

Reflections on the Cancun Conference of 2010

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ABSTRACT: A comprehensive global agreement on climate change, embodying environmental adequacy, equity and justice in matters both of adaptation and of mitigation is urgently needed, but the obstacles to achieving such an agreement remain so formidable that satisfying these ethical criteria was beyond the realm of the possible at the Cancun conference of 2010 even for those aiming to do so. In the circumstances, the degree of achievement attained and the restoration of progress towards an eventual satisfactory agreement after the failure of the Copenhagen conference of 2009 was striking. Judged by relevant ethical criteria, the Cancun conference was defective, and some participants merit ethical censure, but those participants whose aim was an environmentally and distributionally satisfactory agreement have no need to reproach themselves, particularly as they have restored hope that more significant progress can be made either at the Durban conference of 2011 or elsewhere in the near future.

RESUMEN: Necesitamos urgentemente un acuerdo global y amplio sobre cambio climático que disponga sobre adecuación medioambiental, equidad y justicia tanto en lo relativo a la adaptación como a la mitigación. Sin embargo, los obstáculos para conseguirlo siguen siendo muy considerables y la satisfacción de dichos criterios éticos superó el ámbito de lo posible en la Conferencia de Cancún de 2010, incluso para quienes lucharon por ello. En estas circunstancias, no deja de ser impresionante tanto lo que se ha conseguido como la restauración de la deriva hacia un eventual acuerdo tras el fracaso de la Conferencia de Copenhague en 2009. Si lo evaluamos de acuerdo a criterios éticos relevantes, la Cumbre de Cancún fue muy deficiente y algunos de los participantes en la misma merecen desaprobación moral. No obstante, aquellos participantes que fueron con el propósito de conseguir un acuerdo satisfactorio ecológicamente y también en términos de justicia distributiva, no tendrían por qué recriminarse nada a si mismos. Particularmente en cuanto han restaurado la esperanza de lograr más progresos en la Conferencia de Durban en 2011, o donde fuere, en el futuro inmediato.

KEYWORDS: mitigation, adaptation, equity, environmental adequacy, obstacles, capacities, hope

PALABRAS-CLAVE: mitigación, adaptación, equidad, idoneidad ecológica, obstáculos, capacidades, esperanza

1. The Problem

Greenhouse gas emissions (of carbon dioxide, methane and other gases) are changing the global climate, raising sea-levels, melting ice-caps and glaciers, making droughts, hurricanes, floods and forest fires more frequent and more intense, spreading diseases to new altitudes and latitudes, destroying the habitats of many species, and causing the migration from their homes of millions of environmental refugees. Most of this has been known for over twenty years, and yet the action taken so far has been far from adequate.

Action is needed to mitigate these emissions and reduce the rise in average temperatures above pre-industrial levels from over two de-

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degrees Celsius to significantly less, and also to adapt human settlements and structures to the amount of climate change that is by now inevitable. The impacts of climate change are most severe for developing countries, which mostly have little responsibility for the problem; rectifying them can only be funded by developed nations, the main authors of climate change, which alone have the resources to fund the global measures that are required.

Ethical requirements of a satisfactory solution include plans for a massive reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, agreement to make an early start to concerted action at global level, including the adoption of targets and timetables for emission reductions, and arrangements for related verification; and adequate funding to supply international support for projects of both mitigation and adaptation. Possible global policies such as Contraction and Convergence (Meyer, 2005) would go a long way towards implementing these ethical requirements, as also would alternative policies such as a system of Greenhouse Development Rights (Baer, Athanasiou and Kartha, 2007). Failure to satisfy these requirements involves undermining future human generations, disregard for other species, and letting down our contemporaries, and in particular those vulnerable to climate change and its effects. It would thus be a failure both of beneficence and of equity or justice.

The limits of the Kyoto agreement of 1997 and the failure of the Copenhagen summit of 2009 intensified the need for progress on these issues at the Cancun conference of 2010. When the government of Vanuatu recently held a cabinet-meeting under water, this was a freely-chosen demonstration of the threats facing their country. But not long is left before they will have no remaining choice, and their territory becomes inundated entirely.

2. Limited Possibilities

Yet the very failure to make much progress at conferences like the one at Copenhagen helps disclose the obstacles to satisfying the requirements. The opposition of large companies and of much of the American electorate led to the withdrawal of USA from the Kyoto process. The rapid industrialisation of countries such as China, India and Brazil, necessary to provide for the needs of their inhabitants, has made their governments reluctant to consider limits to energy consumption. Countries such as China, wary of the interference of foreign powers, have also been reluctant for there to be verification of such contributions as they were willing to make. Then again, the unwillingness of other northern countries such as Japan, Russia and Canada to limit their growth and

thus their greenhouse gas emissions has intensified the dilemmas facing those genuinely seeking a global agreement.

