

Report
Lecture and discussion with Praful Bidwai

18 March 2011

After Copenhagen and Cancun
What hope for the Durban Climate Conference?



Praful Bidwai, fellow of the Transnational Institute and acclaimed journalist, academic and activist, was invited by SID Netherlands Chapter and the International Institute of Social Studies to deliver a lecture on the hopes for the Durban Climate Conference.

He argued that the Earth's climate is under enormous stress, making the search for a negotiated solution on how to effectively manage climate change ever more pressing.

At Copenhagen in 2009, a treaty seemed to be within grasp but the conference did not produce a legally binding agreement, partly due to the fact that the Obama administration, facing opposition from the Senate and a sceptical US public still under the impression that climate change is a hoax engineered to impose regulations on the US economy, did not want to make any ambitious arrangements. Besides, the emerging major and leading future greenhouse gas emitters – Brazil, India, China and South Africa – formed the 'BASIC' alliance, aimed at avoiding making binding pledges to reduce their emissions intensity. They reached a collusive deal with the US – historically, the world's greatest polluter. This set no binding targets and imposed no commitments. The so-called "Copenhagen Accord" was supposed to be imposed on other countries, but they refused.

In 2010, the Cancun Conference continued the Copenhagen legacy and failed to reach a legally binding treaty. Its sole achievement was a pledge by the developed countries to give financial assistance of \$10 billion a year to the poor countries, to be raised to \$100 billion by 2020. Some of this money will be taken from existing aid flows. Besides, this is only a fraction of the \$500-1,000 billion needed annually.

The objective of the Climate Conference in Copenhagen was to reduce CO₂ concentrations to 380-450 ppm, which would result in a maximum temperature increase of 2°C. If climate negotiations continue to fail, CO₂ concentrations will rise to 700-800 ppm equal to a 3-4°C temperature increase, resulting in many problems in large parts of Africa and Asia in areas like food production, health (malaria), changes in the Monsoon rhythm and vegetation patterns, as well as the (partial) disappearance of small island states. This is likely to lead to large-scale displacement of people. The world today has no legal treaty to take care of people who are displaced due to natural causes, even if these people do not have a place to return to. We need to create new regulations in order to deal with these new problems.

To date there is only one legally binding agreement: the Kyoto Protocol. Since there is no follow-up and the agreement will expire in two years, we will be unable to hold anyone responsible for not making cuts in their emissions after 2012, or for failure to help the developing countries with

mitigation or adaptation. There are many other small agreements which are not legally binding but none of these add up to what is needed to stop the projected temperature increase of 2 °C. The costs that come with climate change amount to US\$130 billion a year and these costs are likely to increase to US\$400 billion in a few years.

The climate conference in Durban this year should be of grave concern to us all. Should it have a post-Kyoto perspective, even though Kyoto only has modest targets? What is certain is that we cannot alter the course of climate change through market mechanisms. In the past few years many short term solutions have been thought of, among them the pumping of carbon dioxide into the ocean, placing mirrors in space, shooting sulphur rockets into space and fertilizing the ocean with iron. However, these solutions have unforeseen side effects and are not effective in the long run. We need a much more radical transformation, including in our life-style and consumption habits.

Nuclear power is not only about burning uranium. There are hidden carbon costs plus the hazards are unacceptably high. Nuclear power can never be a solution to climate change. The global nuclear industry is in deep crisis. The 'latest' design for a, supposedly safer, nuclear reactor is currently under construction in Finland. It is 42 months behind schedule and 90% over budget. Nuclear power cannot be a substitute for radically changing our habits. There are no short cuts!

Durban needs countries that will step up to the task and be pioneers. We should find ways to shame countries into making stronger commitments and stimulate informed debates. If this does not happen, we run the risk of being co-conspirators in a collective death wish.

After Bidwai's lecture the discussion concentrated on the solutions offered to combat climate change. There was concern that the short term solutions that were mentioned might cause us to lose focus on the need to change our lifestyles. One of the participants mentioned the Green Movement in the 80s, during which there was a strong public agenda to change lifestyles. What are our prospects for forming such a political coalition in the current era with the rise of the radical right in many polluting countries who are opposed to combating climate change?

According to Praful Bidwai, the solutions proposed by current political parties are all inadequate and do not nearly extend far enough to tackle the scale of the problem. If the same amount of money is spent on the development of renewable energy as is spent in other non-renewable energy sectors, the reductions in emissions will be faster and cheaper. New technologies often rely far too much on the market, where oil companies predominate and force through their interests. Carbon trading is an example of a solution that proved to be a massive failure because the practice is too vulnerable to speculation. Oil companies will not allow new technologies to develop into solutions until they become profitable. What we need to do is launch a large public sector initiative to develop green technologies which is transparent and open to review by the general public. We need to act now to create a new momentum for climate change because the more we wait the more problems we will eventually have to deal with by which time it will be too late. Investing in the wrong solutions is a massive diversion for which we will end up paying the price.

Bidwai was asked what he thinks about the large investments China is making in the field of renewable energy, to which he replied that China's policy is quite contradictory. The country is growing out of control and is producing huge amounts of carbon dioxide, a staggering 70% of which comes from the burning of coal. At the same time, the country is investing in all kinds of renewable energy. Sometimes these investments are quite successful, making China capable of reducing its emissions intensity (the amount of emissions per unit of GDP) by 30%, which they pledged to do by 2020. The EU also pledged to reduce emissions by 30% (only if other countries agree to do the same), which can be achieved by developing better renewable energy technologies, improving transportation and changing national consumption patterns.

Questions came from the audience on moving forward internationally. When looking at the Ozone layer negotiations, there were only two blocks, the USA and the EU, who were involved in the

negotiations. After three years an agreement was concluded which was soon signed by other countries. However, climate change is a much more complicated issue because of the reluctance of the biggest polluters to come up with a solution.

Climate change negotiations need to be inclusive and cannot be solely between two blocks of actors, especially since the political power of the mentioned blocks is not that big anymore. In addition, the USA is talking about market solutions, but we need strong political solutions! What we need are several countries that are willing to lead by example and thereby inspire other countries into action. For example, if the EU were to really pledge to reduce emissions, it would encourage many other countries to do the same.

Given that China has surpassed the US as the biggest polluter, it is vital that China is involved in such a spearheading initiative. The kind of money needed to alter climate change is substantial, around US\$500-1000 billion a year. The pledges made in Cancun only amounted to US\$10 billion, to be raised to US\$100 billion, including ODA. It is important to realize that the budgeting of climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies is extremely complex: how to divide so many tons and translate this into allowances or national obligations is a difficult calculation. We need to make the cost and burden sharing equitable; otherwise the danger is that developing countries and emerging powers such as China will distance themselves from the entire process.

Another big player is of course Japan. In light of the recent calamity in Japan, a discussion on nuclear power began. Bidwai expressed his concern about the nuclear industry's response to the nuclear disaster, claiming that the March 12-14 hydrogen explosions in the plants were 'a purely chemical reaction' without any nuclear dimension. This state of denial and disconnect about the true nature of the crisis is frightening and it reflects a longer history whereby too many assumptions have been made about the safety of nuclear energy. China has actually announced it will cancel its plans for new reactors, but India, Indonesia and South Korea have signalled their intention to forge ahead with new nuclear power plans. Even in the Netherlands we are pushing the plan to open a second plant. According to Bidwai, nuclear power is an experiment that is out of control. He explained that the Japanese government has made so many contradictory statements and nobody is checking facts and numbers. Nuclear governments always work in secrecy and are not held accountable. Nuclear policies have changed to incorporate greater safety concerns, especially after the Chernobyl disaster. However, how safe is safe enough? We have been on this planet for 6000 years and now we have created something that will potentially cause damage to many future generations.

To end on a positive note, Bidwai said that certain steps taken could alter the course of climate change, with great progress being made in cutting back on the emission of black carbon and encouraging South Asia to clean its fuels through the offering of subsidies. In addition, we should concentrate on a budget approach, for which we need to re-introduce the motion of equity and burden-sharing. We are not going to make this change happen without activism.

Climate science is simple, what is not simple are its geo-political dynamics.