

Politics of Climate Change

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Climate change has emerged as an important environmental issue to confront humanity in recent years. This concern arises from the fact that our everyday activities may be leading to changes in the Earth's atmosphere, that have potential to significantly alter the planet's heat and radiation balance and have tremendous impact on socio-economic and political spheres as well. The nature of the problem is such that no country can take unilateral decision to protect its environment. The problem has to be approached at the global level through collective international efforts. This has given rise to questions regarding who will take the initiative, coordinate and shoulder the costs. A central aspect of the collective action problem is that it cannot ever be solved by confrontation, which means that "welfare not warfare", will shape the rules and the global threat— climate change— will dictate the agenda.

With the changes in climate, developing countries and particularly the least developed countries are likely to suffer the most because poverty in these countries have made the peoples more vulnerable to natural changes as they do not have the resources to deal with changes and adapt to natural disasters. "It is found that for developed countries, the cost of living in a world with twice pre-industrial levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere are estimated at between one percent and three percent of GDP. For the developing countries the estimates range from two percent to 9 percent of GDP." [1] It is true that the developing and island countries would be at the receiving end however; the impact in these countries would have spiral effect worldwide resulting in global turmoil.

Climate Change

Climate of the Earth is controlled by the difference between the incoming solar radiation from the sun and the outgoing infrared radiation emitted by atmosphere system of the Earth. However, the long-wave terrestrial radiation emitted by the earth's surface is partially absorbed and then re-emitted by a number of trace gases in the atmosphere collectively known as green house gases (GHGs). This phenomenon keeps the global temperature warmer by about 33^oc and is vitally important for life on Earth. Since, the industrial revolution, anthropogenic activities— especially fossil fuel combustion and deforestation— are increasing the concentrations of atmospheric GHG's beyond their natural state, resulting in the enhanced greenhouse effect. This has caused an increase in global temperatures, which is known as global warming. The sums of all these potential changes are referred to as climate change.

Background

The UN conference on the “Human Environment” organised in 1972 at Stockholm is considered as a, “turning point in the development of international politics. Some of the principles that were agreed to and established thereby had an enduring effect. The Conference led to the establishment of the, “UN Environment Program” (UNEP), and it worked as a catalyst in the growth of “Green Movements” and “Green Politics”, mostly in the developed countries. In the erstwhile USSR and Eastern Europe environment concerns grew strongly in the 1980’s.

World Climate Conference (WCC) of 1979 led to the establishment of ‘World Climate Programme’ (WCP), specifically to understand climate more fully. WCP, organized the ‘Villach Conference’, from 9-15 October 1985. The ‘Villach Conference’ was followed by publication of report ‘Our Common Future’, by the ‘World Commission on Environment and Development’ (WCED), on 27 April 1987.

In June 1988, the Canadian Prime Minister, Mr. Brian Matronly, convened a conference at Toronto, which was on ‘The Changing Atmosphere: Implications for Global Security’. The ambitious plan of the Conference “stated that governments and industry should reduce carbon dioxide emissions by approximately 20% of 1988 levels by the year 2005 as an initial goal. This was the first international conference to call for such radical action.”[2] The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was set up in 1988, to provide an authoritative assessment of the state of scientific knowledge on global warming.

The momentum generated by these conferences for serious actions and the occurrence of natural calamities in many countries increased global awareness about climate change. During 1988, USA and the erstwhile USSR experienced drought. There were also unexpected floods in Africa and India and floods and drought simultaneously in China; floods in Brazil and Bangladesh; hurricanes in the Caribbean; a cyclone in New Zealand and a typhoon in the Philippines[3]. As a result many world leaders made statements on the need for a response to global warming. Ms. Margaret Thatcher then PM of England stated in a speech that humanity had “unwittingly begun a massive experiment with the system of this planet itself”. George Bush (Sr.) made global warming an issue in the US Presidential election of 1988. He stated that ‘those who think we’re powerless to do anything about the green house effect are forgetting about the White House effect’.

