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THE BLOG

Why Paris Must Not Repeat Kyoto's Mistakes

The Kyoto Protocol has been largely unable to achieve the reduction in emission targets it set out for developed economies. With the US withdrawing from the Kyoto Protocol in 2003 and an increase in Canada, Australia and Japan's emissions by more than 23.4%, 22% and 8.1% respectively from 1990 levels, the Kyoto Protocol has essentially been a failure. The lesson is loud and clear: international law can sometimes end up being a very poor mechanism for allocating emissions permits.

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THONGSEEDARY VIA GETTY IMAGES

silhouette of refinery plant on evening background

World leaders and climate negotiators from 195 countries are in Paris for the 21st Conference of Parties Summit (COP21), with the intention of hammering out a new international climate agreement to fight against

climate change. While the current greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere are already 400 parts per million (from pre industrial revolution levels), in a business as usual scenario, this could eventually touch 750ppm (a possible increase in temperature of 3-4°C) by the end of the century.

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A 1.5 degree rise in temperature reportedly puts 30% of the world's flora and fauna at risk from extinction. And while policy makers are cognisant that climate change is the greatest challenge facing humanity in the 21st century, climate policy has seldom been able to

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Amidst the many disagreements that usually mar climate talks, there is at least a broad consensus on an effective end goal- to stabilise carbon dioxide concentration at 450-550ppm and thereby limit change in temperature to 2 degrees. This would require halting the growth in emissions by the year 2020 and subsequently reducing emissions by 2.5% every year after that.

These targets have been adopted by most countries under the Kyoto framework and serve as the underlying guidelines for their national policies. However, under the existing socio-economic and geo-political framework of uncertainty, the ability to achieve even 75% of the central goal by the required time frame should count as an achievement. But, while we broadly seem to know what needs to be done, doing it remains the difficult part.

The Kyoto Protocol has been largely unable to achieve the reduction in emission targets it set out for developed economies. With the US withdrawing from the Kyoto Protocol in 2003 and an increase in Canada, Australia and Japan's emissions by more than 23.4%, 22% and 8.1% respectively from 1990 levels, the Kyoto Protocol has essentially been a failure.

Developing economies like India and China are now in the bracket of the largest emitters of carbon emissions but are not legally bound. They argue that they produce on behalf of the industrialised countries that are the primary consumers. Hence, the cost of reduction in emission must be borne by the consumer, a view that the developed economies have vehemently opposed.

Similarly, emissions from shipping, aviation and a number of other industries are not included in the Kyoto framework. These industries have seen a severe increase in their carbon emissions over the last decade. Monitoring and review mechanisms are also poor. For example, the technology to measure carbon emissions caused by deforestation, ocean and sink depletion, agriculture, and soil erosion are simply not robust enough.



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A legally binding emissions

agreement India and China.

While countries are expected to meet their targets through various national measures, they have also had the option of doing it through other methods enshrined in the Kyoto Protocol, which include "Emissions Trading", "Clean Development Mechanism" and "Joint Implementation". The European Union has been relatively more successful in achieving substantial emissions reduction. However this can be attributed to it greatly benefitting from emissions trading with Eastern European economies that had collapsed financially after the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

For example, the United Kingdom was able to achieve its Kyoto target by decreasing its domestic carbon dioxide emissions by 23% from 1990 levels by 2011. But, studies indicate an increase of around 10% since 1990 from the emission production of its imports. Oxford economist Dieter Helm wonders, "what exactly is the point of reducing emissions in Europe if it encourages energy intensive industry to move to China, where the pollution will be even worse?"

While the Clean Development Mechanism CDM has been successful in promoting emission reduction projects through carbon trading in the short term, it has failed to address the reduction at a time when developing economies like India and China are locking into long-term carbon-intensive projects such as coal-fired power plants. Moreover, this finance has not made any significant inroads into sustainable development projects in developing economies, which was one of major incentives for such a system being adopted under the Kyoto framework in the first place.

The success of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) framework has been its ability to provide a common forum for debate. However, it has been largely unable to sustain a regime that can be monitored and enforced -- this remains its biggest shortcoming. The lesson from Kyoto is loud and clear: international law can sometimes end up being a very poor mechanism for allocating emissions permits.



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Climate negotiators in Paris might be better off adopting a bottoms up approach with each country

declaring their INDCs and working on the less controversial strategies...

In the ensuing negotiations in Paris, President Obama has hinted on the need for a partial legally binding agreement though the details on the same are unclear. The White House has clarified that he was emphasising the need to have periodic reviews of Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs are voluntary measures a country takes to tackle climate change) to be legally binding. However, even for him, this might be easier said than done. A legally binding emissions reduction agreement is bound to alienate India and China.

A legally binding review mechanism might not impress the Republicans back home and with them currently dominating the Congress, this move is unlikely to pass through. Even if he decides to exercise his veto, Republicans have already warned of cutting funding to his other initiatives. Elections are also not too far away and in the eventuality that the US gets a Republican President, this move will be definitely derailed. There are already indications that the Republicans are not in favour of contributing to the Green Climate Fund.

With so much uncertainty around US long-term commitment towards a top-down approach (legally binding emission agreements or review mechanisms), at this juncture, climate negotiators in Paris might be better off adopting a bottoms up approach with each country declaring their INDCs and working on the less controversial strategies, such as the need to shore up the Green Climate Fund or Adaptation Fund etc. However, are the INDC ambitions of each country in sync with a 2 degree target? How much more ambitious will these targets get in the next two decades? Only time will tell. The clock though, is already ticking.



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