



Equity is the key criterion for developing nations

If the Kyoto meeting fails to reach a satisfactory outcome many leaders of developing countries are aware that they maybe asked to share responsibility for the failure. The question occupying the minds of top civil servants from Brasilia to Beijing, already under pressure to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions sooner than they want, is simple; how should they respond?

So far, the Group of 77 developing countries, which includes India, African States, the Middle East, South-east Asia and the whole of Latin America apart from Argentina, has been united in its opposition to the US proposals for developing country commitments.

Unsurprisingly, the poorer countries argue that the rich must take the lion's share of responsibility for combating global warming, on the grounds that they are the prime cause of current problems. Until this happens, the G77 countries say they will also refuse on principle to discuss the issue of emissions trading or joint implementation.

But the G77 is an uneasy coalition. At one end of its spectrum of opinion are the oil states, including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Venezuela, which would prefer a weak agreement that does not harm sales of oil. At the other are the small island states and low lying countries, such as Bangladesh, for which a weak agreement may spell environmental catastrophe. In the middle lie India, China and the other large industrializing countries of the Far East and Latin America, who will resist any agreement that would harm their industrial growth.

How developing countries choose to respond to the

US proposals remains the key question up to, and even after, Kyoto. There are three possible scenarios. Under the first, the US conditions will be unanimously opposed, even if this means no agreement at Kyoto. Under the second scenario, developing countries will split between those who agree to support the United States, and those who refuse.

The third Scenario would see developing countries as a group striking a deal with the United States in which they agree to reduce their emissions at some point in the future, but with the United States providing them with something in return.

Despite their public opposition to the idea of immediate commitments from developing countries, many officials from the G77 and China (which is not a member of the group) seem reconciled in private to the idea of a 'non-binding' side agreement - a 'Kyoto mandate' - attached to the main treaty. Under this, developing countries would make a non-binding promise to reduce emissions by a certain amount from a specified date. In return, the United States is likely to be asked not to block agreement on targets that would enable developing countries to reduce emissions to a per-capita limit - instead of a flat percentage reduction. The countries that support this stance believe it to be a more equitable way of distributing emissions reductions.

A per capita-based solution would set all emissions limit, or 'cap', to a specified number of tonnes or carbon per person a year.

Countries emitting more than this would agree to reduce their emissions to the required cap by an agreed

date. Countries that emit below the cap would be allowed to increase their emissions up to the limit (see graph).

Per capita solution?

Those who have been promoting the idea that the world's emissions could converge on a single, per-capita figure include the London-based environmentalist lobby group the Global Commons Institute. Aubrey Meyer, GCI's director, says that if a per capita strategy were to be followed, global concentrations of carbon dioxide could stabilize by 2030 at a level of 450 parts per million by volume of the atmosphere. (This is still well above the pre-industrial level of 280 parts per million; atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations at present are 360 parts per million.)

Partly at Meyer's suggestion, this idea has already been formally adopted by the African group of countries, led by Zimbabwe. A variation of this strategy also lies behind the decision by European Union member states to back an average 15 percent reduction; countries such as Portugal and Greece would be allowed to raise emissions, while others, such as the United Kingdom and Germany, would reduce theirs by more than 15 percent.

But some European countries - the United Kingdom in particular - remain nervous about the idea of differentiated responsibilities based on per capita emissions being applied elsewhere. According to a senior British official. This is primarily because of the difficulty in deciding the level at which the cap is set.

A per capita solution is also opposed on strategic grounds by most environmentalist groups, in particular the Climate Action Network, an umbrella group of most of the world's climate-related non-governmental organizations. Indeed, CAN is lobbying developing countries not even to respond to the United States' proposals.

Jennifer Morgan of CAN in the United States says the organization sees the main problem as the timing-not the principle of a proposal on per capita emissions. CAN will oppose anything that reopens the original terms of the climate convention in which developing countries are exempt from reducing their emissions.

Morgan describes the introduction of the developing country issue at Kyoto as a flawed strategy which could imperil the prospect of a legally binding treaty. She fears that the United States might use the developing countries as an excuse to veto the protocol if its terms are not to its liking.

Heavyweight support?

But a per capita based solution has found enthusiastic supporters in the European Parliament, as well as in the Globe network, an organization comprising parliamentarians with an interest in environmental issues. Globe is engaged in its own lobbying campaign. When governments and environmentalist groups were protesting against the Byrd resolution in the US Senate, Globe took what some saw as the extraordinary step of lobbying senators to support it, arguing that the resolution is a route to procuring agreement at Kyoto by getting the United States to agree to per capita emissions in exchange for developing country reductions.

If it is to go further, however, the per-capita idea needs the support of heavyweights such as China and India. China is known to be sympathetic, and said so at a recent conference in Beijing. India is believed to hold a similar view, but continues to maintain an unsettling silence. China's position reflects a debate between traditional Communists, who strongly oppose the US line partly on ideological briefing grounds, and a more pragmatic breed of politician ready to engage with the United States if a long-term benefit for China can be found. On climate change at least, the latter group seems to be winning the argument.

In a speech last month in Beijing, Song Jian, president of China's Council for international Cooperation and

Development said: "China bears no responsibility for reducing greenhouse gas emissions." But he added: "When we ask the opinion of people from all circles, many, in particular scientists, think that the emission control standard should be formulated on a per capita basis." Sir Crispin Tickell, Warden of Green College, Oxford, a member of this council, was present at Song's speech. He says this is the dearest indication likely to be given of China's preferred route to emissions reductions. India, on the other hand, has maintained an uncharacteristic silence about greenhouse gases since the change of government last year which saw the departure of the activist environment minister, Kamal Nath.

This could be because India is unwilling to engage with the United States until Kyoto. Anil Agarwal, director of the Centre for Science and Environment in New Delhi, has a simpler

explanation: India's climate policy, he says, is in total disarray. But Kilaparti Ramakrishna, Director of the science and public affairs programme at the Woods Hole Research Centre in Massachusetts, says that India may yet emerge as a major player. "Responsibility for climate policy has been given a higher political priority" he says. "It used to fall under the remit of the Department of Environment and Forests. But recently it has been taken over by the more powerful Foreign Office, which thinks more in terms of north-south [global] equity. That is a significant development," he says.

The United States, meanwhile, has neither ruled in or out the question of per capita greenhouse cuts. But most US administration officials remain unconvinced about the idea. There is the obvious concern that, under this strategy, the United States would have to make the largest reductions. There is also the view in some quarters that it seems to reward countries - such as China - with large populations and relatively low energy consumption.

Finally, the idea of an equity-based distribution of responsibility to reduce global warming strikes some as being ideologically tainted. In the words of one US official, "To me this is global Communism. I thought we'd won the Cold War."

But the idea still has its strong supporters. Indeed, many now feel that an international commitment to per capita based targets, rather than absolute goals, is most likely to produce a solution at Kyoto that both rich and poor countries will be prepared to swallow.

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