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Copenhagen: A Missed Opportunity

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The failure of the Copenhagen Climate Summit has come as no surprise, and unless major developing countries take a more principled stand for development, future summits can only serve as a stage for more incoherent politics.

The Climate Change Stalemate

THE RECENTLY concluded Copenhagen Summit sought to achieve what its predecessor in Bali tried to do two years earlier. Both attempts, not surprisingly, came to nought. The terms of the debate were fixated on reductions in carbon emissions rather than a more concerted global effort towards solving climate change-- an issue that pervades the politics of our time. Industrialised nations argue that allowing unfettered growth of developing nations would spell environmental doom; developing countries, still facing the scourge of poverty, refuse to give up on much needed fossil-fuelled growth. At the root of the international impasse is this inherent contradiction between emissions reduction and economic development. In the absence of a clear stand on what ought to be prioritised, the discussion can only continue to be a mere diplomatic squabble over numbers and semantics.

The Copenhagen Climate Summit, like the Bali Climate Summit, pushed for legally binding caps on emissions, even as it was clear in the run up to it that the major players would be divided on the issue. What is seen as a success is that climate-change mitigation will be measurable, reportable and verifiable. Also, for the first time developing countries including India will be responsible, albeit voluntarily, for limiting their carbon emissions. The focus on emissions reduction, however, ignores two points: Firstly, while everybody around the table vociferously backs the need for a fall in carbon emissions, there is practically no consensus on how this can be brought about. Secondly, unless we have developed efficient, cheap and widely available alternatives to carbon-emitting technologies, to suggest reduction in carbon emissions is like putting the cart before the horse. It not only would seriously alter peoples' lives and activities now, by impacting on energy and power generation which help sustain societies. It will also encumber our capacities for innovation and problem-solving in

future. This would be undesirable and irrational.

So when nations meet again with schedules for reducing their carbon emissions over the next decade, it could well be yet another numbers game that comes to nought.

CO2 makes the world go round

Beneath the loud rhetoric of emission cuts is the reality that CO₂ is actually *needed* to enable modern society to keep going, and for poor countries to prosper. To acknowledge this would be a good starting point. Despite the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, emissions in most countries that have ratified the treaty have gone up. Between 2000 and 2006, emissions from developing countries rose by 2.3 per cent, while those from developed nations rose by 10 per cent. In the meantime, little has been achieved by way of substituting carbon-emitting technologies.

India and China's growth in the coming years will depend largely on fossil fuels, as it is the most feasible option they have at this stage. While this may seem catastrophic to many, it is important to developing countries, if these societies are to lift millions out of poverty. The current terms of the debate focus on emissions cuts while placing development on the back burner. This is a rather lopsided view: future capacities for developing the technologies needed to solve climate-related problems and for generating abundant energy are being thwarted by overarching concerns with emissions. Moreover, arguments by countries like India, which are essentially posed within the same language of cutbacks and limits, do not have the potential for steering the climate debate into any useful direction.

Hypocrisy of the West?

The stand of developing countries, which tend to put the blame for the world's carbon mess squarely on the West, is limited in scope. India has always maintained that since industrialised nations are responsible for the current levels of emissions, they ought to bear the moral responsibility for global warming and take the lead in cutting emissions.

However, asking developed countries to cut *their* emissions so that the developing world can continue its pace of growth is no different from the industrialised world asking emerging economies to put a stop to their development. Rise in carbon levels was not an intended by-product of industrialisation; neither does it undermine its benefits such as improved standards of living.

Development over the last decade in India, for instance, has dramatically improved its energy efficiency whilst reducing the carbon intensity. This has not been the result of conscious attempts at cutting back, but of growing forth. While droughts have been common in India up to 2009, the last famine was recorded in the 1970s. Recent natural disasters like the floods in Indonesia, storms and typhoons in Philippines and Vietnam, reflect a need for greater capacities to reconstruct and prevent loss of life. This is often exacerbated by inadequate infrastructure and evacuation measures. Smaller developing countries are vulnerable to the vagaries of nature. Their economies may not transform overnight; Indonesia may not build flood defence systems overnight, for example, but would a crash in Green House Gases make life any better here? Development allows the poorer countries to overcome the vagaries of nature and override its effects. The idea of cutting back, in the West or elsewhere, can only create a rather limited political and intellectual ground for any serious action.

The tendency to shout 'you first' obscures the more important question of how we see humans -- as carbon-emitting destructive entities or as resilient and innovative beings? It is here that we need a clear and principled stand that recognises the benefits of growth in building future capabilities. Such a stand would go a longer way towards dealing with practical problems that climate change throws at us than would the blame game the world is currently engaged in.

India and China had the opportunity to challenge the terms of the negotiations at Copenhagen. But instead of driving home the case for more development, they came away with voluntary emissions reduction targets and greater timelines.

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