The momentum could not sustain for long because countries differed on the approaches to tackle the menace and as a result developed and developing countries met separately at Ottawa and New Delhi respectively. In order to bridge the gap between North and South (Ottawa & New Delhi Conferences), “Ministerial Conference on Atmospheric Pollution and Climate Change” was convened in November 1989 at Noordwijk in the Netherlands. It was attended by seventy-two states. Many developing countries participated in it. The conference witnessed dispute among the developed countries. “The Europeans led by the Dutch and Germans wanted hard targets and timetables for carbon dioxide reduction. USA, opposing it, said that main emphasis should be placed on national strategies which include concrete measures and targets.”[4]

Politicisation of Climate Change

The climate change negotiation gradually became politicised in the 1990's and the countries, which pledged for action to mitigate the impact of climate change, were willing no more to stick to their words. In 1990 (17-18 April), President Bush as per his pledge hosted a conference at the White House. But the conference instead of bridging the gap between developed and developing countries widened it. Bush stated at the conference that no action should be taken until more research had been completed and science was more certain. Reacting sharply West German Environment minister, Klaus Topfer, argued that gaps in knowledge must not be used as an excuse for worldwide inaction. UK also showed its reluctance for the commitment to reduce the carbon dioxide emission. David Tripper said 'we will have to make it clear to our electorate how much anguish they will have to suffer in order to save the planet'. The shift from the earlier stand was mainly due to the cost of action and domestic pressure.

During this period the issue of climate change got entangled in the controversy surrounding widening difference in perception over the issue between developed and developing countries especially regarding the measures to mitigate the impact. The developed states led by US were of view that "climate change is a common technological and economic problem and it is caused by Greenhouse gas emissions. It could be tackled by providing aid and encouragement of new technologies in developing states." [5] On the other hand, "developing states were of view that climate change is a western problem. It is caused by consumption patterns. It cannot be dealt with without looking into the problems inherent in the development paradigm and at distribution issues such as who is entitled to what emissions?" [6]

Factors that Influenced Developed Countries:

The tough stand against the carbon dioxide emission by European states was mainly due to the awakening among the people regarding the likely impact of climate change. Moreover, "growth of Green Parties in more than two third of the European countries including Germany, Austria, Sweden, Belgium, Finland, Italy, France and the Netherlands worked as a catalyst in Europe." [7] However, the American opposition to setting hard targets is largely determined by its position as the world's largest producer of coal, oil and gas and the presence of the well-organized industry lobby groups, which play vital role through financial support during electioneering period. Similarly OPEC economy is largely dominated by the export of oil and natural gas. Therefore, any curb on the use of these resources would jeopardize their entire resource strategy and long-term prospects. Due to this OPEC countries oppose any curtailment of these resources, whereas, Alliance of the Small Island States (AOSIS) countries, which are most vulnerable, demand very high emission reductions. In other developing countries, central concerns have been 'equity'. They vociferously oppose any resolution, which puts high emission reduction target on them.

Although countries had divergent views regarding the reality of climate change and mitigation measures, the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee(ING) continued its discussion for the finalization of UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) that was adopted in 1992 during Earth Summit at Rio.

The Earth Summit

United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) is popularly known as 'Earth Summit' held in June 1992 at Rio de Janeiro. It has international recognition because all the UN members participated in it and expressed their views regarding the climate change and for the first time developing countries were treated equally on the issue of climate change. With the publication of Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) first report, the Summit gained importance as it confirmed the reality of global warming. The convention signed and later ratified by countries, created a legal instrument called the Conference of the Parties (COP), which had the objective of stabilising GHGs concentration in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system.

The preamble of UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) consists of 26 Articles. The convention also adopted Agenda 21, a 400-page document with 40 chapters aiming at providing a programme of action for sustainable development. Absence of carbon dioxide emission target in UNFCCC was due to reluctance of USA. In 1992, then president George Bush threatened not to attend the Earth Summit in Rio if the convention included any binding commitments to stabilizing GHGs.

However, during the Summit the contentious issues: funds, technology transfer, atmosphere and forest principles created differences between the developed and developing countries. Criticizing the lackluster policy of North on the funds, Gro Harlem Brundtland said, "We are disappointed by the lack of adequate financial commitments made. The 20-year-old-target of 0.7% of GNP as official development assistance must be reached before the 2000".[8] Many developed countries took his criticism positively. They gave assurance for the funds and the institution called Global Environment Facility (GEF), which was to manage funds, was included in the Agenda-21. On the issue of forest, developed countries wanted to make it globalised because of its importance in mitigating the impact of climate change. Criticising the demand of developed countries, Kamal Nath, then Environment Minister of India said, "our strongest objection is to the attempt to use forests as part of the global cycle. If it is such a resource, we should be paid for it— not only now but also the opportunity cost (of leaving forest intact) for the past and future. The position otherwise is: our forests are your dumps. They should stabilize their carbon emissions. We cannot supply them as an escape route."[9]

One could say that Earth Summit helped in generating the enthusiasm for environment-friendly future among the peoples of the world. Several institutions were established prominent among them were the Commission for Sustainable Development (CSD) and the Global Environment Facility (GEF), working in association with UNEP, UNDP and other UN bodies.

