

Durban's greenwash outcome

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The outcome of Durban is a disaster for global climate protection and the survival of millions.

India's corporate media has never before so blatantly blacked out or distorted a major international event as it did the Durban climate conference under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. It declared it a historic success, a victory for climate equity, and a developing country triumph.

In reality, the outcome was a disaster for global climate protection and the survival of millions of poor, vulnerable South Asians.

One didn't have to be physically present at Durban, as I was, to say this. It's obvious from public documents. Durban was the world's last chance to make global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions peak this decade, and breathe new life into the world's sole legally binding climate agreement, the Kyoto Protocol, beyond 2012, when its first phase ends. Only thus could global warming be limited to the 1.5-to-2 degree Celsius ceiling (over preindustrial temperatures) that planet Earth can tolerate. That chance is lost.

The world is now on course to 3 to 4 degree C, perhaps 5 degree C, warming by this century's end or earlier. This spells destruction of billions of lives. Durban has sealed climate apartheid, under which rich polluters evade responsibility, but underprivileged people suffer the worst effects of climate change for which they are least responsible.

The media says India forced a "climate breakthrough" and "regained its position as the ... moral voice of the developing world". It quotes environment minister Jayanthi Natarajan: "[W]e got the extension of Kyoto Protocol ...and restored equity as a central dimension of the debate. We firmly reiterated ... the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities [CBDR]...".

CBDR holds that all countries have a common climate protection duty, but: rich industrialised countries of the North, responsible for three-fourths of accumulated atmospheric emissions, must do more, and do it first. However, the key outcome, "the Durban Platform for Enhanced Action", does not even mention equity or CBDR. The Northern countries wanted, and got, an altogether different regime from that defined by the 1992 climate Convention, the Kyoto Protocol and the Bali Action Plan (2007), which created a firewall between the North's obligations and the South's voluntary actions. A CBDR mention, the North insisted, must be qualified by an interpretation based on "contemporary economic realities", including recent North-to-South power shifts, and China and India's emergence as among the world's top emitters. This would have opened a Pandora's Box.

At Durban, the Kyoto Protocol did not get its second post-2012 "commitment period" (CP2). The decision was postponed to 2012, without clarity on the North's commitments to higher ambition. Such commitments seem highly unlikely given past experience, and the Great Recession. The Protocol will become a soulless "zombie" until replaced by a new, even weaker, agreement.

Durban failed to impose the much-needed 40-45 percent early emissions cuts on the North by 2020 (over 1990). At the conference, developing countries further split, with the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) and the least developed countries (LDCs), allying with the European Union. Some of them resented the insistence of the two-year-old BASIC (Brazil, South Africa, India, China) grouping on "the right to develop". "While they develop, we die," Grenada's ambassador said.

Under "the Durban Platform", countries will negotiate by 2015 "a protocol, another legal instrument, or an agreed outcome with legal force under the Convention applicable to all". This will be implemented from 2020 onwards. This tortuous wording reflects India's reluctance to accept binding commitments, and leaves the legal form open to interpretation. But postponing deep emissions cuts to 2020 will guarantee catastrophic climate change and aggravate the global developmental crisis. The longer the North delays cuts, the lesser the South's room for development.

The Platform was the result of bad compromises imposed by the North. The EU shifted goalposts. Instead of unconditional support for a CP2 for Kyoto, it demanded that all major emitters accept binding reductions in a new deal. This alone would bring the US, which never ratified Kyoto, into the obligations net. The real reason was the EU's growing climate pessimism amidst a massive domestic economic crisis.

Instead of mounting political-diplomatic pressure on the opponents of a Kyoto CP2, the EU-led bloc isolated and divided BASIC. BASIC's differences widened. South Africa and Brazil were willing to accept binding commitments, but not China and India. South Africa, the conference host, was keen to declare it a success by supporting the EU-led bloc.

At Durban, China indicated "flexibility" by offering to accept binding commitments on certain conditions, including a Kyoto CP2 covering all Northern emitters, higher ambition, and immediate activation of the promised \$100-billion Green Climate Fund for developing countries. These conditions weren't going to be fulfilled. But they highlighted China-India differences.

India was seen as inflexible and got isolated. India failed to anticipate the EU's attempt to win over the most vulnerable and poorest of developing countries through financial promises, coercion and threats, similar to those used at the 2009 Copenhagen conference to secure adherence to the so-called Copenhagen Accord. WikiLeaks disclosed this.

There was much wrangling over the phrase, "agreed outcome with legal force under the Convention applicable to all". The US backed this – probably because it was the last chance to push China into binding commitments. Indian negotiators claim that the formulation means that the obligations must be in keeping with the Convention's principles, including CBDR.

However, the Durban political context, with sharp divisions over CBDR's application, suggests that differentiation will undergo substantial reformulation in the North's favour. China's and India's bargaining power will shrink. True, India can still claim that the new instrument need not apply symmetrically to all countries mandating emissions reductions. But India's own BASIC partners disagree with this. Worse, the Bali Action Plan has been dumped. The working group on Long-Term Cooperative Action set up in Bali will be terminated in 2012, and a new process will begin, with considerable dilution of differentiation.

There is a case for introducing gradations and nuances into CBDR. The world has changed since 1992. China has become an industrial giant. Developing countries now account for 55 percent of global emissions. The South is sharply differentiated. But huge differences remain between the North and most developing countries in living standards, emissions, and capacity for climate action.

It would be totally unjust to paper over this and suppress the North's historical responsibility. Yet, the Durban Platform comes close to doing this.

After Durban, "might is right" will prevail, further vitiating negotiations and wiping out past gains for the narrow short-term self-interests of a handful of powerful states. The process reached a low point at Copenhagen, where India too acted deplorably.

Over 20 years, the UNFCCC talks produced some gains and many hopes. But since 2007, they have gone downhill. The Northern leadership's will to fight climate change in the face of corporate opposition has weakened thanks to its adherence to neoliberal policies.

India could have prepared itself better for Durban had it built a coalition by offering AOSIS and LDCs need-based financial and technological assistance in climate change adaptation, and also strengthened the G-77 developing-country bloc. It could have pressed the EU for supporting a Kyoto CP2, and produced worthy results. India didn't summon up the policy independence and strategy this needed. It lost the plot.

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