S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
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RSIS COMMENTARIES

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Post-Kyoto Protocol:
Changing a Climate of Denial?

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As governments gear up to meet in Copenhagen later this year to formulate a post-Kyoto Protocol framework on climate change, governments have been slow in translating scientific knowledge into policy responses. There is a need for a holistic approach.

AS THE world counts down to the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen at year's end, governments have been scurrying for global consensus on a post-2012 framework on climate change. A recent international scientific congress on climate change hosted by the University of Copenhagen seems to suggest that current efforts are not enough. New scientific findings on climate change tabled at the congress show that the problem is far more severe than what the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) suggests in its latest report. This document is known as the fourth assessment report on climate change (AR4).

Doomsday scenarios have yet again been raised. Sea levels may rise much higher than previously forecasted to threatening the lives of about 10% of world's population. There is also only a 50:50 probability of the international community stopping a 2 degree Celsius rise in temperatures. Even Lord Nicholas Stern, whose socio-economic projections in the Stern Review had set alarm bells ringing in 2006, noted that he had underestimated the adverse implications of climate change for the years ahead.

Denying Scientific Facts

Two observations can be made from these developments. Firstly, there is the issue of time lags which deny scientists from effectively tabling their findings to policy circles. This is in part due to the fact that advancements in science are continuously evolving. As such, government negotiators do not always have the latest findings when formulating policies. Also, translating technical and scientific findings into simple explanations for policymakers as well as the public is a tedious and time-consuming process. Formulating international agreements takes even longer. Politicians have traditionally examined issues with a short- to medium-term focus, whereas issues of climate change require a long term outlook.

Secondly, in addition to keeping up with the science, politicians – to some extent – still deny science when it impedes their perceived national interests. Opinions expressed at this congress, for instance, demonstrated the AR4's shortcomings in effectively synergising science and policy. One may recall the prolonged discussions during the IPCC Meeting in April 2007, when government negotiators edited the final draft of the AR4 "line-by-line". Media reports noted that this was done to reduce the severity of some of the scientific projections on climate change. This was to make it more palatable for policymakers – in particular the United States, China and Saudi Arabia who objected to the phrasing of parts of the text.

Some scientists expressed outrage as they did not favour diluting the scientific projections, which would deny an accurate depiction of the seriousness of the issue. Nevertheless, the revised report was accepted by the international community. Dr Martin Parry, co-chair of the report's working group, reportedly insisted that while "it was regrettable that certain messages were lost… the report was not watered down in the broad thrust".

Denying Security from Vulnerabilities

There is also a trend of denying communities their security from vulnerabilities. The AR4 notes that certain communities are more vulnerable to the effects of climate change than others. There is however a lack of understanding as to why this is so. While poverty, limited infrastructure and capacity to deal with these issues are often cited, other factors must be given more weight. There is a need for a broader understanding of the deeper issues faced by communities... Studies done in Mumbai reflect this. Pre-existing issues of inequality and discrimination have pushed slum-dwellers to live in areas that are more prone to environmental risks (such as low-lying regions by the rivers). This increases their vulnerability to the effects of climate change.

Secondly, governments need to ensure that measures to address climate change are effective and work in tandem with other policy responses. For instance, the Indonesian government had pledged to improve drainage systems in Jakarta to address the increasing severity of floods. However, more thinking is needed on the impact that sewage and drainage construction would have on slum-dwellers. These urban poor communities have mostly been forced out of these premises at very short notice with little or no compensation.

While government officials have noted there have been monetary compensation, the culture of corruption in the country had resulted in very little of that money trickling down to the slum-dwellers. Flood experts have also noted the tendency of government officials to opt for short-term flood mitigation solutions rather than a fully integrated approach. Such a broader approach would require improvements in existing flood prevention infrastructure and participation from civil society.

There has been talk of reducing carbon emissions by capitalising the current global economic crisis to create opportunities to address climate change. However, concrete plans have yet to materialise. Providing more jobs in the clean energy/green technology sector has also been mooted by United States President Barack Obama to tackle the current twin evils of climate change and global financial turmoil. Yet, many economists remain sceptical. Such a move would require a much larger amount of capital and may potentially threaten the job security of people in other traditional energy industries such as oil and gas.

Denying Success at COP-15?

In light of these issues, it remains to be seen whether states will be able to reconcile their differences and formulate substantial solutions for regional and local problems. While an international framework post-2012 is vital to address this global problem, governments – both developed and developing – must assess their efforts on two key indicators. Firstly, are their policies pro-active enough and

governments prepared to commit more in a post-2012 framework, and not depend on the low baseline set in the AR4 of 2007? Secondly, are these policies effectively meeting the needs of vulnerable communities?

Developing countries cannot shy away from action under the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities". Simple measures such as safe housing, access to proper sanitation/water facilities and sustainable agricultural methods are basic vital safety nets for the most vulnerable communities.

Bottom-up approaches are also critical in complementing governments' efforts to address climate change. Civil society groups – including scientists and business communities – play an important role in keeping the momentum alive and preventing "issue fatigue". Moreover, they can provide decentralised solutions in meeting energy and resource needs of marginalised communities. These are important to encourage and support policy makers who find it difficult to ensure commitments amidst other pressing global problems.

Action can and must be taken now – for ultimately, international frameworks and government policies are only the tip of the (melting) iceberg of responses needed to tackle climate change.

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