

Climate Change What Is Expected From Mexico in 2010?

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David Gray/REUTERS

Copenhagen was definitely a disappointment. Too many expectations were raised and the results—if we can say there were any at all—were insufficient. The main polluters did not accept a binding agreement to reduce carbon emissions. The next climate summit will be in Mexico in December 2010, but what is at stake and what can reasonably be expected?

In Copenhagen, the world's leaders and their ability to move ahead on the most complex overall cooperation problem the planet faces undoubtedly failed. Not only did they not reach an agreement, but they were also unable to outline roads forward for negotiating the issue of climate change. It is even seriously in doubt whether the United Nations' frame-

work for discussion (one country-one vote), in which 190 countries' deliberations are set, will be the appropriate mechanism to make it possible to arrive at a unanimous decision, since, when the powers do not want to come to an agreement, the mechanism can only lead to paralysis.

To better understand this issue's transcendence, let us take it by stages. First, we have to understand why climate change is such a complex, delicate matter. Second, we have to look at who the main players are and the key points that divide them. Then, we will review the proposals for reducing greenhouse gas emissions (GHG), that is, the mechanisms and possible entities that would negotiate. With all this in mind, we will be able to have a panorama of what is really at stake and what could therefore be the object of the 2010 summit in Mexico.

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COMPLEXITIES

Climate change is one of the world's most important cooperation problems because it poses the reduction of GHG emissions, which has a direct impact on the possibility for growth of all areas of the economy that use fuel, that is, practically every human activity. In theory, the solution is simple: we have to use less fossil energy derived from burning coal, oil and gas. This means nothing less than changing our way and style of life, just like the environmentalists propose. However, changing on a grand scale the consumerist, dirty-energy-wasting lifestyle humanity has become accustomed to, at least since the industrial revolution, requires a real change of paradigms that cannot be achieved without public policy that stimulates it powerfully, quickly and effectively.

In addition, seen from the global point of view, an especially complex problem of justice arises when the question is posed internationally: which countries can grow and how much? In other words, we are faced with the issue of who has the authority to dictate the limits of economic growth on a worldwide level. Climate change will only be mitigated if a cap is put on the consumption of energy or if a price is paid—a tax or a duty—for consuming coal, oil and gas. Both measures limit economic growth.

We have to keep in mind that countries rarely adopt measures to reduce emissions on their own, since international competition is ferocious in the era of globalization. This means that the political proposals to solve the problem of climate change must necessarily be both global and long-term, making them extremely difficult to delineate and put into practice, since politicians prefer local, immediate solutions.

THE POINTS OF DIFFERENCE

Once the Kyoto Protocol comes to an end in 2012, there are two avenues to explore. One is along the same lines as the previous one, a kind of "Kyoto II," which would imply

that the industrialized countries follow the United Nations (UN) rules of the game and commit to reducing GHG emissions. The main opponent to this is the United States, which has not accepted the accord, and the main winner would be the UN mechanism itself, which, as we all know, protects the weakest.

The other avenue is negotiating a different accord altogether that would both bring in all parties, mainly the United States and the main emerging countries in terms of development, like China, India, Brazil and perhaps also Indonesia and South Africa, who together account for 80 percent of the world's pollution. Since this road is new, it presents a series of aspects that are yet to be ironed out; among the most important of these is who must reduce emissions, by how much and starting when?

Regardless of which of these roads is followed, it must be clear that the failure in Copenhagen was due to U.S. legislators—both in the House and the Senate—not passing a federal law to reduce emissions compatible with the aims of a potential world accord. To this should be added—particularly if we are talking about the second road—that China has been reticent to commit itself to making verifiable reductions before the United States does. Indonesia, Japan, India and Brazil have made statements in the same vein, saying they are unwilling to set reduction proposals as long as the biggest polluter has made not commitments.

Forging a consensus about who must reduce emissions is the core point of any global agreement on climate change. We must remember that, in its time, the philosophy of the Kyoto Protocol was based on common but differentiated responsibility, rooted in the argument that countries that had been industrialized for years had already polluted a great deal, and for that reason should take on commitments to reduce emissions and finance new technologies that would make it possible for the developing countries to not repeat this environmentally unsustainable model. The Kyoto Protocol was built on the idea that the developed countries are responsible for shouldering the cost of decarbonizing the developing countries.

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Today, in the prelude of a new accord, we are facing the same concern: who must reduce emissions? What is meant by the biggest polluter? Who has polluted in the past, who is doing it today and who will do it in the future? For that matter, should pollution be measured as a function of the total amount of metric tons emitted or as a function of emissions per capita? These are very relevant, important points because they elicit different answers that will define what must be done. What is not at all in doubt is that the United States is the world's biggest polluter in all senses: in terms of absolute amounts of emissions, historically and per capita.

In contrast, in the case of China, enormous differences can already be observed: despite the fact that it is second in terms of absolute amounts, it comes in 122nd in the world in terms of emissions per capita. The case of India is even more extreme, since it is the world's seventh largest polluter in absolute terms, but among the lowest ranking per capita, where it comes in 163rd. Europe is the third largest polluter and also fourteenth per capita. Mexico emits 1.5 percent of the planet's pollution, but is thirteenth in terms of absolute amounts, fifteenth historically, and ninety-third in terms of emissions per capita.

Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) figures frequently say that China will become the world's largest consumer of energy in the first years of the next decade and that, together with India, will be responsible for 45 percent of the increase in world consumption projected for 2005-2030. What OECD International Energy Agency reports do not usually stress is that, despite this, by 2030 China and India's carbon emissions will continue to be much smaller than those of the OECD countries. For example, experts calculate that by 2015, India's per capita emissions will barely reach 1.4 tons, compared to the OECD's 10.4 tons. What is more, by 2030, India will only be producing 2.3 tons and China, 7.9, compared to the projected 19 tons in the United States and 11.6 in the OECD countries.¹

Thus, the idea shared by many in countries like the United States, Canada and Japan that the Kyoto commitments were unfair because they imposed great sacrifices by

the industrialized countries while giving the emerging economies a free rein should be taken with a grain of salt. It is quite absurd and far from any notion of justice, for example, that a country like the United States, which emits 20.6 tons per capita, should try to convince India, which emits only 1.2 tons, to take on obligatory emission cutback commitments. This would mean, for example, denying access to electricity to the more than 500 million inhabitants of India who do not yet have it. There is no doubt, however, that the developing countries have a right to develop and also the obligation to make a priority, not of reducing their GHG emissions, but of their poverty levels.

THE MECHANISMS

In recent years proposals have been offered as alternatives to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, particularly by presidents of the United States, in an attempt to create a new forum that would this time come under their leadership.

In May 2007, President George W. Bush created the Asia-Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate (APP). Through this partnership, the United States offered clean technologies and the possibility to disseminate them among a select group of major world polluters, basically in Asia, including China, India, Australia, Canada, and later probably even Mexico. The idea was that through the APP, the big polluters would establish voluntary accords to reduce carbon emissions using U.S. technology. The idea was to introduce so-called "clean technologies," like, for example clean coal, nuclear energy, carbon capture (a method not for reducing emissions, but for capturing already consumed emissions), and bio-fuels. It should be mentioned that most of these technologies continue to be questioned by environmentalist groups as possible substitutes for fossil fuels.

To promote the partnership and in order to present an alternative to the Kyoto Protocol, the United States has carried out a series of bilateral negotiations. In 2009, just

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before the long-awaited Copenhagen summit, Barack Obama announced the Major Economies Forum on Energy and Climate (MEF).² This forum was “intended to facilitate a candid dialogue among major developed and developing countries, help generate the political leadership necessary to achieve a successful outcome at the December UN climate change conference in Copenhagen, and advance the exploration of concrete initiatives and joint ventures that increase the supply of clean energy while cutting greenhouse gas emissions.”³ The United States seems confident that a modified version of the MEF could play a leading role in future negotiations and win legitimacy in the United Nations.

The so-called G20 —actually nothing more than the G8 plus the European Union and a series of emerging nations like Saudi Arabia, Argentina, Australia, Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Mexico, South Korea, South Africa and Turkey— has also been suggested as a possible alternative forum for dealing with climate change. This group, until now mainly focused on financial and trade issues, undoubtedly includes the biggest polluters, although, just like in the case of climate change in the UN, they are very at odds with each other. In contrast with the Kyoto Protocol, the very nature of this forum would require creating an institution similar to the World Trade Organization to deal with climate change, and that would not be so much for negotiating an accord, but for creating a regulatory body on climate change issues.

EXPECTATIONS

Expectations for the Mexico 2010 summit are not very encouraging. The players who deactivated Copenhagen have not given out very positive signals: U.S. senators have begun to criticize the bill passed by the House, and China, for its part, has said it has no intention of changing its position, and every time it has had the chance, it has underlined the right of nations to grow without subjecting themselves to international commitments.

Given this situation, at the next summit, Mexico basically has two choices. The first is to try to convince participants of the benefits of a new treaty in the Kyoto Protocol style, which would imply obligatory reduction commitments by industrialized countries, but this time broadened out to include at least China, India and Brazil. The task would by no means be easy, and the time remaining is short, not favoring this choice. If the U.S. House and Senate do not decide to establish reduction commitments within U.S. territory this year, thus not allowing the nation to agree on commitments with the rest of the world, then this first option (to achieve something in the area of emissions reduction) would be completely closed. We would be left, then, with the second option, the “soft” one. Instead of trying for an accord on reductions, we could at least reach an agreement on a related issue: what is known as adaptation to climate change. This would imply focusing on raising as much money as possible and discussing the mechanisms for distributing it so that poor countries can better adapt to the devastating effects of climate change. This option, more reduced in scope, could lead to concrete results.

Lastly, given the threat of climate change, we must remember what Bolivian President Evo Morales said about the recent earthquakes that have shaken Latin America: we must act because it seems that “Mother Earth is angry.”⁴ ■■■

NOTES

¹ Pablo Bustelo, “China e India: energía y cambio climático,” Real Instituto Elcano (ARI), document number 136/2007, December 28, 2007, http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/ARI2007/ARI1362007_Bustelo_India_China.pdf.

² This was announced on March 28, 2009. The 17 major economies participating in it are Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, the European Union, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Mexico, Russia, South Africa, the United Kingdom and the United States.

³ See <http://www.majoreconomiesforum.org/>. [Editor's Note]

⁴ President Evo Morales made this comment before the UN during the commemoration of Earth Day on February 28, 2010. [Editor's Note.]