UNFCCC, provided for the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee(INC) to continue meeting and to prepare the ground for the Conference of the Parties (COP), comprising all the 170 plus states that ratified the convention. It was decided and agreed that COP will meet on a yearly basis unless the parties decide otherwise. The COP's role was to promote and review existing commitments in light of the convention's objective, new scientific findings and the effectiveness of national climate change programming. It was entrusted with the task to adopt new commitments through amendments and protocol as and when circumstances required.

Conference of the Parties-1

The first session of the COP was convened at the International Center, Berlin from 28th March to 7th April 1995. In the opening message to COP-1, Secretary General of UN conveyed that, “the role of the conference was to take the convention to its next stage, from consensus to cooperation, from commitment to actions. Actions under the convention could be brought into a process of intergovernmental policy coordination in which appropriate linkages could be established between climate protection and the key issues of sustainable development.”[10]

On the question of emission reduction, “AOSIS, advocated for 20% reduction in industrial country emission by 2005. OPEC campaigned strongly against any substantial commitments for developed countries, fearing that emission reduction measures would reduce demand for oil and thus threaten their incomes. The European Union and some other West European states broadly supported emission reduction targets by 5-10% by 2010. Whereas, several other developed countries including the USA, Japan, Australia and Canada were reluctant to support any obligations requiring emission reductions.”[11]

The deliberations of COP-1 showed that countries were not willing to make any compromise with their fossil fuel. The positive fallout of the conference was that the countries agreed for international review of national measures to limit emission.

Conference of the Parties-2

The COP-2 met from 8-19 July 1996 in Geneva. The conference opened with recognition and endorsement of the second IPCC report. The report suggested that without specific policies to mitigate climate change, the global average surface temperature since 1990 was projected to increase by about 2⁰C (between 1⁰ C and 3.5⁰ C) by 2100; average sea level was projected to rise by about 50cms (between 15 and 95cms) above present level by 2100. AOSIS and African countries asked for the reconstitution of GEF in order to meet the developing countries’ commitments. COP-2 called on the GEF to provide expeditious and timely support to developing countries and initiate work towards a full replenishment in 1997. It also instructed the representatives to accelerate the negotiations on the text of legally binding protocol or another legal instrument to be completed in due time for adoption at the COP-3.

The positive fallout of the COP-2 was that for the first time since the early days of climate negotiations, the USA called for intensified negotiations on a binding medium-term emission target and a longer-term goal for atmospheric concentration of GHGS. The new stance was part of President Bill Clinton’s re-election campaign for the US Presidential elections scheduled for November 1996.

Conference of the Parties-3

From Dec 1-11 1997 COP-3 was convened at Kyoto in Japan. It is a landmark among the conferences pertaining to climate change. Among the various recommendations made by COP-3, the important ones are:

(a) Annex-1 countries (38 industrialised countries plus EU) agreed to reduce their overall emissions to 5.2% below 1990 levels by the first commitment period (2008-12), with differentiated targets for various parties. The emission cut only for Annex-1 countries agreed is in the recognition of FCCC, “common but differentiated responsibilities” for countries at different stages of development; b) In order to reduce the GHGs, the Protocol provides several mechanisms, which facilitate multi-lateral cooperation between and among countries on:

(i) *Clean Development Mechanism (CDM)*, between developed and developing countries and

(ii) *Emission trading* (Whereby a country that exceeds its emissions quota can buy another country’s unused quota). It is considered as a flexible means of achieving emission targets because it will allow firms or countries to keep down the costs of reducing GHGs. “NAM countries agreed on emissions trading and said that it can only commence after allocation of emissions entitlements on an equitable basis to all countries that has been agreed upon by the parties.”[12]

(iii) *Joint Implementation Activities*: It is designed to allow Annex-1 countries to cooperate on emission reduction projects and share the benefits. It could prove out to be very effective in reducing the GHGs because actions taken jointly can reduce the net cost of building clean power plants or promoting energy efficiency systems.

The Kyoto Protocol is just the first step towards meeting the mandate of Article 2 of UNFCCC, to avoid adverse anthropogenic alteration of the climate system. The positive aspect of the Protocol is, it has started confidence in the various processes and has enhanced the political commitment to make the negotiations and commitments easier.

Conference of the Parties-4

It was held at Buenos Aires in 1998. On the Kyoto Protocol mechanism COP-4 specified that detailed rules for all mechanisms should be adopted in one package at COP-6. Argentina’s President Menem stated that his country would adopt voluntary commitments by COP-5, coupled with a call for equal access to emissions trading. The statement catalysed the issue of voluntary commitment by the developing countries to reduce their emissions. It was strongly supported by US. This was strongly objected by developing states that stated that these types of voluntary emission limits could threaten to further dilute industrialised countries’ reduction obligation. The announcement by Argentina was guided by its own interests, for it consumes very low levels of fossil fuel because of availability of abundant hydropower. The announcement might have been made to get support and investment of developed states to harness the hydropower potential.

Conference of the Parties-5

From October 25 till November 5, 1999 at Bonn, the COP-5 discussed issues like deciding penalties against countries that fail to meet their commitments and the adverse effects on countries due to climate change. It was comparative lackluster in politics, but underlying tensions remained. Disagreements between developing and industrialized countries revolved

round the experimental Activities Implemented Jointly (AIJ) programme. Developing countries made it clear that no credits would be given to industrialized countries for projects undertaken in this pilot phase.

On the issue of emission trading USA wanted no cap whereas, EU raised reservation against the US demand and urged for a minimum of 50% reduction from domestic action. No agreements were reached on any of the contentious issues, which were deferred for COP-6.

Conference of the Parties-6

It was convened at The Hague from 13-25 November 2000 and it was expected that an effective compliance regime would be formed. The Executive Secretary of the conference Michael Zammit Cutajar said, “The Hague conference is a make or break opportunity for the climate change treaties. He also said that unless governments of developed countries take the hard decisions that lead to real and meaningful cuts in emissions and to greater support to developing countries, global action on climate change will lose momentum”. “G-77 and China proposed for the creation of a compliance fund and further stated that in the event of failure to meet emissions reduction target, a country can pay into this fund at a pre-determined penalty rate. The penalty rate must be high enough to act as a deterrent. It was also suggested percentage of funds be allocated to finance projects to reduce emissions.”[13] US strongly opposed any financial penalties for the non-compliance. Finally it was decided that compliance procedure would only apply to the Kyoto Protocol (KP) and not to the commitments under the convention. On the issue of GEF, industrialized countries wanted that all financial assistance were to be channeled through the GEF. Developing countries opposed this because they found GEF too bureaucratic. The issue was relegated to the background due to the negotiations centering on the US and EU priority areas of sinks and emission trading.

Bonn, July 2001

Contrary to expectations, the Hague conference ended with a deadlock. The developing states could not participate meaningfully because of the dispute among the industrialized countries. The Bonn meeting on 23 July 2001 was able to break the impasse through compromises on the following major areas: Kyoto mechanisms, land use, land use change and forestry (sinks), compliance and financing for developing countries. It reflects another landmark in international climate policy.

The agreement reached after more than 48 hours of non-stop negotiations, to some extent paved the way for the ratification of the Protocol, binding industrialized countries to reduce emissions of heat trapping gases by a specified percentage. Regarding emissions trading a new term was added— “reserve”. This reserve intends to prevent a country overselling, which may result in non-compliance and it should not drop below 90% of that country’s emission budget or 100% of 5 times the most recently reviewed inventory, whichever is lowest. Regarding joint implementation, countries agreed to refrain from using emission reduction units generated from nuclear facilities.

At Bonn, the issue of sink was amicably resolved with an agreement on the rules and modalities on activities related to land use, land use change and forestry (LULUCF). For developing countries three new funds were created. Special Climate Change Fund, Least Developed Countries Fund and Adaptation Fund. Commenting on the Bonn outcome “Mr. Oliver Deleuze, chief negotiator of the EU said that “an imperfect living deal was preferable to a perfect but dead deal” and hoped that US would now “come on board the boat we have constructed for the protocol.”[14]

Conference of the Parties-7

It was held at Marrakech, Morocco, from 29th Oct. to 9th Nov. 2001, attended by environment and energy ministers from around 165 countries. They agreed to the first detailed rulebook governing the 1997 Kyoto Protocol. Regarding the controversial issue of credits accruing from the projects-based investments in developed countries and developing countries; it was decided, “industrialized countries could bank on credits generated from projects-based investments in developing and developed countries but only up to 2.5% of the amount they were allowed to emit.”[15] It was also decided that now developing countries could unilaterally start a project and sell credits to industrialized countries.

The conference conceded carbon dioxide emissions quotas known as “Hot Air” to Russia and Ukraine. “This arrangement may have been an essential inducement to get Russia to ratify the KP, and countries that were not sure they would meet their commitments on their own saw it as a cheap safety valve.”[16] The decision on the controversial issue of legally binding, if industrialized countries failed to meet their commitments, was deferred after the KP entered into force.

