

## Sidelining the Most Vulnerable

Climate Change Conference Paris 2015

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A lot of hand-wringing and promises aside, COP21 is turning out to be another climate conference where the developed countries refuse to commit to norms set by previous summits. While India has maintained a principled and independent stance at COP21 so far, it remains to be seen if it is sidelined in the coming days. A report from the 2015 United Nations Conference of Parties (COP) 21 on climate change in Paris.

The French, who have made international diplomacy a fine art, bowled a googly of sorts by reversing the order that has been practised in all previous United Nations (UN) climate and other development summits. Instead of asking world leaders to arrive at the end of the conclave, to sign the agreement thrashed out by countries' negotiators, they invited them to the first day.

The idea was to make the broad brushstrokes of what is likely to be called the "Paris accord" a fait accompli and commit politicians and bureaucrats only to dot the "i"s and cross the "t"s. Whether this feint works will only be known by the following two weekends—this first, when the basic draft is issued, and the second, when the final document is signed and sealed.

### **International Solar Alliance**

There is no question that Prime Minister Narendra Modi registered a coup of his own by launching the International Solar Alliance on the very first day. The fact that it was introduced with President Francois Hollande underscored the universal endorsement that the initiative achieved.

As in many such grand pronouncements, like the pledges of foreign direct investment that Modi obtains on each of his visits abroad, there can be a huge gap between promise and performance. The Alliance is expecting in time to raise \$400 million from membership fees from the 131 countries that are potential members—most between the Tropics, which are well endowed with land and sunlight but too poor to exploit them.

It will also tap funds from bilateral and multilateral agencies. But this is in the realm of speculation. Indeed, the government may have got carried away by the euphoria of the launch, considering that it expects to raise \$1,000 billion by 2030—10 times what the UN expects rich countries will pay developing countries to cope with climate change by 2020.

According to the Penang-based Third World Network, widely considered to be the Global South's most outspoken negotiator in the climate talks, India has been pulling its weight in the ongoing negotiations taking place behind closed doors. Anticipating this, US Secretary of State John Kerry, referred to India's position as "a challenge" a few days before Paris summit.

## **Paris Accord Not Binding**

The problem with the outcome of the Paris accord is that it will be entirely voluntary, leaving each country to pledge its commitment to mitigate the impacts of climate change. The accord would not be binding on any country. This turns a blind eye to the catastrophic impacts of global warming, some of which are already being felt across the planet, Chennai not being an exception.

The US, and what are known as the "umbrella countries", consisting of Canada and Australia among others, is dead set against any attempt to make emission cuts compulsory. This is why the US refused to sign the Kyoto Protocol under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 1997. This was the only earlier agreement, signed by most UN members, that compelled industrial countries held responsible for creating the problem of global warming in the first place, to cut the emissions of greenhouse gases and pay a financial penalty for failing to do so.

Speaking at this summit, President Barack Obama made no secret of his position when he said, "Targets are not set for each of us, but by each of us." At best, only the procedures for monitoring of such voluntary compliance may be made mandatory. These procedures will cover actions that are "comparable, measurable, reportable and verifiable." The speculation at Paris is that this will be done every five years. It also matters where the secretariat of such a monitoring mechanism is housed. If it is at the UNFCCC secretariat in Bonn, negotiators can be reasonably certain that the process will be fair and transparent. But a new agency at a different venue can prove a major obstacle. A possible precedent in another context is the discomfiture with the "conditionalities" imposed by the US-based International Monetary Fund before disbursing loans to developing countries in the past.

## **Perils of Self-differentiation**

Next only to the fact that the accord will not be binding is the attempt by the Umbrella Group and some other rich countries to remove the distinction in the negotiations between developed and developing countries. This has been a cornerstone of the UNFCCC position, from the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 onwards. On the contrary, countries are

now being asked to “self-differentiate.”

Even before China became the biggest emitter of greenhouse gases in the world in 2010, the US has been targeting it. India has also been tarred with the same brush for being a major contributor to climate change and must therefore also cut its emissions. Former US President George W Bush Jr said as much. It was to keep such moves at arms’ length that gave rise to the alliance of emerging economies known as BASIC—consisting of Brazil, South Africa, India and China. Now the US is talking about the “evolving economic circumstances and emerging trends” in such countries which distinguish them from other developing countries and have therefore to take on commitments of their own.

BASIC has not exactly crowned itself with glory. It was in a huddle literally at midnight on the closing day of the abortive Copenhagen summit in 2009. It acquiesced to pressure from Obama, who gatecrashed their conclave and pressurised them to sign an accord. This was very far removed from a treaty binding on all signatories. However, they will now have to stand up to the pressure in Paris to take on bigger cuts.

### **Miniscule Aid for Most Vulnerable Countries**

A third problem in Paris is blurring the distinction between developed and developing nations by singling out the least developed or most vulnerable countries for aid. Typically, these are the small island states and countries like Bangladesh which are low-lying and also have a long coast, exposing them to greater danger of flooding with ocean level rise. A slew of funds were announced on the opening day, but the amounts were quite small and merely looked to more contributions in future.

Thus the Breakthrough Energy Coalition was announced on the opening day, comprising 28 of the world’s biggest investors, including Mark Zuckerberg, Bill Gates, Jack Ma, Mukesh Ambani, Ratan Tata and the US-based Vinod Khosla. Under Mission Innovation, Obama will double the US contribution to more research and development on clean energy.

A Paris Pact on Water and Climate Change Adaptation will disburse \$20 million to help the water systems of developing countries develop resilience, hoping to raise \$1 billion ultimately. This included a financial commitment by India to build such resilience through improved groundwater management. Another \$500 million aimed at developing countries was launched by Germany, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland. This is supposed to create a new class of low-carbon assets with disbursements of \$250 million to begin with, later to leverage \$2 billion in lending by the World Bank.

### **Combatting OECD Report**

At Paris, the Indian critique of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has got a lot of traction.

In a recent report, the Paris-based organisation has stated that rich countries had delivered as much as \$57 billion to developing countries to help them combat climate change. This is well over half of what was promised by 2020 and does not square with the facts on the ground. French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius went so far as to suggest that considerable progress had been made and only the remaining \$40-odd billion had to be raised.

In a counter-report titled "Some Credible Facts Needed" by the Climate Change Finance Unit in India's Finance Ministry, officials alleged that "Numbers were derived on self-reported basis from self-interested players, and open to 'gaming' and exaggeration ... At this time, the actual cross-border flows from 17 special climate funds since their inception are some \$2.2 billion...amounting to 'green-washing' of finance."

While the authors said that this was not an official paper and did not reflect the views of the government, it is clear that India's new-found confidence on the global stage emboldened the authorities to take a clear stand against this distortion of facts.

## **Grim Conclusion for India**

To coincide with Paris summit, three experts from Indian Institute of Management (IIM) Ahmedabad, Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Gandhinagar and the Delhi-based Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW) released an independent study to show that India would need \$1.3 trillion in 15 years to address the adverse impacts of climate change. As many as 800 million people living across nearly 450 districts are currently experiencing significant increases in annual mean temperature going beyond the 2°C warming that, scientists say, is the tipping point beyond which there can be disastrous impacts.

Observers believe that India, as the world's third biggest emitter, may well be targeted for continuing to demonstrate its independent and principled stance at Paris. This is in sharp contrast with China which has kept out of the limelight. They predict that China may choose at the fag-end of the summit to close ranks with the US, leaving India to fend for itself.