

International Climate Change Politics: Challenges and Opportunities

Written by Katharina Rietig

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KATHARINA RIETIG, AUG 1 2012

Evidence presented by the *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (IPCC) shows that the human impact on the planet over the past two centuries led to environmental degradation and atmospheric alteration that results in climatic changes and loss of biodiversity with irreversible trends (IPCC, 2007). Natural and social scientists agree that humanity is entering a new epoch named the *Anthropocene* (Biermann et al., 2012), in which human impact has become so significant that it results in “unacceptable environmental and social change” (Lidia and Smith, 2012). This contribution examines the state of international climate change politics in 2012. Following a review of the rationale for action and the landmark decisions that shaped international climate politics over the past two decades, especially the 2010 and 2011 climate negotiations, the focus will be on the underlying factors that hinder effective climate governance and emerging opportunities if the national and local level is taken into account.

The core argument is that although *international* climate governance with its incremental steps and focus on economic costs, negative consequences and sacrifice is ill-equipped to address the climate crisis, a positive framing of the opportunities from combining climate mitigation and economic prosperity can increase countries’ ambition: progressive national and local action including carbon-neutral cities, regions and countries; the integration of climate considerations into all policy areas such as energy, transport, agriculture and industry; policies reflecting the social costs of carbon emissions (Kuik et al., 2008) and investment in low carbon technologies can facilitate the transition to a sustainable economic development path that addresses climate change effectively. This can bring the global community on a more positive path that may also allow for a more ambitious global climate agreement in the next decade (Jacobs, 2012).

Has international climate change politics failed?

At the United Nations Rio Earth Summit on Sustainable Development of 1992, governments recognised the problem of climate change and created the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to address the issue on the global level. The scientific community regularly provides comprehensive and government approved assessment reports on climate change under the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). These assessment reports present mounting scientific evidence of a global climate crisis resulting in the increase of weather extremes such as droughts and floods caused by changing climate patterns (IPCC, 2007).

In 1997 governments agreed on the Kyoto Protocol as the first global climate treaty requiring industrialized countries to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions by a total of 5 percent over the 5-year period from 2008-2012 based on their 1990 emissions (Depledge and Yamin, 2004). The Kyoto Protocol had a number of weaknesses. These included the early expiration date, the fact that the US withdrew its participation, and the path-dependent agreement to only account for the emissions of countries considered as industrialised countries in the early 1990s, the so-called Annex-1 countries (Depledge, 2005; Depledge and Yamin, 2004; Yamin, 1998). This path dependency makes it difficult to take into account the major emitters of greenhouse gases of the 21st century: in 2010, China accounted for 29 percent and India for 6 percent of global emissions, while the EU-27, Russia and Japan, as the three major actors covered under the Kyoto Protocol, combined account for only 20 percent of global emissions (Olivier et al., 2012).

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Given the expiration date of the Kyoto Protocol, countries agreed in the 2007 Bali Roadmap (Ott, Sterk and Watanabe, 2008) to negotiate a post-2012 climate agreement until the 15th Conference of the Parties (COP-15) to be held in Copenhagen in December 2009. This summit marked a peak in global public attention, resulting in the participation of over 100 Heads of States and high public pressure to deliver a legally binding treaty. The Copenhagen Accords (ENB, 2009; UNFCCC, 2009) were drafted by the G20 as a small group of leading and emerging economies. The Copenhagen climate change conference was widely regarded as a major disappointment. Some analysts went as far as concluding on the failure of international climate politics (Winkler and Beaumont, 2010) due to institutional dysfunctions of the UNFCCC (Keohane and Victor, 2011: 15) and the lack of inclusive leadership provided by the chair via introducing compromise draft texts and allowing the parties sufficient time for deliberation (Müller, 2011). Yet, there might not have been any negotiation result at all without the high public pressure from environmental non-governmental organisations and global media attention that increased the political costs of failure (Rietig, 2011).

