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2015 the New Copenhagen? The UNFCCC Process Risks Falling into Faulty Patterns

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J. JACKSON EWING, JAN 19 2013

The fallout from the 18th Conference of Parties (COP 18) in Doha, as with a litany of past climate change summits, has been defined largely by frustration with the pace, scope and ambition of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) processes. Exasperated and often derisive voices lament the vacuous extension of the Kyoto Protocol, pervasive uncertainties on funding mitigation and adaptation efforts in developing countries, and failures to heed increasingly clear scientific warnings. At their core, these and other critiques are simply different versions of discontent over efforts that are seen not to be adequate responses to the climate challenge.

It has become difficult in recent years to envisage any other response to global climate change summitry. Critics of climate conferences will always find fodder in underwhelming COP outcomes, and Doha has only solidified the skirmish lines between vocal critics and those who claim that measured, modest progress continues and represents the only game in town.

On a more micro-level however, Doha has seen further entrenchment of a potentially troubling dynamic: the circling of calendar dates at which a future grand bargain is to take place. In this sense the UNFCCC risks reverting to bad habits.

The Copenhagen Syndrome

Goals for the 2009 COP 15 in Copenhagen were ubiquitous to climate change summits in Bali and Poznan during the preceding two years. The once lauded 'Bali Roadmap' made clear that Copenhagen was in focus, and the upcoming conference took on an almost mythical narrative as being the place at which the ship would be righted once and for all.

The relative failure of Copenhagen to live up to its billing created a justifiable backlash against such approaches. The Copenhagen meetings demonstrated, among other things, that seemingly well-established plans in the climate change sector remained hostage to international trends and moods in a range of sectors. In that case, global economic stresses, deficits in political capital among key countries and poor leadership by the host nation conspired to send delegates home without the grand bargain which they had for some time sought.

Subsequent meetings in Cancun and to an extent Durban have attempted to cool the temperature of key climate debates by opting rather to pick low-hanging fruits and make incremental progress on ostensibly achievable goals. While this has not assuaged those clamouring about a lack of urgency, it has allowed the UNFCCC process to proceed with modest successes and avoid the cynicism and melancholy that followed Copenhagen.

Events in Doha beg questioning whether these recent softly and slowly approaches have fallen out of favour. In place of Copenhagen, the thrust of the UNFCCC process now targets COP 21 in 2015, at which point a series of paramount decisions will notionally usher in a new era of climate change response. It is in 2015 that 'binding' emissions targets will be set for key high emitting countries, essential bargains struck between developing and

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developed states and categories re-evaluated about what countries belong where in the climate discourse and framework.

This vision may unsurprisingly give pause to those still smarting from Copenhagen's failures, and the narratives of Durban and particularly Doha suggest lessons unlearned from Bali and Poznan. Beyond Bali and Poznan, however, Doha has doubled-down on the UNFCCC proclivity for stopgap measures meant to bridge the gap between the present and some putative future in which political will might be more forthcoming. The Kyoto Protocol provides the most (in)famous such example. The Protocol needed to be extended because of the range of clean development mechanism, joint implementation and carbon marketisation programmes that it underwrites; even if many of these programmes are increasingly embattled. Letting this range of activities either flag or proceed rudderless would have eroded the global climate change architecture to a point perhaps beyond recognisable return. The Protocol remains, however, a wholly deficient check on the climate challenge as the vast majority of global emissions fall outside of its purview.

The Process Paradox

Critics and supporters of extending the Kyoto Protocol can thus both readily find solid ground. It is an increasingly ineffective treaty existing on borrowed time that nevertheless needs to be kept alive because of the ramifications of not doing so. This is a microcosm of a larger climate paradox, which pits the seeming necessity of rapid and fairly radical action against the reality that finding agreement on climate change is slowed by the fundamental nature of the problem. Climate change's tendrils extend into an exhaustive range of sectors, it has a myriad of impacts that are highly differentiated across time and space and, for understandable reasons, it garners profoundly different levels of policy prioritisation from disparate actors. It thus represents an unprecedented global commons challenge that renders no clear processes for moving forward.

Calls for patience and cautious optimism liken the UNFCCC challenge to the decades-long slog between Bretton Woods and the formation of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), or the ongoing efforts towards nuclear non-proliferation, and argue through various forms that Rome was not built in a day. The World Bank, United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), contributors to Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) assessments and others, meanwhile, continue to release reports that spell out the climate challenges, and the inadequacy of efforts to address them, in their bare, confronting realities. Ambition and urgency along with incremental and at times piecemeal efforts therefore both appear essential and increasingly at odds with one another.

Solutions to this process conundrum are far from apparent, but sober starting points on the broad approaches that will define global climate change policies are essential. The reevaluation of strict lines between the developed and developing (annex I and non-annex I) countries must continue; as no agreement that does not constrict high-emitting emerging economies has any chance for success. Conversations about blurring these lines made strides in Durban but saw little movement in Doha as efforts to keep the fundamentals of the climate architecture alive took centre stage. The toothlessness of 'binding agreements' in their current form should also be all too apparent, and new approaches would do well to either make censuring options clearly apparent or move away from the obsession with binding agreements altogether. New metrics for emissions measurement, whether through per-capita, per-unit of GDP, industrial outputs, or, most ideally, some combination of these and other measurements, should be embraced.

Most importantly for any such efforts however, is that UNFCCC actors continue to converge on overarching processes and strategies, and this necessitates a sober look past failures, current trajectories and the connections that currently bind them.

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