

Paris climate talks: Developed countries must do more than reduce emissions

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We are only days away from the climate change summit in Paris. Several world leaders are likely to be present to applaud a successful outcome, which is virtually guaranteed since the bar has been set so low in terms of effort expected from the major industrialized economies.

Under the UN process which the negotiations have been taking place, countries are required only to present their climate pledges (known as Intended Nationally Determined Contributions, or INDCs), which are voluntary and subject to an international review but with no strict compliance procedure.

It is this pledge and review system which will become the template for future climate change action. Past experience shows that such weak international regimes, which posit only a best endeavour commitment, rarely deliver expected results.

The UN recently reported that aggregating all the INDCs so far, the world would be on an a trajectory of 2.7C, when a 2C rise is already the limit of safety defined by scientists.

What many people fail to realize is that global warming is the consequence of the stock of greenhouse gas emissions, chiefly CO₂, which has accumulated in the Earth's atmosphere as a result of fossil fuel based industrial activity in the industrialized countries of the world.

This is the reason why the UN recognizes the historical responsibility of the developed countries in causing global warming even though current industrial activity in major developing countries such as China and, to a much lesser extent, India is adding incrementally to that stock.

If developed countries do not make significant and absolute reductions in their emissions there will be a progressively smaller carbon space available to accommodate the development needs of developing countries. There is a difference between the emissions of developing countries which are "survival" emissions and those of developed countries which are in the nature of "lifestyle" emissions. They do not belong to the same category and cannot be treated on a par.

To blur this distinction is to accept the argument that because "we got here first, so we get to keep what we have, while those who come later must stay where they are for the sake of the saving the planet from the threat of climate change." Far from accepting their historical responsibility developed countries are instead trying to shift the burden on to the shoulders of developing countries.

This they have been doing by keeping attention focused on current emissions while ignoring the source of the stock of emissions in the atmosphere. A sustainable and effective climate change regime cannot be built on the basis of such inequity.

One often hears the argument that it is all very well to preach equity but given the planetary emergency the world faces from the threat of climate change we must set aside the equity principle in the interests of humanity as a whole. This is a wholly specious and self serving argument. It reflects the sense of entitlement to an affluent lifestyle, based on energy intensive production and consumption, while denying the even modest aspirations of people in developing countries.

In a densely interconnected and globalised world, it will be impossible to maintain islands of prosperity in an ocean of poverty and deprivation. It is not that developing countries are claiming the right to spew as much carbon as possible into the atmosphere without regard to the health of the planet.

As the main victims of climate change– the impacts of which they are already suffering – they have a much bigger stake in dealing with this challenge. They are, in fact, doing much more than most developed countries, to adopt energy frugal methods of growth, conserving energy, promoting renewable power and limiting waste within the limits of their own resources.

They could do much more if they had access to finance, technology and capacity building from developed countries, a commitment which is incorporated in the UN. Success may elude Paris if developed countries continue to evade their responsibility to provide adequate financial resources and transfer appropriate technologies to developing countries to enable them to enhance their own domestic efforts.

Climate negotiations have become less about meeting an elemental challenge to human survival and more about safeguarding narrowly conceived economic self interests of nations. These are negotiations conducted in a competitive frame, where each party gives as little as possible and extracts as much as possible. The inevitable result is a least common denominator result and this is what is expected at Paris.

Imagine if each country came with the intention to contribute as much as it can and take away as little benefit to

itself as possible, because we are all faced with an urgent and global challenge. We would then get a maximal outcome – which is what the world requires if it has to escape the catastrophic consequences of climate change. The negotiating dynamic may change dramatically.

The leaders can capture the imagination of people around the world if they explicitly acknowledge the seriousness of the threat we all confront and commit themselves to a global collaborative effort to deal with it based on the principle of equitable burden sharing.

Why not create a global technology platform which brings together the best minds from developed and developing countries alike to create new climate-friendly technologies which can then be disseminated as global public goods? Given the promise of solar power, why not announce a global solar mission designed to make it a mainstream energy source in a decade? Since coal will continue to be a major source of power generation in many countries of the world, could we collaborate together on a clean coal mission which reduces harmful emissions and increases the efficiency of coal combustion?

Countries can then contribute according to their capacities and resource availability and I have no doubt that emerging countries such as India, China or Brazil will be enthusiastic participants in such initiatives. Even if we are unable at this stage to go beyond the INDCs which have already been submitted the adoption of these initiatives may reassure the world that a new and more promising process has been set in motion to deliver a more sustainable future for our common home.

(1040 words)