

COP19 opens in Warsaw amidst worsening climate situation

Warsaw, 11 Nov (Martin Khor*) - This year's COP19 in Warsaw is likely to show yet again the difficult complexities of the world trying to extricate itself from the full-scale climate crisis.

It also takes place at a time of extreme weather events and ecological hazards. In the Asian region alone, the Philippines is enduring the strongest storm in recorded history. Recently, there were also a powerful cyclone in India, serious fires in Australia, heavy rains and floods in many countries, air pollution in Beijing, the "haze" in Southeast Asia. The experience of extreme weather events is also prevalent in all other regions.

The concentration of Greenhouse gases is rising to record levels. The amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere rose in a year by 2.2 parts per million to reach 393 ppm in 2012, or 141% above the pre-industrial level of 278ppm. By 2015 or 2016, that average may reach the landmark 400ppm, according to the latest World Meteorological Organisation report. In fact, the 400 level had already been breached in several stations, including in Hawaii earlier this year.

The signs on the ground and the science are increasingly scary. But adequately implementing the actions to prevent further global warming (mitigation) and for coping with the effects (adaptation) is still out of reach.

At Warsaw the differences in approaches among countries on the global framework for action will likely re-surface.

Finance as the Key Issue: Warsaw as the "Finance COP"?

The developing countries are united in seeking the significant levels of finance needed for their climate actions. Without external financing, they can't mobilise the large resources needed for technological change, replacing energy sources,

improving energy efficiency, re-fitting machines, re-designing buildings, changing the fuels in vehicles, stopping deforestation, etc. Their existing scarce resources are also needed for economic and social development. To complicate things further, the global economic slowdown is already taking a toll, with economic growth going down, commodity prices declining, trade deficits of many countries widening, and a few countries being caught in a debt and foreign exchange crisis.

The developing countries want Warsaw to be the "Finance COP", during which developed countries commit to concrete and adequate funding. The latter had already committed in the Cancun COP to mobilising US\$100 billion a year by 2020.

To start with, they pledged \$10 billion a year in 2010-12. That period is over, and there is no concrete commitment for 2013 or after, and no road-map of scaling up the funds from 2013 to 2020.

This is dispiriting, especially since the developed countries' governments have been stressing their lack of funds and that much of the money can be obtained from the private sector, which is not the usual way that North-to-South financial resources are committed.

The Green Climate Fund Board has made some progress in its meetings this year. Nevertheless, there are hardly any funds except for administrative costs so far.

There are eight items on finance issues in the COP and CMP agendas, including long-term finance, standing committee on finance, GCF, the GCF-COP arrangements, fifth review of financial mechanism and Adaptation Fund.

Eagerly anticipated is a whole-day Ministerial dialogue on finance on 20 November. It is

hoped that this dialogue will clarify what resources will be available. If there is a breakthrough in financing commitments, the mood will change among developing countries, which will be able to gear themselves to greater actions. If the lack of clarity continues, or it becomes more evident that there are no significant new funds, the gloomy situation will continue and may infect the overall mood.

Mitigation and Interpretations of “Applicable to All”

The major developed countries have a higher priority in the post-2020 and pre-2020 mitigation agenda. They are interested in getting developing countries to commit themselves to help fill in the pre-2020 emissions gap. The developing countries are interested if the Kyoto Protocol second period commitments have been ratified, the review of adequacy of commitments and the possible upgrading of commitments, and whether there will be a comparable effort made by non-KP2 Annex 1 Parties.

The European Union is seeking in Warsaw that each country in 2014 will make a pledge on reducing its emissions. In the plan, the pledges are to be assessed by other countries, and revised upwards if necessary and possible. Then the pledges will be placed as commitments in an agreement during the COP in 2015 in Paris, to be implemented after 2020.

This proposal is seen as premature by some developing countries. They want firstly to negotiate and clarify the principles, rules and elements of a mitigation framework, before pledges are made. They insist that developed and developing countries should have different types of commitments, as the Convention indicates.

Secondly they want to ensure first that financial resources and technology transfer are adequate and really forthcoming. For most developing countries, mitigation actions (NAMAs) are conditioned on finance and technology support being forthcoming.

Negotiating the principles and rules, and the finance and technology commitments should be tied together with the mitigation or emission-reduction issue, and all these should be included in the agreement together with the adaptation issue, according to these developing countries. There cannot be a mitigation-alone agreement.

Another sticking point is the types of mitigation commitments by developed and developing countries. The agreement to be signed in 2015 is to be “applicable to all” but there are different interpretations to this term.

Many developing countries, citing the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and the principle of equity, argue that an agreement would apply to all which sign it, but that it would not apply in a uniform way. “Universality of application does not mean uniformity in application”, as some have stated. In particular, it does not mean uniformity in the types and extent of obligations. According to this argument, there must be a qualitative difference in the commitments of developed countries (which mainly caused the climate problem through their historical emissions) and the developing countries (which are still at a lower economic level and need space to develop).

Most developed countries however seem to take the view that “applicable to all” means that all countries should be treated the same way, with similar levels of legal-bindingness and taking on the same type of emission-reduction obligations, with any difference being mainly in the timeframe for implementation.

Progress on the post-2020 framework may depend on whether an understanding can be reached on this issue.

Adaptation; and Loss and Damage

Another issue in Warsaw is adaptation. Developing countries want to take measures to reduce the impact of climate change, for example by improving the drainage systems to cope with the increased incidence and strength of rainfall and floods; seawalls to protect from sea-water rise, storm surges and tsunamis; sustainable agriculture methods and more hardy crop varieties that can adapt to global warming, etc.

But the already meager funds for adaptation have become much smaller due to the drying up of the Adaptation Fund (mainly due to the very low carbon-trading prices), while the GCF adaptation window is not yet operating. How to address this crisis in adaptation financing may be one of the important issues in Warsaw.

Related to adaptation is how to address “loss and damage” caused by climate change. Last year’s COP in Doha made a breakthrough by agreeing on further work on this issue. This was hailed by

many newspapers as the most important development of COP18.

In particular the decision in COP18 mandated Warsaw's COP19 to set up "institutional arrangements" such as a mechanism on loss and damage. Since Doha, meetings have been held on loss and damage issues, with discussions including on understanding future needs and on how to address slow onset events.

A key focus in Warsaw will thus be to establish the institutional arrangements. The discussion on

setting up an international loss and damage mechanism (as a key component of the arrangements) would have to include key issues of the functions of the mechanism, the modalities of performing the functions, and the financing.

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