

India's cynical role at Cancun climate talks

Friday 24 December 2010, by [BIDWAI Praful](#) (Date first published: 15 December 2010).

India has given up putting any pressure on industrialised countries to tackle climate change at Cancun, in order to defend their right to an economy based on high growth, environmental destruction, and luxury consumption for a small elite.

Nick Buxton - What do you think of the results of Cancun?

Praful Bidwai - The Cancun agreements are little more than the Copenhagen Agreement, which five countries secretly negotiated at last year's climate talks and tried unsuccessfully to impose on the rest of the UN.

Those who defend it say a weak agreement is better than complete collapse and failure. However they ignore that the Cancun agreements put the only binding climate agreement, the Kyoto Protocol, on life support. The Cancun Agreements replace the science-based process of setting emissions-reduction targets on its head and take a "bottom-up" approach, under which countries set their own targets. Instead of imposing emissions cuts of around 40 percent on the North without carbon offsets and other loopholes, as is imperative, they allow it to do very little without being penalised.

What is more, the Cancun Agreement is full of loopholes and ambiguities. They postpone major decisions (e.g. the legal form of commitments) to next year. They blur the distinction between the North, historically responsible for three-quarters of global emissions, and the South. For instance, the US, the world's worst polluter, has offered emissions cuts of a laughable 4 percent by 2020.

The results are that, under the Cancun agreement, global temperatures are likely to rise by upwards of 3 °C, causing irreversible disruptions and breakdowns in the climate system, leading to ecological devastation, millions of deaths and colossal economic damage, thus threatening humanity's survival.

Bolivia was the only government with a superb position. They recognised that the deal does nothing to stop climate change. They were isolated, but it is a view that eventually many countries will come to accept.

Giving the green light to carbon market expansion

The Cancun agreement will also greatly expand carbon markets - through the deforestation agreement REDD and the inclusion of the dubious technology of Carbon Capture and Storage under the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) - which is very sad thing.

CDM allows companies in developing countries to earn carbon credits and sell them to the North, which can then evade reducing its own emissions. Carbon markets are merely opportunities to cheat and use short cuts rather than make cuts domestically.

The central question we face is how we change, particularly in developed and in larger developing countries, fundamental patterns of production and consumption and move to a genuine low carbon path. Carbon markets give new momentum and incentives for doing all the wrong things, in terms of not making deep enough emission cuts, not moving fast to use low carbon technologies, not reducing consumption of luxury items, and instead looking to buy our way out with false offsets.

In India, we have seen clearly the fraudulent nature of carbon markets. Thanks to carbon markets, the Indian multinational Tata is claiming credits for using established technologies in coal burning power stations and for iron production. This is absurd, given that both are high energy intensive industries. In Delhi, carbon credits are being used to expand expensive unsustainable metro lines that benefit mainly middle class families, instead of looking at reorganising road space. In the north of the country, credits are paying for huge dams that everyone opposes because of the environmental damage involved. The whole thing is a scandal.

The international press has been praising India, and the Indian Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh, for India's constructive role in Cancun. What do you think of India's role?

India made two shifts: firstly making voluntary commitments to reduce the emissions intensity of its GDP and secondly agreeing to verification of these cuts. They weakened their previous position, which was that these would only be done if a second level of commitments to the Kyoto Protocol was confirmed (for the period 2012 to 2020) and if it was supported by finance from industrialised countries. They also compromised on how often verification would take place and for who, accepting that it would be every 2 years for all developing countries .

In terms of impact, their voluntary offers are meaningless. They now have licence to effectively emit more. The promise of 20-25% cut in emissions intensity [these are relative rather than absolute emissions cuts tied to GDP growth] is easy to do, as electricity price has historically been high and already led many businesses to minimise energy use. India's economy also relies on the services industry, which has a much lower carbon footprint than manufacturing. India could do a whole lot more, but with this agreement won't need to.

For India, the Cancun agreement means business as usual which is a model based on neoliberal high growth consumption benefiting a small elite. The global implications of India's position is even worse as it has meant that we have given up pressure on industrialised countries making binding cuts to support a position where everyone makes insignificant voluntary cuts.

What has been the reaction in India to the Cancun agreement?

Mixed. One paper, The Hindu, called it a new beginning, which has restored momentum to negotiations, laying the ground for target setting at next year's Durban conference. Others have condemned India for diluting the principle of equity and differentiated responsibility between North and South. Grassroots organisations have been very critical, noting that the agreement has not delivered any meaningful cuts.

The position on climate among India's elite is entirely self serving. Their driving motivation is the idea that we must grow and have a right to increase emissions. Privately, they will say industrialised countries had a party for 200 years, so let's at least party for 30 years. They also think that now India is emerging as a big power, it should play as the other big boys do, including taking on their tendency to shirk any obligations. If that means India supports bad agreement, and let's rich countries off the hook, then so be it. It is a very cynical position.

Why was more progress not made at Cancun?

I think it shows how powerful the industrialised countries remain. We know from the Wikileaks cables, that the US used its economic power to bully and seduce countries, like those from the Alliance of Island States into supporting the Copenhagen Accord.

Cancun also shows how exaggerated the importance of emerging powers are on the world stage. For all their economic might, they do not want to, or can not, play the role of Western major powers. They are happy to let them do major manipulations as long as they don't suffer as a result; instead of using their prestige and higher profile to defend interests of the South. And that is a great pity. Just imagine if it had been India, rather than Bolivia, saying it was not in agreement with the Accord. That would have stirred things up!

Where do you think campaigners should focus next?

There is still a fight left for a second commitment period under the Kyoto Protocol, so there should be serious mobilisation in favour of it. We may have reservations about the Protocol's limits, but if it is buried, we are in deep trouble as it is the only binding agreement.

Civil society also needs to take a stronger adversarial position if we are to make progress. Those into lobbying can often be distracted by small gains, whereas we must like most grassroots movements focus our analysis on whether cuts have been achieved. This is the only realistic way to assess whether we are gaining any ground in tackling climate change.

Praful Bidwai

Independent Journalist

P.S.

* Interviewer: Nick Buxton. From TNI website:

<http://www.tni.org/interview/indias-cynical-role-cancun-climate-talks>

* TNI Fellow and former senior editor of The Times of India, Praful is a freelance journalist and insightful columnist for several leading newspapers in South Asia writing regularly on all aspects of Indian politics, economy, society and its international relations. He is an associate editor of Security Dialogue, published by PRIO, Oslo; a member of the International Network of Engineers and Scientists against Proliferation (INESAP) and co-founder of the Movement in India for Nuclear Disarmament (MIND).