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COP-15: A Step Forward or a Step Backward?

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The Accord adopted at the Copenhagen Climate Change summit has done little to advance global efforts on dealing with the impact of climate change. It does little to meet ASEAN expectations or ensure that the region's peoples are made less vulnerable. As negotiations move ever slowly forward, ASEAN must strengthen itself as a coherent negotiating bloc.

THE COPENHAGEN Climate Change Conference has come and gone. The outcome is disappointing to say the least, but not surprising. Under the terms of the 2007 Bali Roadmap, the Copenhagen meeting was supposed to adopt emission reduction targets for industrialised countries for a second commitment period after 2012. It was also supposed to agree on longer term cooperative action on a range of issues including mitigation, adaptation, technology development and transfer, and financial resources to support developing countries' efforts.

By the middle of 2009, however, it was clear that there was not going to be any binding agreement at Copenhagen. UNFCCC Executive Secretary Yvo de Boer took the line that he would happy to get general agreement on four issues - how much industrialised countries were willing to reduce their emissions; what major developing countries such as China and India were willing to do to limit the growth of their emissions; how help for developing countries to adapt to the impacts of climate change would be financed; and how that money would be managed.

In the end, the best that thousands of delegates at Copenhagen could manage was a short and rather garbled political statement – the Copenhagen Accord – hammered out as a compromise by a small number of countries behind closed doors. Even then the absence of a last-minute consensus means that this can only be 'noted' in the conference report.

What did ASEAN want?

ASEAN has called for international climate agreements that are fair and equitable, embody the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR), focus on adaptation as well as mitigation and maintain the distinction between developed and developing countries. Member states

opposed the negotiation of an entirely new agreement, preferring an amended Kyoto Protocol, amid concerns that any new agreement would put the issue of binding targets for developing countries back on the table.

In the *ASEAN Joint Statement to COP15* adopted at the ASEAN Summit in October, member states called for industrialised countries to take deeper and earlier cuts in their greenhouse emissions; to reaffirm their commitment to providing technology, financing and capacity building support to developing countries; and to ensure that any unilateral measures did not negatively affect the sustainable economic and social development of developing countries. Several specific issues were also part of the ASEAN negotiating position.

On REDD – Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries, ASEAN called for as much flexibility as possible in policy and mechanisms so that countries could choose the best REDD mix in line with their capacity and economic circumstances. ASEAN governments also wanted any agreement at Copenhagen to pay greater attention to integrated coastal and ocean management as a climate change adaptation strategy (a follow up to the World Ocean Conference hosted by Indonesia in May 2009). And on funding, ASEAN called for financial contributions for mitigation and adaptation to be set at 0.5-1 per cent of developed countries' gross domestic product, with a considerable proportion of that coming from governments themselves.

The Copenhagen Accord

First, the (possibly) good news. The Accord still talks about 'common but differentiated responsibilities' and distinguishes between developed and developing countries. Without this, China would never have agreed to the Accord and there would have been no compromise agreement at all. The Accord also raises expectations about new and additional resources to support adaptation and mitigation in developing countries. The sums seem substantial: USD100 billion a year by 2020 and something 'approaching' USD30 billion by 2010-2012. But these are promises only and as funds can come from private and investment sources as loans rather than foreign aid, governments are somewhat let off the hook.

The Accord announces the establishment of a Copenhagen Green Climate Fund and a Technology Mechanism but it is unclear how these will relate to existing processes such as the Kyoto Protocol's Clean Development Mechanism or Adaptation Fund. REDD is addressed specifically in both the Accord and a separate Conference decision, with calls for positive incentives to mobilise financial resources so that developing countries can reduce their emissions from deforestation and forest degradation.

And the bad news? There are no really meaningful numbers in the Accord even though most leading emitters had announced their pledges in advance of the COP. It agrees that deep cuts are required to hold the increase in average global temperature to less than 2 degrees Celsius (many developing countries had fought for 1.5 degrees). But it says only that countries 'should cooperate' to get to the stage of 'peaking' emissions as soon as possible. A goal of an 80% reduction in emissions by 2050 was dropped. Developed countries are expected to report their 2020 targets to the Secretariat by the end of January 2010 but can choose their own baseline rather than being tied to the Kyoto Protocol's 1990 baseline.

Developing countries are also expected to submit Nationally Appropriate Mitigation Action (or NAMAs). If they want international support for these, then they must submit to international measurement, reporting and verification (MRV). Despite various references to the needs of the most vulnerable developing countries, the COP has done little to guarantee emissions reductions, effective mitigation or wide-ranging support for adaptation. For millions of people in Southeast Asia, the impacts of climate change on food and water security, health, safety from flooding, coastal inundation

and extreme weather events, are immediate. Copenhagen will do little for them or for their security.

Just one more ‘first’ step?

Despite the general weakness of the Accord, world leaders have been quoted as calling the COP a first step (German Chancellor Angela Merkel), a good first step (UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown), a positive step (Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi), a significant step (UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon) and a ‘breakthrough’ (US President Obama). This is spin. It is 17 years since governments adopted the UNFCCC in which all countries promised to work together to prevent dangerous human-induced interference in the climate system. Industrialised countries promised to take the lead in reducing their emissions and providing financial support for mitigation and adaptation. It is more than a decade since the adoption of the Kyoto Protocol with disagreement rife on whether industrialised countries will meet by 2012 the modest reduction targets that they agreed to in 1997.

Official responses from within the region have been mixed. The Philippine delegation welcomed the agreement. Thai PM Abhisit (also chair of ASEAN) is reported to have called it a failure. Malaysian PM Najib’s speech at the COP made it clear that nothing short of massive commitment of funds and deep emissions cuts from developed countries would satisfy him. Indonesian President Yudhoyono was reported to have been ‘pleased’ with the final outcome.

Where to now?

The mandate of the two key working groups has been extended for another year but without clarity on what kind of agreement should be submitted to COP16 in Mexico at the end of 2010. Submission of individual country targets and NAMAs as required by the Copenhagen Accord could stimulate moves towards an agreement. But on other matters, past experience suggests that promised increases in funding and adoption of governance structures to manage those funds are likely to be slow in materialising.

There is also an important question about what role ASEAN should play. Despite having submitted a joint statement, approved an ASEAN working group on climate change and established a Climate Change Initiative, ASEAN was not conspicuous as a negotiating bloc in Copenhagen. Yet ‘bloc-ing’ now seems to be the way to go at these meetings for voices to be heard and taken seriously. Being part of the G77 and China is insufficient. So is relying on spillover from the justified attention given to the Small Island Developing States (SIDS). The Association needs to look for more robust ways to present a collective view that will ensure that attention to Southeast Asia’s climate vulnerabilities is more than just the unintended aggregate of individual country interests.

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