

DO CLIMATE CHANGE CONVENTIONS LIKE COP-8 ACHIEVE ANYTHING?

Shreekant Gupta

The eighth annual meeting of 185 countries that have signed a non-binding UN convention on global warming is being held at Delhi. The convention is a first step to address possibly the most serious environmental problem humanity has faced. The extent of climate change and its environmental and economic impacts are subject to debate. It is, nevertheless, clear that humans are altering the earth's climate in profound ways through burning fossil fuels that produce carbon dioxide (a greenhouse gas) and from activities such as cutting of forests and agriculture that produces methane another greenhouse gas. Much attention at present is centred on making the Kyoto Protocol happen—an agreement for rich countries to cut their emissions of carbon dioxide—and on the refusal of the United States to sign this agreement. The fate of the Protocol is uncertain (India signed it in August this year). It hinges on whether Russia and to a lesser extent Poland, Canada and Australia, all of whom are important carbon dioxide emitters agree to it.

To an outsider, COP-8 is a bewildering mela with over 4000 delegates, observers and journalists as well as a cacophony of NGOs. Pious proclamations aside, not much is expected to happen. But such meetings are required even if they do not achieve anything. They are part of a process (albeit a slow and frustrating one) to build a global consensus. It is important that nations of the world continue to talk to each other on this vital issue. Also, beneath the posturing there is much manoeuvring and wheeling and dealing that goes on.

In the larger context, it is crucial for India to look beyond Kyoto and COP-8 and to take a long-term and more holistic view on climate change. After all, this problem took decades to manifest itself and its magnitude and dimensions are still not well understood. Also, it will remain with us through the current century and beyond—as yet there is no magic bullet for global warming. Thus, whether Kyoto happens or not India must look ahead especially beyond 2012 when the Kyoto agreement (if it were to happen) would end. International negotiations to decide on the architecture of the greenhouse gas abatement regime beyond the first round of efforts (2008-2012) will start in earnest by 2005. India's strategy seems to be to insist on equity as a basis for sharing the right to emit greenhouse gases. It is evident that a billion or so Indians would collectively garner a big chunk of these rights which it is assumed represents a real transfer of resources from the rich to the poor countries. Thus, high-minded principles aside, the bargaining is largely about money. The problem with the Indian stand is that the implications of allocations on a per capita basis, on the price of these allocations are not well understood. After all, the revenue I earn from selling "widgets" depends not only on the number of "widgets" I own but also on their price. If I care about how much money I can earn I should presumably care about the price as well as the quantity of "widgets".

In addition to a long-term view, we also need a holistic approach to climate change that encompasses the effect of our energy use on the health of Indians alive today and on our agriculture. Burning of fossil fuels not only produces greenhouse gases but also local pollutants like particulates. If we continue to use energy inefficiently as we do at present because we distort prices and use outdated technologies then we endanger the health of our own citizens and threaten our food security. A recent UNEP study documents the harmful effect of these local pollutants on the health of Indians and on our agricultural output. To insist that we continue to be profligate in using energy in the name of development is cutting our nose to spite our face. Reducing the energy intensity of our economy through economic reforms and use of tried and tested methods such as emissions trading for local pollutants (as shown by the sulphur dioxide trading program in the US) would be in our own interest. It would also pre-empt those who demand action by India on the climate change front. In the world of realpolitik making a virtue out of necessity is a good idea. On the other hand, US-bashing may make good copy but it will not reduce load-shedding in Delhi. Unfortunately, Theodore Roosevelt's advice to speak softly and carry a big stick has been stood on its head by our climate negotiators whose shrill rhetoric is only matched by its emptiness.

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[The author is at the Delhi School of Economics and is a Founding Trustee of the Centre for Civil Society, New Delhi.]