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COP16: Can Cancun Salvage Copenhagen?

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Synopsis

Given the dismal results of COP15 in Copenhagen last year, there has been growing pessimism over the prospects of the forthcoming COP16 meeting in Cancun. Governments and civil society organisations should push for a better outcome.

Commentary

THE NEXT global parley to tackle climate change is set to take place in a week's time in Cancun, Mexico from 29 November 2010. But this coming meeting of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), also known as the Conference of Parties (COP16), is already clouded by the failure of last year's COP15 in Copenhagen. What was to be a gallant goal-setting agenda of legally binding targets for carbon emissions in the post-2012 scenario, COP15 ended in failure, save for a piecemeal declaration of intended future efforts and commitments called the Copenhagen Accord. Given the critical importance of addressing climate change, how can we avoid a repeat of Copenhagen in Cancun?

COP 15 Failure and Feeble Follow up

COP15 was marred with politicking and bad form from the very beginning, of which three major incidents stood out. Firstly, the "leaked Danish text" - a draft document formulated by developing countries to be tabled for discussion - was severely criticised by developing countries for hardly taking into account the needs and demands of the developing world. Secondly, the conference proceedings were disrupted by a staged walk-out by civil society organisations (CSOs) together with simultaneous protests outside the conference venue. Thirdly, the credibility of the climate science was contested, at least by Saudi Arabia - due to reports of recent allegations against leading climate scientists at the University of East Anglia for manipulating climate data.

Since the dismal developments at COP15, intergovernmental events leading up to COP16 have not been too fruitful either. During the last negotiating session before COP16 in Tianjin, China, expectations have been much lower than those preceding COP15 - so low in fact that some officials have concurred that legally binding targets would not be reached at COP16. At the end of the Tianjin talks, there was no indication of bold action that would be taken in Cancun.

These constant setbacks have only served to harden the sense of pessimism, exhaustion and frustration amongst those involved in the process. A participant in the Tianjin meeting noted that the constant politicking between the global North and South as well as between the two biggest polluters, the United States and China, remains a sore point in the negotiation process. It has even led some to question the viability for minor

progresses that have been made. Indonesia, for instance, doubted that an agreement on the Reduction of Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD) would be reached in COP16, as it was barely discussed in Tianjin.

COP 16: Hope or Hurdles?

Civil society groups have played a significant role in keeping the momentum alive to tackle global warming. Bill McKibben's 350.org, is one of the most notable groups that have had extensive international outreach in rallying support on the need to effectively address climate change. Their first campaign in 2007, Step It Up, was claimed to be bigger than 1970's first Earth Day rally. The latest one, 350 EARTH – to be held one week before COP 16 – will feature people's movements through art that is visible from a bird's-eye-view. It is hoped that these displays of mass unity would address issue fatigue and precipitate UNFCCC negotiators to formulate legally binding climate policies.

However, sustaining the momentum and hope for addressing climate change is only half the battle. It is true that an indispensable spirit akin to the first Earth Summit in Rio in 1992 is needed. But such passion must also be complemented with appropriate approaches and a more in-depth understanding of the economics and politics at work. The issue of climate change must be seen holistically. This will effectively balance the demands for economic development with the constraints faced by countries in achieving low carbon growth. Civil society groups must also learn to engage with UNFCCC negotiators, rather than go against them.

Another potential obstacle to success at COP16 is the UNFCCC mechanism itself. Given the fact that the UNFCCC system has 192 parties involved, it remains questionable how a genuine and democratic outcome will occur with such differing opinions and capacities among participant states. While some observers have suggested an overhaul of the UNFCCC's governance system, others have suggested the need to push for regional/sub-regional solutions.

The latter would be a feasible solution as sub-regions and regions would be better able to sync their development efforts based on their unique constraints. This way they can inform the global process of more realistic goals and expectations. ASEAN for instance has, at the very least, indicated that the issue of climate change cannot be seen in isolation, and has thus merged it with existing initiatives on energy security and sustainable development.

Go Regional

The bumpy road to Cancun needs to be re-paved with improvements in at least two aspects.

Firstly, COP16 requires a greater sense of community and optimism rather than just economic sense and pessimism. Governments, which are often bogged down with the costs involved in addressing climate change, must be willing to leave aside narrow state interests. Governments must cooperate to acknowledge the severe intangible costs involved of not coming to a consensus – such as rising sea levels and its range of consequences -- or at the very least, realising concrete targets for moving forward.

Secondly, the structure of past approaches need to be revised. Emphasis should be placed on regional frameworks, which would allow for a more realistic assessment of countries' abilities to effectively fulfill their commitments at the international level. Improvements in these two areas can lead to effective solutions to addressing climate change.

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