

In Poznan, Poland, the world could get cooked, for good

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The 14th Conference of Parties (COP) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), to be held

December 1-12, 2008, at Poznan in Poland, is a little different from all the COPs held so far in the 21st century. For the first time since the December 1997 COP held in Japan, the world is moving to a negotiating mode.

Last year, at COP-13 Bali, Indonesia, nations decided upon a course of action called the Bali Action Plan, 'a comprehensive process to enable the full, effective and sustained implementation of the Convention'. By the end of next year, at the COP to be held at Copenhagen, Denmark, nations have to finalise how they will tackle climate change 'now, up to and beyond 2012'. The Poznan COP is therefore finely, even dangerously, poised. Given warming of the climate system is unequivocal, as the Bali Action Plan places on record, the question is the speed with which countries are prepared to move, particularly as they need to take on deep and drastic emission reduction targets to avert the worst excesses of a changing climate.

With Earth's future literally at stake, the period from the COP at Bali to the one at Poznan has merely seen a flurry of proposals. There has gathered an immense wish-list of what can or should be done, or not, but no basis for negotiation (no text, however provisional, or bracketed). The Bali Action Plan itself was a pure exercise in procrastination. No deep targets were set for developed countries to cut emissions. Instead in Bali, industrialized countries managed to sneak in the provision that their action to cut emissions may not be based on hard commitments or mandatory targets and compliance within a multilateral framework, but actions merely measurable, reportable and verifiable (see: *Down To Earth*, January 15, 2008).

The Bali Action Plan eroded trust among developed and developing nations. The rift has grown. Age-old dissensions have come to the fore. The US is still pointing a finger at China, India, Brazil and South Africa, saying if these countries do not take action, it will not. Thus deflecting attention from the fact that its emissions, already one-fourth of the world's total emissions, have increased, and it



wants allowance to let its emissions peak after 2025, ten years after the least risky target for global emissions to peak and then decline. At the preparatory meeting in Accra, Ghana, the European Union (EU) threw in its tactical missive—to differentiate between developing countries, to segment the group and carve it up to get emission reduction targets from some. Japan has jumped in with a plan to have sectoral emission reductions so that engagement becomes mandatory.

As emissions of the developed world have actually increased (not decreased) during the last decade or so, there is also much afoot to juggle targets. Some countries have said (informally) that the base-year should change—from 1990 to 2000, or even later. As emissions have soared in this period—since 1990-2005, US CO₂ emissions have increased 20 per cent, Japan 13 per cent, and Australia over 35 per cent—it would be a convenient write-off. If this happens, reduction targets would be from a higher baseline and much would be forgiven and forgotten.

Another jugglery is to postpone emission reduction targets so they mean little. In other words, extend forgiveness into the future. When negotiators met mid-2008 at Seoul, South Korea to discuss the question of future targets, the US and Japan resisted interim targets for 2020. At the Hokkaido, Japan G8+5 meet, the G8 agreed on 50 per cent cuts by

2050, without saying what would be required to be cut by 2020 and, of course, without any mention of a baseline year for the cuts (see: *Down To Earth*, July 16-31, 2008).

In addition, there is the delicate matter of emission reductions being credited using the land use, land use changes and forestry, in the developed world. LULUCF has been widely considered to be one of the 'loopholes' in Kyoto. Now, there is a move (to be watched in Poznan) to widen the holes, not to plug them. Canada, a major emitter, has suggested approaches to "substantially improve incentives" for mitigation from this sector, just a bad call for including new sinks—harvested wood products and wetland restoration—to get some pass marks in the much-in-red balance sheet.

In all this, the developing world is caught in the ultimate pincer attack. On the one hand, it needs to increase emissions for development. Much is being made of China's emissions. But not much is said about how the deal at UNFCCC was for developed countries to reduce their emissions, precisely to give China and others the space to increase. On the other hand, they already feel the devastating impact of changing climates—from increased intensities of rainfall to cyclonic events. They are victims, but are being made the culprits.

In Bali these countries, under pressure, agreed to take nationally appropriate mitigation actions, even if it meant deviating from the basic tenet of the UNFCCC, which only required the industrialized world to cut emissions. But it was also agreed these mitigation actions would be supported and enabled by technology, finance and capacity building, in a measurable, reportable and verifiable manner. Now the focus is to weaken this agreement.

Pure stalemate. There is virtually no movement on how the funds or technologies needed for this transition will be paid for. In preparation for Poznan, country positions on these two issues are deadlocked—the developing countries want to be assured substantial finances. The developed world is saying little and putting even less real change on the table.

But it is in the funding of adaptation—everything that can be done to increase the resilience of the poor and help them 'adapt' somehow to the devastation—that pettiness comes into its own best. The developing world wants urgent and big action to respond to the challenge of adaptation. The developed world agrees, but does not want to be tied into making any real financial commitments.

The only area of some understanding is the need to pay for standing forests in developing countries.

The 4th Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change estimates 20 per cent emissions are contributed from deforestation and forest degradation in the developing world. These emissions need to be 'mitigated' and, simultaneously, everything done to ensure more forests are not cut, because countries have no option but to use their lands for agriculture or for mining. So, standing forests are carbon stocks and should be paid for. But even as this issue is inching towards consensus, there are big stakes here. Forests are not just carbon stocks but livelihoods and habitats of millions of people. How will their rights and uses be protected? What is the 'price' put on forests, without compromising the interests of the poorest in the world? Indeed, how can the mechanism work for the poor?

There are huge issues of how emissions will be calculated and verified, given the past failures of the global community in designing instruments that work effectively and easily. The Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) is now widely accepted as being complicated, designed for cheap reductions and built on the worst principles of the now-collapsed market. CDM consultants that assess and rate the project are paid by the project proponents and little is done to make sure the 'fundamentals' of this carbon market are not compromised. Instead, it has become nothing more than creative carbon accounting, with little big-ticket change.

The atmosphere at Poznan, therefore, will be murky and combative.

Poznan also marks a difference in our time. The US election has brought in a new president, who has said his recalcitrant and renegade country will take on emission cuts. At a recent meeting, president-elect Barack Obama has said he will bring US emissions down to 1990 levels by 2020. That still means no drastic emission cuts—something desperately needed—but is more than what the world has got from the US till date. But this is also when the world is facing a recession. On the one hand, the r-word may bring some relief to climate change targets as countries cut fossil fuel use; it also brings the opportunity to use the massive public spending on building a new and different economy. But the reality is that it may also bring out even more of the worst, increase the rich world's unwillingness to pay for its excesses and to pay for ways to 'avoid' emissions in the emerging world.

This is also when the time for postponement is over. Climate change is real and urgent. The only chance is to avert a catastrophe. Can we? Do we have a choice? ■