

# Deconstructing the Climate Blame Game

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An accusation that is being made post-Copenhagen is that the major developing countries, China in particular, blocked ambitious emission reduction targets that were offered by the advanced economies. But a dissection of the offers shows that a backloading of cuts and a refusal to specify near-term reductions would retain inequalities in emissions and lead to a further grab by the developed countries of the “carbon space” available to keep global temperature rise under 2 degrees celsius.

It is obvious that the Copenhagen Accord has disappointed many sections of world public opinion that had looked forward to an equitable and viable global plan of action to combat global warming. While the Accord commits its signatories to keeping the rise in global temperatures below 2 degrees celsius, it does not specify any global plan of emissions reduction that would enable this goal to be achieved.

The developed countries and the bulk of their media have been quick to blame China for the absence of such commitments and have held China and the other major developing countries responsible for the unambitious nature of the Copenhagen Accord. The first salvo was launched by United Kingdom Secretary for the Environment Ed Miliband in a comment in *The Guardian*, on 20 December 2009. Miliband's key accusation, among other minor ones, was that in the final negotiations China had vetoed two specific numbers. The first was a commitment by all nations to reduce annual global emissions by 50% below 1990 levels by 2050. The second was a specific offer that the developed countries would reduce emissions by 80% below 1990 levels by 2050. A more dramatic version of these accusations has come from Mark Lynas, best-selling British author on climate issues and currently climate change adviser to the government of the Maldives

in a comment widely circulated in the global media.

Were the proposed global quantitative commitments indeed a major step forward in setting the stage for further climate action and was China being selfish and irresponsible in opposing them? A closer look at the import of these numbers suggests something quite different from what the political leaders of the developed nations would like the world to believe.

## Scarce Resource

Climate science is clear that to ensure a greater than 50-50 chance of keeping global temperature increases below 2 degrees celsius, humanity as a whole cannot emit more than approximately 1,000 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide between 2000 and 2050 and must stabilise the carbon dioxide concentration in the atmosphere shortly thereafter. The space for emissions or “carbon space” is therefore a scarce resource that needs to be equitably shared among all nations. It bears emphasis that of the carbon space that is already occupied, the developed nations have a disproportionate share of approximately 75%, despite their share of the world's population being only 19%.

In mitigation therefore the key to the realisation of the global common good is coordinated and not unilateral action. Such action must also be equitable, ensuring that those who have taken a disproportionate share of carbon space historically make sufficient room for the needs of the rest. Thus, if the developed nations announce a unilateral emissions reduction, prima facie this is not generosity but in reality a statement of how much of the global atmospheric commons they will occupy in the future.

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Crucially, the share of carbon space that they are laying claim to will not be determined only by the reduction in their annual emissions in the final target year. It also depends very much on the pathway by which this target is reached. It is easy to see that if drastic emissions reductions are pushed to the future with very low cuts in the beginning, then the developed countries make things considerably easier for themselves by emitting more and grabbing a considerably greater share of carbon space. On the other hand, an equitable distribution of carbon space demands that the developed countries cut early and drastically and not postpone the bulk of the reduction to the future.

The upshot of this is Miliband's target of 80% reduction by 2050 for developed countries is of marginal value unless we know how they are going to get there.

In reality, the Copenhagen Accord leaves it to the developed countries themselves to decide this, instead of committing them to immediate and substantial emission reductions ranging from 25% to 40% below 1990 levels by 2020 as recommended by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

Using the model of computing the burden-sharing of emissions reduction that we have developed with other collaborators (reported in Tejal Kanitkar et al, EPW, 10 October 2009) it is easy to calculate how much more carbon space the developed countries will grab if they cut emissions up to 2020 according to their current pledges. Compared to the IPCC scenario of 40% reduction by 2020, the developed countries will emit an extra 100 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide if they go by their current pledges. This amounts to almost 34% more than what is their due under the IPCC scenario.

### Perpetuating Inequities

It is clear that for developing countries to accept both an 80% reduction by 2050 and voluntary cuts till 2020 would only sanction this further grab of carbon space by the developed nations. Weak near-term targets with only long-term quantitative commitments are also a means of ensuring in-built inequities as is clear from per capita emissions under this scenario. The

per capita emissions of developed countries and the US in particular by 2050 would continue to be higher by at least a factor of two compared to the developing nations, over and above the considerable loss of carbon space on the way, unlike the IPCC scenario that would allow the convergence of per capita emissions of all nations by 2050.

Matters are actually worse than this. For one, the IPCC target for developed country reductions by 2050 is 90% of 1990 levels and not 80%. The next sleight of hand is with the global target of 50% emissions reduction by 2050. Again this specification alone is of little use without specifying how the world is going to get there. It is a good diversionary slogan in the short-term and a new source of pressure on the developing countries for mitigation action in the long-term.

But the most drastic implication of these suggestions is that low cuts by the Annex 1 countries (the advanced economies) and the need to keep within the 1,000 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide budget, would actually require developing countries to slow down their emissions growth drastically, now. Further, absolute reduction of their emissions must begin even before 2020, a very few years from now. India would have to peak by around 2020 and the smaller developing countries before

2025. In contrast, in the IPCC scenario, the peaking years for developing countries could be roughly a decade later (and more if the carbon budget were above 1,000 billion tonnes).

In fact, earlier versions of the Copenhagen Accord, precisely sought to make this explicit, demanding the specification of the peaking year for the emissions of all developing countries taken collectively, with individual countries specifying the peaking year for their national emissions. Even if that attempt was rejected out of hand by developing countries, it is clear that in future negotiations this would be dragged up again.

Small wonder then that China's Wen Jibao, representing what is arguably the most scientifically advanced nation in climate issues among developing countries, refused to be drawn into the trap of voluntary mid-term reductions coupled with firm global targets for 2050 despite the extraordinary pressure on him at Copenhagen. Indeed the inequitable burden-sharing arrangement in mitigation is already under way. As a leaked UNFCCC assessment of mitigation actions, a document that the UK's Miliband does not mention, makes clear, the emissions reduction from commitments for deviations from business-as-usual made so far by the developing nations amount

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to more than the emissions reduction from the voluntary commitments of the developed nations.

### **Divisions in Developing World**

But a significant weakness of the position of the BASIC four (Brazil, South Africa, India and China) at Copenhagen is that from the point of view of the small developing nations at the forefront of climate change as well as the small island nations the question of who bears the brunt of emissions cuts may seem moot, especially since global warming threatens their very

existence. At the summit, the developed countries led by the United States succeeded in driving a wedge between the major developing economies and the rest of the G-77, counterposing the development needs of a major part of the world's population with the vulnerability of the small nations at the forefront of global warming impacts.

While fighting for their justified share of carbon space, it is clear that the major developing economies need to acknowledge that they have greater responsibilities as distinct from the rest of G-77 to

avoid being trapped by the developed countries. At the same time, any attempt by the smaller developing nations to capitalise on this division between the developed nations and the major developing nations, would legitimise the current tactics of the global North that undermines the very global environmental governance that is critical to their ability to face up to the climate crisis. But both sections collectively need to evolve an arrangement that guarantees a relatively fair share of the global carbon space within a reasonably tight carbon budget.