

CIERP Policy Brief

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Following the LDCs: How Leadership in the Climate Regime Could Look

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SUMMARY

As a set of countries with development as their overriding priority and yet highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, the Least Developed Countries are in a unique position to help broker an agreement that is informed by science and meets basic needs. This policy brief puts forward three ideas that could make such an agreement possible.

INTRODUCTION

In his opening remarks at the Least Developed Countries strategy meeting in Kathmandu, Prakash Mathema, the current chair of the Least Developed Countries group announced a new “mantra” for the LDCs: follow us. As negotiations under the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Durban Platform for Enhanced Action (ADP 2) resume in Bonn this June, the LDCs have the opportunity to operationalize the “follow us” mantra by putting forward some out of the box proposals. With an ambitious mandate of concluding a new agreement by 2015, and increasing the ambition of mitigation before the negotiated agreement would enter into force in 2020, this working group affords a key opportunity for the LDCs to contribute to the emerging climate architecture.

As the ADP progresses into negotiating mode, this policy brief utilizes the current window of opportunity to propose three concrete policy recommendations. The basis for these recommendations is recent scholarship on climate negotiations that has critically analyzed the efforts to achieve a comprehensive outcome at the Copenhagen conference in 2009.

CLEAN ENERGY ACCESS: REFRAMING THE NEGOTIATIONS

As scholars have argued, the climate regime, much to its detriment, has focused on devising burden-sharing mechanisms instead of focusing on incentives that could encourage states to join a climate agreement.^{1,2} The provision of clean energy services could be one opportunity to reframe the discussion. Apart from adapting to the impacts of climate change already underway, a major common interest for the Group is access to energy services. Energy services are in fact the critical linchpin that firmly connects climate change with development. Achieving low carbon transformation in this sector will allow for significant reductions in greenhouse gases while providing people with most of the basic services at the same time.

By shifting the discourse of the negotiations into one that focuses on goals and targets for access to energy services, two critical elements of an agreement can be achieved. First, this shift will mobilize an entirely different set of stakeholders that could support an agreement as the distribution of costs and benefits will change. The single-minded focus on carbon emissions has crowded out other framings through which climate change could be viewed. LDCs could play an instrumental role in promoting these alternative framings, thereby mobilizing a different array of stakeholders into the climate regime. Second, the trust deficit between developed and developing countries can be bridged as a common focus on universal goals transcends the usual north-south divide. This framing also avoids the current binary debate on universal participation relying on a pledge and review process versus stringent top-down targets for the future regime. LDCs could play this role of bringing back carbon emissions’ long lost cousin, energy intensity, into the picture.

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1 Prins, G., Galiana, I., Green, C., Grundmann, R., Korhola, A., Laird, F., Nordhaus, T., Pielke, Jr, R., Rayner, S., Sarewitz, D., Shellenberger, M., Stehr, N., and Tezuko, H. 2010. The Hartwell Paper: A new direction for climate policy after the crash of 2009. Oxford, London, UK: Institute for Science, Innovation and Society, University of Oxford and LSE Mackinder Programme, London School of Economics and Political Science.

2 Moomaw, W. and M. Papa. 2012. “Creating Mutual Gains Climate Regime through Universal Clean Energy Services.” Climate Policy DOI: 10.1080/14693062.2011.644072

THE EQUITY SPECTRUM: TYING COMMITMENTS AND DEVELOPMENT GOALS

More than any other negotiating bloc, the LDCs are well poised to make a strong case for firmly casting climate change as a development issue. The negotiating process of achieving a comprehensive outcome opens up many possibilities of devising a ‘spectrum of commitments.’ It is exactly this opportunity that needs to be seized by the LDCs. By linking graduated commitments with development goals, LDCs can help to obtain an agreement that would be in line with the principles of equity and common but differentiated responsibilities while maintaining universal participation. As the previous session of ADP 2 in April 2013 indicated, there is a growing call for proposals that display differentiated commitments. Apart from some attempts by Brazil, China, India and South Africa (BASIC)³ to propose a burden sharing mechanism and some calls to revive the Brazilian proposal⁴ that was made in the negotiation rounds in the lead up to the Kyoto Protocol, LDCs could play a constructive role by putting together a concrete formulation on how such a spectrum of commitments could be achieved.⁵

FORGING ALLIES

The LDCs need to be proactive in utilizing the current state of flux in climate negotiations by reaching across aisles. Apart from partnerships inside the formal negotiations process, the LDCs will have to create and tap a network of support outside of the UNFCCC process. These measures will build confidence and give credibility to any commitment that the members of the group can make, especially while advancing issues like clean energy services. Management of short-lived climate pollutants is an issue that could help to increase pre-2020 ambition and offer significant co-benefits to poorer nations. Furthermore, the lack of a comprehensive agreement, thus far, has spurred a tremendous amount of activity on climate change outside of the process. These innovations and policy experiments need to be brought into the negotiations, and the LDCs could bring in many lessons learned in the readiness and piloting phases already underway.

CONCLUSION

By asking the rest of the world to follow the LDCs, the chair has set the right tone. This policy brief provides some elements to give the vision some material basis. A decisive turn can be achieved by shifting the focus to access to energy services as this will help to advance the climate-development nexus, restore equity, and play to the strengths of a wide array of actors to ultimately achieve a climate agreement that is sustainable.

To summarize, this brief offers three succinct messages:

- Focus on clean energy services;
- Tie mitigation commitments with development outcomes;
- Innovate by building coalitions of state and non-state actors, incorporating the momentum and learning happening outside of the immediate treaty process.

3 BASIC Experts. 2011. “Equitable access to sustainable development: contribution to the body of scientific knowledge.” BASIC Expert Group: Beijing, Brasilia, Cape Town, and Mumbai. www.erc.uct.ac.za/Basic_Experts_Paper.pdf

4 The Brazilian proposal links burden-sharing to changes in surface temperature: FCCC/AGBM/1997/MISC.1/Add.3, <http://unfccc.int/cop4/resource/docs/1997/agbm/misc01a3.htm>

5 For an example, see Baer, P., Athanasiou, T., Kartha, S., and Kemp-Benedict, E. 2008. The Greenhouse Development Rights Framework: the right to development in a climate constrained world. Publication Series on Ecology, Volume 1.

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