In these circumstances, the ethical requirements mentioned above were probably unattainable, both at Copenhagen and at Cancun, granted the limited opportunities open to those who would ideally favour their achievement. To wield these ethical requirements as if there were no such obstacles, and deplore their non-attainment, is to ignore the Kantian tenet that 'ought' implies 'can'. The ethical requirements could in theory be used to condemn any agreement that fell short by a single pound or dollar to overcome the obstacles and achieve global equity. But this would mean that virtually any outcome whatever would have to be condemned, with this as the basis of appraisal.

3. Outcomes

The Copenhagen conference of 2009 failed to achieve any global agreement at all. It did, however, see the entry into multilateral climate negotiations of both USA and China, and the beginnings of some kind of agreement between these two powers. On the other hand, the failure to achieve more than the little that was achieved meant not only a delay that may yet prove fatal but also the stalling of the entire process towards securing an agreement to replace the Kyoto agreement, which expires in 2012. While little more than was actually agreed was likely to be ratified by the US Congress, the overall outcome remains intensely disappointing.

In the weeks preceding the Cancun conference of 2010, commentators spread the dismal view that no major agreement could be achieved there either, as opposed to agreement on some amount of international funding for adaptation in developing countries. Reports from the conference itself appeared to confirm that reluctant developed countries were persisting in their reluctance, right up to the final day. Then the Mexican hosts proposed a form of agreement which won the support of all participant countries except Bolivia, and which was hailed as a triumph by the principal British negotiator, Chris Huhne. This agreement welcomed the commitments of different countries to mitigation, without specifying quantified targets, made progress on provision for verification, and agreed to a sizeable fund for adaptation in developing countries, albeit without specifying precise funding arrangements. It also found a way of building on the Kyoto agreement (which had appeared to be in danger of having to be discarded entirely), and of making possible further progress at the 2011 conference, due to take place in Durban, South Africa.

4. Was Bolivia Right?

'Bolivia Was Right' is the title of a recent article by Julian Oram in the World Development Movement magazine *Action* (Oram, 2011, 10). The article bears this title because Bolivia alone stood out against the Cancun agreement. Bolivia is one of the countries worst affected by climate change, through the melting of Andean glaciers, which means that some rivers are seasonally too full, while others have ceased to flow altogether, disrupting the lives of rural farmers.

Critics of the agreement could point to the huge gap (nine gigatonnes, says Oram) between the aggregated pledges of countries to reduce emissions and the size of cuts needed if a rise in average temperatures of more than 2 °C is to be avoided. The agreement fails to be adequate to what is needed environmentally, and this already amounts to an ethical shortcoming. It further fails in matters of equity, with nations that have caused the problem continuing to imperil through inaction vulnerable nations that have contributed little to the problem, but cannot escape its impacts. Additionally, by failing to specify how the agreed adaptation arrangements are to be funded, it falls short in this aspect as well (Brown, 2010). Bolivia would be well entitled to join in making these criticisms, all of which have a direct bearing on its own problems, and is to be congratulated in resisting the blandishments of those urging that it should fall into line with the rest of the international community, including the rest of the least developed countries. Bolivia's resistance attests that climate agreements still have far to go.

But it does not follow that the agreement should be regarded as a failure. In view of the limits of what could have been achieved, it is remarkable that Cancun achieved so much. Thus while the adaptation arrangements are imperfect, it remains possible that the countries with sufficient financial muscle will over the months that lie ahead agree to fund them adequately. Then again, in matters of equity and environmental adequacy, it remains possible that countries sympathetic to agreements of sufficient scale, scope and strength will persuade enough of the others to adopt convergent approaches, although this would involve a change of attitude on the parts of Japan, Russia and Canada, concessions from China, and a rather large change in public opinion in USA and thus on the part of American voters and members of Congress. It also remains possible that the progress achieved at Cancun will lead to greater progress at Durban.

So if the issue is not so much the ethical adequacy of the agreement but whether the outcome was a positive achievement in the circumstances,

the answer can still be affirmative. Equally, the participants should not all be morally condemned because of their shared failures, for some of them achieved as much as anyone could expect of them, if not more.

In any case, both those who denounce the conference and those who recognise the progress that it made share duties to campaign to increase the chances of a favourable outcome at Durban and in future international negotiations. Not all minds are made up, and meanwhile each freak weather event focuses attention once again on the need for precautionary action such as emissions cuts on an unprecedented scale, and support for infrastructures capable of protecting countries such as Vanuatu and Bangladesh from the kinds of flooding to which they are so vulnerable, and of aiding countries such as Bolivia to adjust to their new situation.

However, the precondition of effort being invested in campaigning is hope, and hope based not on despair but on grounds for there being prospects of ever more adequate (or less inadequate) agreements. For all its multiple faults, Cancun supplied the makings of such grounds, and in this way kept hope alive. Judged by what was achieved, it was an ethically defective episode, and many of its participants remain open to moral censure. But its hosts, together with those who pressed for an agreement of environmental adequacy, equitable responsibility and justice, need not berate themselves, since they did all that they could have done in the circumstances, and have equipped the rest of us with hope that, despite delays and disappointments, the problem can still be appropriately addressed.

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