities do not seem to add any weight or help in the progress of the various climate talks and negotiations.

In Jul, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration announced that the globe is on a hot streak after setting the highest monthly record twice in a row in May and Jun this year. In Jun, the average global temperature was 16.2 deg C (61.2 deg F) which was 1.3 degrees higher than the 20th century average. Moreover, it beats 2010's old record by 1/12 of a degree. While some may criticize that 1/12 of a degree is minuscule; in temperature records, it is like winning a horse race by several lengths.

Despite these physical evidences that are constantly emerging, climate change critics and global warming deniers are continuing to challenge the methodologies used, discrediting the various studies and putting forth various forms of conspiracy theories.

At the recent UN summit, Leonardo DiCaprio, the recently appointed United Nation's Messenger of Peace recalled a claim made more than 20 years ago by another Hollywood star, Robert Redford, when he said, on global warming, that it was "time to stop researching and to start acting". Apparently, this statement prompted Richard Lindzen, the physicist and climate-change sceptic to acknowledge that it seemed "a reasonable suggestion for an actor to make".

Climate change is a global issue and would the efforts of individual countries acting alone lead to any effective outcome? Acting must indeed be carried out in concerted efforts.

Paving the Way

The collapse of the climate talks in Copenhagen (2009) continued to haunt the progress of climate talks held subsequently. Even at this summit, developing nations spoke of an "erosion of trust" that richer countries would do enough to slash emissions. One of the common frustrations faced by developing countries being that they continued to suffer the most from the adverse impact of climate change even though from a historical perspective, these countries are the least responsible for climate change. Another common theme that emerged frequently is that developing countries would not be able to commit to reducing carbon emissions without substantial financial assistance from developed countries.

David Waskow, head of WRI's International Climate Initiative reportedly told Inter Press Service (IPS) that persisting with such line of arguments could lead to a "zero-sum" game. However, "one of the things that was heard frequently (at the summit) was the recognition that climate action and economic growth and development can go hand in hand." Historical responsibility is a concern, he said, but it should not stop poor countries from recognising that "there are paths forward on climate action that can in fact be beneficial for development."

For the 2015 Paris agreement to succeed, the 20th Yearly Conference of Parties (COP20) President and Peruvian Environmental Minister Manuel Pulgar-Vidal said at a press conference that negotiators will need a "clear, focused and strong draft agreement" by the end of the UN's climate change conference (COP20) in Lima this December". Major economies will need to come forward by Mar 2015 with their proposed contributions to the Paris framework.

The writer is the Principal Consultant & Director at Innovar Pte Ltd (www.innovar.com.sg). He can be contacted at office@innovar.com.sg.