The 2010 Cancun Agreement (ENB, 2010; UNFCCC, 2010) reinforced the content of the Copenhagen Accords. These mark the first steps on the path towards a global climate architecture that includes industrialised and developing countries alike and thereby signals a departure from the selective Kyoto Protocol approach of placing the sole responsibility for mitigation on the industrialised countries' shoulders. States agreed for the first time that global temperature increase is to be kept below 2°C and that all, even the developing countries, should contribute to achieving this objective, within the limits of common but differentiated responsibilities, by nationally appropriate mitigation activities and stronger action on forests. To achieve this target, industrialised countries provide financial assistance via the Global Climate Fund; facilitate the transfer of low carbon technologies and support capacity-building (UNFCCC, 2012). Consequently, a patchwork of different mitigation and adaptation efforts is emerging referred to as climate regime complex (Abbott, 2011; Green, 2011; Keohane and Victor, 2011) or as building block of diffuse, disintegrated individual actions setting humanity on a emission trajectory towards 3-5 degree temperature increases by the end of the 21st century (Falkner, Stephan and Vogler, 2010). This perspective prevails although the Cancun Agreements represent significant progress in the measure of UNFCCC's incremental steps (Jacobs, 2011) thanks to the transparent and inclusive steering approach demonstrated by the Mexican COP-16 presidency and the shared desire of delegates to get any agreement (Grubb, 2011).

The 2011 negotiations in Durban, South Africa resulted in a second commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol (however, without the participation of the United States, Canada and Japan) and the "Durban Platform on Enhanced Action" (ENB, 2011; UNFCCC, 2011a; 2011b). This was made possible by the European Union that agreed to a second commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol – the major demand of the G77 developing countries – in exchange for India, China and the United States agreeing to negotiate a follow-up treaty by 2015 taking effect in 2020, which includes all major emitters of greenhouse gases (Interview EU official, 2011). There are two possible interpretations for the current state of climate politics. From the outsider perspective, progress is slow and there is still no legally binding global treaty that reliably limits greenhouse gas emissions to safe standards proposed by the IPCC, thus climate change politics has failed. From the insider perspective familiar with the UNFCCC's governance structure only capable of very incremental steps due to national sovereignty and state's self-interest, the COP-17 outcome marks a breakthrough.

Incremental steps of the UN negotiation process and major conflict lines[1]

The 'frontlines' in the UNFCCC negotiations on a post-2012 climate treaty are two fold and reflect the North-South divide, which in 2012 is still dominant within the UNFCCC: the emerging economies of China, India, Brazil, South Africa and Indonesia, together with most other developing countries in the G77+China coalition, regard the UNFCCC as the only legitimate setting for negotiations on climate change mitigation and adaptation. Based on their understanding of climate justice and the right for economic development, the G77+China Group favours a second commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol and opposes any binding commitments on its part, as those would interfere with developing countries' priority of economic development and poverty alleviation (Rajamani, 2009; 2010). The distinction of Annex 1 and non-Annex 1 countries under the Kyoto Protocol, as well as the provisional rules of procedure that effectively provide each of the 194 countries with a veto right, describe institutional path-dependencies inherent to the UNFCCC that hinders progress in the negotiation process.

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Official negotiation positions of states in the UNFCCC negotiations reflect the prevalent 'win-lose mindset'. Carbon mitigation is perceived as incurring high economic costs, harming carbon intensive industries that provide a large number of direct and indirect jobs and require a shift in lifestyle. Behavioural path-dependencies, such as habits of high-energy consumption, are together with the lock-in (Unruh, 2000) into carbon intensive infrastructure at a low efficiency difficult to change. Concerns of reduced economic competitiveness and conditional commitments, such as the US' refusal to commit to a post-2012 agreement without emission reduction and pledges from the emerging economies, make negotiation positions of key states incompatible.