The above said deliberation of COPs show that the views of developed countries in general and US in particular were expressed on the basis of economic self-interest rather than out of principled belief in world development. It also shows that the developing countries need a leadership, which can strongly denounce the unethical practice of the developed countries and at same time work hard to ensure that the morality issue, which they are talking about, is incorporated into domestic policies. The partial success of negotiations in all the COPs is due to the fact that the negotiations have revolved around peripheral aspects of the issue like transfer of technologies, economic aid, funds, conservation of forest and reluctance on the part of developed countries to reduce the carbon dioxide emissions.

An Assessment

The developed countries have repeatedly emphasised in COPs that India and China should also have some commitment to reduce the carbon dioxide emission. The argument of developed countries is primarily based on expanding use of fossil fuel in developing countries relative to the industrialized nations in percentage terms. For example, China envisages expanding its coal consumption five fold to three billion tonnes a year by 2020, this alone would add nearly 50% to current worldwide carbon emission.

However, if one looks at the implementation measures, then one would find that developing countries, not only have included potential impacts of global warming in their national planning policies and procedures, but also they have all set in motion a wide range of policies. China, in spite of being the world's second largest consumer of coal has taken the most dramatic steps to curb growth in coal use. "Subsidies for coal fell from 37% to 29% between 1984 and 1995 and petrol subsidies were slashed from 55% to 2% between 1990 and 1995. Between 1998 and 1999, clean air legislation and energy efficiency measures reduced China's coal consumption by 16.8% and its overall fuel use by 10.7%." [17] Similarly, India has reduced the subsidy on petroleum products, despite the political fall-out. The capital Delhi stands as an example as its public transport now run on Compressed Natural Gas (CNG).

On the other hand coal use in US has increased by 1.6% during 1998 and 1999. Moreover, U.S.A. has implemented no major policies that would significantly reduce its dependence on carbon and has instead pursued measures to maintain supplies of inexpensive fossil fuels like gasoline, and it is available now at \$1.309 a gallon in the US almost the same price as in the early 1980s. It is found that "a US citizen's annual GHGs are equivalent to that of 19 Indians or 107 Bangladeshis, or 134 Bhutanese, or 269 Nepalese." [18] It clearly shows that US is responsible for nearly 36 percent of GHGs load today and still it is not ready to give up the lifestyle it pursues.

Developing countries could do more if financial and technological support is provided as they are witnessing economic transformation. They could also take a lead in creating global market for zero carbon technologies because of two distinct advantages, "they have more solar energy than most of the developed countries and they could provide a huge niche market in hundreds of thousand of their villages that are not yet touched by carbon grid." [19]

In order to make the negotiations meaningful, its sphere should be broadened with the incorporation of issues like removal of poverty, writing off debt of least developing countries, restructuring of GEF by bringing it out of the ambit of World Bank. Moreover, developed countries are required to increase their share for the Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) to help the less endowed countries. The developed countries had committed themselves to increase their contributions to the ODA to 0.7 percent of their GNP, but by 1997 it had dropped to 0.22 percent.

Furthermore, there is an urgency of building confidence between governments, business elites and peoples regarding the use of the eco-friendly technologies. There is a need to impress upon political leaders in particular that the cost of inaction is greater than the cost of conservation, and they need not to stop being so economically, defensive, and start being more politically courageous.

For instance, through the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), developing countries would receive additional funding for reducing their emissions. The fund would help in improving the socio-economic conditions. Through CDM, developed countries would be able to reduce their emission at lower cost through projects in the developing countries. It is estimated that, "the potential amount of CDM investments is at between \$5 billion and \$10 billion a year" [20] Enforcement of KP would lead to transfer of technology to developing countries and for

developed countries it would help in expanding the export market

Lastly, one could say that it is high time to take note of the challenges the issue of climate change is posing for all of us. Both developed and developing countries should pursue the negotiations seriously and earnestly for ensuring good and healthy life for the future generations. Sustainable development need not wait for tomorrow's technological breakthrough; green technologies; renewable sources of energy and other alternative solutions available today can begin to do the job. Reduction of emissions from the developed world is a must as they have the wealth and technology and have contributed disproportionately to global environmental problems while the developing countries must become more and more carbon responsive in their growth and development. The ozone treaty could be cited as the most successful example of international environmental cooperation to date and the best model for progress on issues such as climate change.

Endnotes

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