



Editorial

Last call to get climate deal right

Sunita Narain/November 30th, 2014

The Indian government must not use “equity” to block climate change negotiations. It must be proactive on equity and put forward a position on how to operationalise the sharing of the carbon budget—accounting for countries’ contribution to past emissions and allocating future space—in climate talks.

I wrote this last year when the UPA government was in power. I am repeating this as the NDA government prepares for the next conference of parties (CoP) to be held in December in Peru.

Equity is a pre-requisite for an effective agreement on climate change. In the early 1990s, as the negotiations began, Anil Agarwal, environmentalist and director of the Centre for Science and Environment, and I put forward the argument that since the atmosphere is a global common, we need equal entitlements to the space. We argued the only way countries would commit to reducing emissions—connected to economic growth—would be if there were limits for all, based on contribution to the creation of the problem.

The 1992 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change is built on this premise—the group of countries (Annex 1) responsible for creating the problem must create space for the rest to grow. But since the objective is to have a different growth pattern to avoid emissions of long-life carbon dioxide, developing countries would get money and technology.

The current situation is very different. Countries which were required to cut emissions did not do so at the scale or pace needed. The US “peaked” its emissions in 2012. The situation is worse if the accounting for emissions is done on the basis of consumption and not production. In that case developed countries increased their emissions in this period because all they did was to export manufacturing to other parts of the world.

So the rich did not reduce emissions, while the rest of the world increased. While in 1992, Annex 1 countries contributed some 70 per cent of the emissions, by 2014, they are down to 40 per cent. The space is filled and now there is little left for future growth of all. This is where climate change negotiations are stuck.

The old rich want the differentiation between the past polluters and the current and future ones to go. They say we should forget the historical contribution and divide the carbon cake afresh. They remind developing

countries that the present is different—China, for instance, has overtaken the US as the world’s largest contributor on an annual basis. But they forget conveniently that on a per capita basis there is still a vast difference between the US and China.

The “firewall” between Annex 1 and the rest, as called by US negotiators, was first breached at the 2009 Copenhagen conference when countries like India agreed not to discuss the historical contribution of the already rich and put their own emission reduction targets on the table. In 2011, this arrangement was cemented. The Durban CoP agreed that the world would work to finalise a new agreement by 2015. This deal would require the “highest possible mitigation efforts by all Parties”. The only sweetener was the hard fought phrase that the agreement would be under the “Convention”, which, in turn, is based on the principle of equity.

But in the 2013 CoP at Warsaw it was agreed that “all” countries would submit their Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDC) by early 2015. In other words, now there is no agreement which specifies the target for each country based on its past contribution. Countries do not put forward their emissions reduction targets based on common but differentiated responsibility.

It is, however, argued (by top US negotiators) that the deal is based on equity. This is because each country is free to decide domestic targets, keeping in mind its contribution to the problem and its capacity to act. Ingenious indeed. The game is, however, not over. The next step is to put INDC together and to see how the aggregate of “all” adds to the magic number needed to keep the temperature rise below 2°C, the guardrail of devastating change. It is taken for granted that the sum of all will be way below what is needed. Now the real question kicks in: how to estimate the past, present and future emissions contribution of each country to decide who will reduce how much emissions?

In Warsaw 2013, the African Group proposed an equity reference framework, which has different indicators of development and capability to assess what each country should do. India stridently opposed this. No doubt, the African proposal has flaws, but our government has to put forward a counter-proposal on how to operationalise equity. Otherwise, equity is only for blocking consensus; empty word being banged in noisy pans.

If we take climate change seriously, we will argue for an ambitious agreement based on equity because that’s the only way it can be effective. This is the last chance to get it right. The chips are already down and the die will be cast by the time of the Paris meet in 2015.