

Negotiating Without Goals or Science: Have the Risks of Climate Change Diminished?



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Abstract : Humans cannot negotiate with Mother Nature (i.e., the natural laws of physics, chemistry, and biology); all they can do is agree upon how and when they will conform to these laws. The Copenhagen Conference on Global Climate Change held in December 2009 failed utterly to produce any quantitative goals on emissions or dates by which they would be reduced despite massive scientific evidence that reducing anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions to match Earth's assimilative capacity for them is long overdue and should begin immediately. The time has probably already passed for keeping the global temperature increase below 2°C despite the link between climate change and resource constraints. The 3-page accord that US President Obama negotiated with the leaders of China, India, Brazil, and South Africa failed to set a 2010 goal for reaching a binding international treaty to seal the provisions of the accord. In short, the negotiations at Copenhagen did not result in crisp, numerical goals and objectives.

Key words : Climate negotiations, Laws of nature, Tipping Points, Greenhouse gas emissions, Universal emission targets, Climate change

Introduction

Man is a goal seeking animal. His life only has meaning if he is reaching out and striving for his goals. **Aristotle**

Many people fail in life, not for lack of ability or brains or even courage but simply because they have never organized their energies around a goal. **Elbert Hubbard**

Obstacles are those things you see when you take your eyes off the goal.

Hannah More

Nations can negotiate with each other but cannot alter the natural laws of physics, chemistry, and biology. Reductions in anthropogenic greenhouse gases and the time set for these reductions must be congruent with natural laws or they will fail. One can judge the results of the Copenhagen Conference on Global Climate Change in December 2009, including global warming, by the answer to a single question – Did the Conference significantly reduce risk and improve security for human society? Reducing risk and improving security require action based on goals with specific reductions in anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions until their atmospheric concentrations match the biospheric assimilative capacity for them. Reductions must be introduced immediately populations of low-lying islands and river deltas remain at serious risk from rising sea levels caused by global climate change, glaciers and ice sheets are melting rapidly, Earth is still warming, droughts

and floods continue, deserts continue to expand, and potable water is increasingly scarce. Humankind's carbon footprint continues to increase, which is aided by plane travel to global climate conferences such as the one in Copenhagen – one US senator is reported to have made the 9-hour (each way) flight to spend only 3 hours in Copenhagen.

“Even before the farce in Copenhagen began it was looking like it might be too late to prevent two or more degrees of global warming” (Monbiot, 2009). The German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU; 2009, p. 1) reports: “Governments still appear to be fixated on the task of supposedly establishing, maintaining or restoring their national economic competitiveness rather than on preserving the natural life-support systems which are the basic prerequisite for any form of economic activity.” Climatologist James Hansen states: “Science reveals that climate is close to tipping points. It is a dead certainty that continued high emissions will create a chaotic dynamic situation for young people, with deteriorating climate conditions out of their control” (Hansen as quoted in James, 2009). James (2009) states: “In the Copenhagen Accord there are no deadlines, no assurances, and talk of keeping below 2C makes no link between science and reality of continued pollution.”

Chazan (2009) reports: “The agreement achieved at the Copenhagen climate summit leaves business leaders around the world close to where they began, facing uncertainty about how environmental policy will

affect their costs and decisions about investments.” Vidal *et al.* (2009) report: “The UN climate summit reached a weak outline of a global agreement in Copenhagen tonight, falling far short of what Britain and many poor countries were seeking and leaving months of tough negotiations to come.” In contrast, “China and Indonesia have hailed the UN Copenhagen climate summit outcome, despite its cool reception from aid agencies and campaigners” (BBC News, 2009).

Klein (2009) was not impressed by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s press conference in which she “said that the U.S. would contribute its ‘share’ to a \$100-billion financing package for developing countries by 2020 – but only if all countries agreed to the terms of the climate deal that the U.S. has slammed on the table here, which include killing Kyoto, replacing legally binding measures with the fuzzy concept of ‘transparency,’ and nixing universal emissions targets in favor of vague ‘national plans’ that are masked together.”

Wackernagel (2009) is one of the few people who has focused intently on the future and resource constraints: “Most delegations seem to be unaware of the link between climate change and resource constraints. Why would Europe propose to reduce emissions by X, and to reduce even more if everybody participates? If they fully realized resource constraints, and recognized that without a strong Copenhagen regime the world will get volatile more quickly, their proposition would look differently.”

Broder (2009) states: “The three-page accord that Mr. Obama negotiated with the leaders of China, India, Brazil and South Africa and then presented to the Conference did not meet even the modest expectations that leaders set for this meeting, notably by failing to set a 2010 goal for reaching a binding international treaty to seal the provisions of the accord. Nor does the plan firmly commit the industrialized nations or the developing nations to firm targets for midterm or long-term greenhouse gas emissions reductions. The accord is nonetheless significant in that it codifies the commitments of individual nations to act on their own to tackle global warming.”

The WBGU (2009) sums up the “achievements” succinctly: “The Copenhagen climate summit fell far short of expectations. The only substantial result was the Copenhagen Accord, which was worked out by the heads of state of the most important countries and merely ‘taken note of’ by the remaining community of states.”

At the individual level of negotiations, Goodnough (2009) comments on an attempt to replace old, inefficient wood stoves that have high particulate emissions with new, more efficient wood stoves. However, some residents in Keene, New Hampshire, USA, feel that “they know better than the bureaucrats, whom some suspect of exaggerating the risk posed by the old wood stoves. . . . New Englanders . . . treat their old stoves like cherished friends and can’t imagine their old friend going into a scrap heap.” Although the state offered residents US\$1,000 toward the cost of a new stove that would meet current emission requirements, some people have not taken advantage of this offer.

Consequently, at the national level, many nations are not yet “on board” with a global climate pact that lacks precisely stated goals within a particular time frame. At the individual level, not all individuals are “on board,” despite a financial incentive and the likelihood that the local air quality would be improved.

Abrupt Climate Change: The Wild Card in all Negotiations

“Two hypotheses have been put forward to explain the large and abrupt climate change that punctuated glacial time. One attributes such changes to reorganizations of the ocean’s thermohaline circulation and the other to changes in tropical atmosphere-ocean dynamics. . . . In any case, we are still a long way from understanding how our climate system accomplished the large and abrupt change so richly recorded in ice and sediment. However, despite this ignorance, it is clear that Earth’s climate system has proven itself to be an angry beast. When nudged, it is capable of a violent response” (Broecker, 2003).

Even so, these abrupt changes seemed not to have influenced the Copenhagen Conference deciders. No specific emission goals were set for a particular time, and no substantive discussion occurred on emergency response should a climate tipping point be passed. Brown (2009) comments: “We are in a race between political tipping points and natural tipping points. Can we cut carbon emissions fast enough to save the Greenland ice sheet and avoid the resulting rise in sea level? Can we close coal-fired power plants fast enough to save the glaciers in the Himalayas and on the Tibetan Plateau, the ice melt of which sustains the major rivers and irrigation systems of Asia during the dry season? Can we stabilize population by reducing fertility before nature takes over and stabilizes our numbers by raising mortality?”

Conclusions

The “negotiations” at Copenhagen did not produce crisp, numerical goals and objectives. No binding agreement was reached on what would be done to reduce risks from rapid climate change. Moreover, no sense of urgency was present for the catastrophic consequences of passing social and ecological tipping points that are almost certainly irreversible. Humankind may soon suffer unthinkable events that could have been avoided if world leadership had considered more carefully the consequences of continued “business as usual.”

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