Looking beyond the international level: Reframing climate mitigation as a chance for sustainable low carbon economic development

The international negotiation position of the key emerging economies remains within the traditional win-lose mindset of sharing burdens; the costs associated with mitigation efforts and reduced economic growth are high, although the long-term prospects from climate mitigation outweigh the short-term investments (Stern, 2006). However, the same governments who currently refuse to accept a legally binding international deal that removes the differentiation of industrialized Annex-1 and developing non-Annex 1 countries (without any emission reduction commitments under the Kyoto Protocol) are embracing green growth strategies in the name of poverty alleviation and economic development. These include Brazil, South Africa, China (Reuters, 2011; WRI, 2011), and India (PMCoCC, 2008; Sankar, 2010). The low carbon economic development plans were less driven by climate policy considerations, but rather by the objective of economic development and poverty eradication (Upadhyaya, 2010) with considerations of sustainability while using clean and cost effective technologies. They could be regarded as a two-level negotiation strategy (Putnam, 1988) that responds to the pressure on the international level to come up with and subsequently implement voluntary commitments, but also as a recognition of the domestic benefits of such a policy in terms of reduced environmental pollution, and the economic benefits of entering new low carbon technology markets.

Climate politics and the international negotiations in particular have too long been seen as an unsolvable issue in a deadlock situation, especially after the perceived failure of the Copenhagen summit. The current climate governance architecture is in fact ill-equipped to deliver a strong, legally binding treaty that will solve the problem of climate change and prevent us from entering the era of the 'Anthropocene', the irreversible alteration of the planet in a way that may lead to a collapse of civilisation as we know it. But to prevent that, it is crucial to understand climate mitigation as an opportunity for economic growth and to accordingly change the incentive structures, while also acknowledging the limits to this approach. Whether that treaty emerges or not during the next window of opportunity, depends not only on the impact of the publication of the next IPCC report, recovery from the economic crisis, and changing perspectives in the emerging economies as their prosperity grows between 2015 and 2020 (SEI, 2011), but especially on reframing the issue of climate change as a 'win-win' opportunity for long-term sustainable development and economic prosperity. In addition, it is crucial to link renewable energies, energy efficiency and integration of climate considerations with other sectoral policies (Rietig, 2012), and see them as investment and not as a pure economic cost without pay-offs in the medium and long term.

If both industrialised and developing countries know they are able to reduce their emissions significantly, based on empirical evidence that their low carbon development strategies are working, they will find themselves in the position of more readily agreeing to a climate treaty that legalizes individual, bottom-up climate mitigation efforts in a top-down UN style climate treaty, which yields even higher benefits as the example of the Montreal Protocol on the Ozone layer illustrates. The Montreal Protocol's success is based on the combination of incentives to act multilaterally, a strong leadership-role of the US as the main polluter, its infinite time-frame, the aggregated benefits from international ozone layer protection for each country, enforcement by trade restrictions, deterring from free-riding by endogenous minimum participation requirements, but especially the self-interest of the US to act domestically regardless of an international agreement (Barrett and Stavins, 2003; Barrett, 2007; Carraro, Marchiori and Orefice, 2009; Sunstein, 2003). Thus, the path to a more effective international climate politics is paved by countries' transition to a low carbon economy (Jänicke and Jacob, 2009; Jänicke, 2011; Keane and Potts, 2008; Zenghelis, 2011) using available and increasingly market-competitive renewable technologies, energy efficiency, and pricing-mechanisms that reflect the true environmental costs of greenhouse gas emissions.

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[1] This analysis is based on evidence triangulated from data collected through participant observation in 84 constituency meetings, workshops, working groups, contact groups, plenary sessions and briefings by the chairs to civil society by Katharina Rietig at UNFCCC in November 2009 (Barcelona), December 2009 (Copenhagen), April 2010 (Bonn), June 2011 (Bonn) and May 2012 (Bonn); and document analysis of daily and summary issues of the Earth Negotiations Bulletin (UNFCCC) Volume 12, issue 322 (7/5/2007) until Volume 12 issue 546 (28/5/2011) retrieved from <http://www.iisd.ca/vol12/> on 12/8/2011 (IISD, 2007-2012).

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