

On hanging together

Tom Burke, Third Generation Environmentalism (E3G)

The 'global' problem of climate change is endlessly discussed, but rarely looked at cold. The crux of the matter is that all of us, everywhere, share this monumental problem. To prosper we need energy security; but if we persist in using fossil fuels with current technologies, our prosperity will founder. The roadmap drawn up at the Bali climate change convention will show what we need to do to hammer out the post-Kyoto regime. But to get through the ferocious complexity of the process, we will need a change of mind-set. Moving away from a focus on who is to blame and who should act first, we must gain a new political maturity.

A failure of will

Last year Kofi Annan warned of the growing gap between what scientists say is necessary to avoid dangerous climate change and what politicians are willing to do. Since then, concern among climate scientists has grown along with our knowledge of the impacts of a rapidly changing climate.

Furthermore, the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere is growing at a faster pace. The International Energy Agency has just published new projections in its *World Energy Outlook*. These now forecast a 57 per cent increase in CO₂ emissions in 23 years, with coal use due to grow by 73 per cent in a 'business as usual' scenario.

But the torpor that afflicts the political response to what former US National Security Advisor Sandy Berger calls 'the existential problem of climate change' continues. At their current level of ambition, the world's climate policies are simply too weak to stem the onrushing tide of emissions.

The window of opportunity to keep the eventual temperature rise below 2 °C – increasingly

recognised as the threshold of dangerous climate change – is closing rapidly. It is no exaggeration to say that the fate of the earth and its six and a half billion citizens largely depends on the success of the UN climate negotiating process being launched in Bali.

These will be the ultimate in talks about talks. Their purpose is not to agree what more should be done to tackle climate change. The political conditions simply do not yet exist for such an agreement. Instead, they will try to agree to launch a negotiating process aimed at reaching such an agreement at the Conference of the Parties in Copenhagen in 2009.

The date for reaching this agreement is important because the first commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol ends in 2012. Contrary to much press and political comment – some misinformed, some malign – the Protocol does not 'expire'. International treaties do not simply disappear.

Without agreement on a second commitment period, or an agreement that replaces the Protocol and all its mechanisms completely, the world's burgeoning carbon markets would collapse. Agreement is needed by 2009 because of the time it will take for it to be ratified by enough governments to come into force before 2012.

The hoped-for outcome from these talks is a Bali Roadmap charting the way forward to a 'global deal' in two years' time. Quite what this 'global deal' will consist of – and who it will include – remains to be seen. The core elements are now on the table: further steep cuts in industrialised countries' carbon emissions; more money – much more money – for adaptation and technology transfer; some kind of quantifiable commitments from developing countries; measures to reduce deforestation. But it is not at all clear how they will fit together.

KEY MESSAGES:

- The political torpor round climate change has left us with policies too weak to stem emissions.
- This could change with the negotiations in Bali, which are hoped to culminate in a global deal in Copenhagen in 2009.
- Predicted to be hugely complex, the negotiations will pit pro Kyoto parties against anti, and focus on a daunting array of core issues.
- The process will work only if we move beyond talk centred on the moral high ground towards working out ways of moving together towards a low-carbon economy.

Tighten up or all change?

No one should underestimate the bewildering difficulty of these negotiations. Some want to push forward with the current Protocol, tightening the targets for the Annex 1 (industrialised) nations and trying to persuade the developing countries, especially the largest emitters like China and India, to take on binding targets of some kind.

Others want to start again with a replacement of the Protocol by a completely new instrument that might or might not include the Kyoto mechanisms. The current US government would prefer that we go back to 1992 and simply agree to do our best voluntarily.

The political effort required for these negotiations to really succeed is on a par with that required to win the Cold War. That victory involved creating NATO to deal with the tanks on our lawn and the OECD to win the battle of ideas in our factories. It also required us to be willing to spend untold billions on weapons we hoped never to use.

The world is some way from making a comparable effort yet on climate change even though the inexorable threat to the prosperity and security of everyone on earth is far more certain. We are currently stuck in an increasingly futile conversation about who caused the problem, who should act first to solve it and how the pain should be shared.

There is no question about occupancy of the moral high ground. This is a problem primarily caused by the activities of the industrialised nations. The cumulative nature of the carbon loading on the atmosphere makes the issue of whose current emissions are largest immaterial. Finger pointing at the rising level of Chinese or Indian emissions is nothing more than a pathetic and provocative piece of evasion.

But there is equally something pointless about occupying a moral high ground on which very large numbers of your citizens are simultaneously suffering violent storms, floods, fires, droughts and rising tides of salt water and migrants. If we are to arrive at a 'global deal' on climate change we need a much more mature political discussion than is currently occurring.

That conversation must start from the recognition that every country in the world faces the same shared dilemma. All must achieve energy security if they are to prosper. This means using more fossil fuels. But if they are used with present technologies the climate will change rapidly. If that happens, the very prosperity that required the energy security will itself be undermined.

The 'global deal' to be negotiated at Bali and beyond would be better focused on how nations can work together to make a rapid transition to a low-carbon economy than on who should carry the biggest burden for reducing emissions. As the old saw has it, if we do not hang together we will certainly hang separately.

Tom Burke is a founding director of Third Generation Environmentalism (E3G).
www.e3g.org

The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) is an independent, nonprofit research institute working in the field of sustainable development. IIED provides expertise and leadership in researching and achieving sustainable development at local, national, regional and global levels. This opinion paper has been produced with the generous support of Danida (Denmark), DFID (UK), DGIS (the Netherlands), Irish Aid, Norad (Norway), SDC (Switzerland) and Sida (Sweden).

CONTACT:
Camilla Toulmin
camilla.toulmin@iied.org
3 Endsleigh Street, London WC1H 0DD, UK
Tel: +44 (0)20 7388 2117 Fax: +44 (0)20 7388 2826
Website: www.iied.org