



The Current Column
of 21 December 2009

**Taking a chance on a more democratic
climate policy. The poorest countries are
the moral winners of a disappointing
Copenhagen climate summit**

By Fariborz Zelli,
German Development Institute /
Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik



Taking a chance on a more democratic climate policy. The poorest countries are the moral winners of a disappointing Copenhagen climate summit

Bonn, 21 December 2009. The Copenhagen climate conference was marked by many an absurdity even before the last-night showdown that brought it to a close. While some were forced to wait for admission, in part patiently, in part despairingly, out in the cold in front of the conference centre, others, who had made it in, were threatening to leave the talks. Outside the gates to the Bella Center, in the south of the Danish capital, hundreds of delegates from non-governmental organisations had to stand, some for over seven hours, freezing in the snow to register for observer status. The conference organisers, at a complete loss, daily confronted these representatives of civil society with new restrictions, until, in the end, not even one hundred of them were left to be admitted. At the same time, inside the Center the delegations from the poorest developing countries, annoyed over the course the talks had taken, were mulling a boycott in response. Despite this set of divergent spatial aspirations, the two groups seemed, until just before the talks ground to an end, to have one thing in common: their lack of influence on the conference's outcome.

That things turned out differently in the end, with the supposedly weakest countries leaving their unmistakable mark on the Copenhagen conference, may, though, be regarded, well and truly, as the start of a new era of international climate negotiations. With their resistance to a compromise that enjoyed the blessings of industrialised and leading developing countries, the poorest nations broke with two sacrosanct traditions that had evolved in the 17-year history of the UN Climate Convention. For one thing, the group of developing countries, now with a total of 130 members, has always shown unity when it comes to central issues – and has done so despite substantial internal discrepancies as regards level of economic development or actual vulnerability to climate change. For another, it has as a rule been a small group of powerful countries that have managed, virtually at the last minute, to negotiate a breakthrough, as in the cases of Kyoto in 1997 and Bali two years ago. It is tempting to seek to legitimise this concert of the powerful by pointing out that this is, at the same time, the only way to bring the biggest greenhouse gas emitters together at one table. However, this cliquishness on the part of those chiefly responsible for climate change inevitably turns a blind eye to the interests of the groups not invited to join: the least developed countries, the small island states, and the coalition of African nations.

Up into the late hours of the last day of negotiations, all seemed to be proceeding as might have been expected: While, in the foreground, a parade of not less than 119 heads of state and government were taking the rostrum, US President Obama met, behind closed doors, with the leaders of 24 industrialised and emerging countries, including a bilateral encounter with Chinese Prime minister Wen Jibao. Finally, shortly before his departure, it was of course President Obama who announced what was referred to as a last-minute accord. And, be it said in passing, Obama, by going it alone, contributed to further weakening the hapless Danish chairmanship of the negotiations under Prime Minister Rasmussen. Day for day, either the hosts themselves or the various countries groups in attendance launched one new draft final declaration after the other. This not only contributed to the confusion of a conference in no way lacking in themes and contentious issues. Worse still: All this served in effect to embolden those intent on watering down the 'Copenhagen Accord' – so far, in fact, that it was no longer acceptable to the poorer developing countries.

The latter objected, rightly, both to the lack of a clear-cut roadmap leading to a binding agreement and to the exercise in mere lip service when it came to taking concrete steps towards avoiding a rise in the average global temperature of over 2°C. Even so, the compromise, rejected by many poor countries, did contain a few usable elements that could go into the making of a new, future conven-



tion. This goes, for example, for the willingness noted by Obama – before running cameras – of the emerging countries to reduce their own emissions. The Industrialised countries further announced their willingness to make billions of dollars available for emission reductions and adaptation measures undertaken by developing countries: 30 billion by 2012 and an annual 100 billion starting in 2020. While these sums are, in the World Bank's view, still not sufficient, they do amount to something on the order of a quantum leap compared to the funding that has been pledged thus far. But the crucial issue will be the sources tapped to provide these funds. In the interest of their own credibility, the industrialised countries will, as Klaus Töpfer, former director of the UN Environment Programme recently noted, have to avoid even the appearance of engaging in bookkeeping stunts, and instead of simply rededicating development assistance already approved, they will need to appropriate new, additional funds.

And the legacy of Copenhagen? Even though plenty of precious time was frittered away there, what the conference has left behind is not a pure shambles but an urgent call to pay more heed to the interests of the poorest developing countries. Those who now unthinkingly bemoan the sluggishness of the UN process, extolling instead the supposed merits of smaller fora, have failed to get the message. There are enough arenas where industrialised and emerging countries come together to discuss, undisturbed, climate-relevant issues, including e.g. the G8+5 or G20 formats or the US-initiated "Major Economies Forum on Energy and Climate." The revolt of the small and poor in Copenhagen simply illustrates the fact that the UN climate negotiations are at present the only platform available for the voices of those who are or stand to be hardest hit by global warming. The goal over the months to come must be to do more to integrate these voices with a view to creating a broader base for a more ambitious agreement.

And so the failure of Copenhagen could, with a bit of good will, be viewed as a wholesome shock, one that may pave the way for a more fair and just culture of negotiation. Just before the conference got underway, former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan called for a new quality of this kind for international cooperation, expressing the hope that the spirit of conflict and manoeuvring embraced by individual country groups was in no way adequate to the 'all-in-the-same-boat' character of the climate problem. In the past two weeks, the locked-out representatives of civil society, and be they from the rich or the poorest countries, were closer by far to this realisation than the occupants of the Bella Center. "Change Politics, not the Climate" was the motto they wrote on one of the banners they displayed during the protest march marking the conference's half-time. Next time it would certainly be better to listen to them than just to leave them standing out in the cold.



By Fariborz Zelli

German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE).