

Better to have no deal at Copenhagen than one that spells catastrophe

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The only offer on the table in Copenhagen would condemn the developing world to poverty and suffering in perpetuity.

On the ninth day of the Copenhagen climate summit, Africa was sacrificed. The position of the G77 negotiating bloc, including African states, had been clear: a 2C increase in average global temperatures translates into a 3-3.5C increase in Africa. That means, according to the Pan African Climate Justice Alliance, “an additional 55 million people could be at risk from hunger”, and “water stress could affect between 350 and 600 million more people”.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu puts it like this: “We are facing impending disaster on a monstrous scale ... A global goal of about 2C is to condemn Africa to incineration and no modern development.”

And yet that is precisely what Ethiopia’s prime minister, Meles Zenawi, proposed to do when he stopped off in Paris on his way to Copenhagen: standing with President Nicolas Sarkozy, and claiming to speak on behalf of all of Africa (he is the head of the African climate-negotiating group), he unveiled a plan that includes the dreaded 2C increase and offers developing countries just \$10bn a year to help pay for everything climate related, from sea walls to malaria treatment to fighting deforestation.

It’s hard to believe this is the same man who only three months ago was saying this: “We will use our numbers to delegitimise any agreement that is not consistent with our minimal position ... If need be, we are prepared to walk out of any negotiations that threaten to be another rape of our continent ... What we are not prepared to live with is global warming above the minimum avoidable level.” And this: “We will participate in the upcoming negotiations not as supplicants pleading for our case but as negotiators defending our views and interests.”

We don’t yet know what Zenawi got in exchange for so radically changing his tune or how, exactly, you go from a position calling for \$400bn a year in financing (the Africa group’s position) to a mere \$10bn. Similarly, we do not know what happened when secretary of state Hillary Clinton met Philippine president Gloria Arroyo just weeks before the summit and all of a sudden the toughest Filipino negotiators were kicked off their delegation and the country, which had been demanding deep cuts from the rich world, suddenly fell in line.

We do know, from witnessing a series of these jarring about-faces, that the G8 powers are willing to do just about anything to get a deal in Copenhagen. The urgency does not flow from a burning desire to avert cataclysmic climate change, since the negotiators know full well that the paltry emissions cuts they are proposing are a guarantee that temperatures will rise a “Dantesque” 3.9C, as Bill McKibben puts it.

Matthew Stilwell of the Institute for Governance and Sustainable Development - one of the most

influential advisers in these talks – says the negotiations are not really about averting climate change but are a pitched battle over a profoundly valuable resource: the right to the sky. There is a limited amount of carbon that can be emitted into the atmosphere. If the rich countries fail to radically cut their emissions, then they are actively gobbling up the already insufficient share available to the south. What is at stake, Stilwell argues, is nothing less than “the importance of sharing the sky”.

Europe, he says, fully understands how much money will be made from carbon trading, since it has been using the mechanism for years. Developing countries, on the other hand, have never dealt with carbon restrictions, so many governments don’t really grasp what they are losing. Contrasting the value of the carbon market – \$1.2 trillion a year, according to leading British economist Nicholas Stern – with the paltry \$10bn on the table for developing countries for the next three years, Stilwell says that rich countries are trying to exchange “beads and blankets for Manhattan”. He adds: “This is a colonial moment. That’s why no stone has been left unturned in getting heads of state here to sign off on this kind of deal ... Then there’s no going back. You’ve carved up the last remaining unowned resource and allocated it to the wealthy.”

For months now NGOs have got behind a message that the goal of Copenhagen is to “seal the deal”. Everywhere we look in the Bella Centre, clocks are ticking. But any old deal isn’t good enough, especially because the only deal on offer won’t solve the climate crisis and might make things much worse, taking current inequalities between north and south and locking them in indefinitely.

Augustine Njamnshi of the Pan African Climate Justice Alliance puts the 2C proposal in harsh terms: “You cannot say you are proposing a ‘solution’ to climate change if your solution will see millions of Africans die and if the poor not the polluters keep paying for climate change.”

Stilwell says that the wrong kind of deal would “lock in the wrong approach all the way to 2020” – well past the deadline for peak emissions. But he insists that it’s not too late to avert this worst-case scenario. “I’d rather wait six months or a year and get it right because the science is growing, the political will is growing, the understanding of civil society and affected communities is growing, and they’ll be ready to hold their leaders to account to the right kind of a deal.”

At the start of these negotiations the mere notion of delay was environmental heresy. But now many are seeing the value of slowing down and getting it right. Most significant, after describing what 2C would mean for Africa, Archbishop Tutu pronounced that it is “better to have no deal than to have a bad deal”. That may well be the best we can hope for in Copenhagen. It would be a political disaster for some heads of state – but it could be one last chance to avert the real disaster for everyone else.

P.S.

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