

A Reformulation of 'Success' in the Climate Change Negotiations

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Introduction

Previous JIQs have detailed the progress and momentum of the international negotiations on climate change and recently asked the question: when can we be satisfied with negotiation outcomes? This question concerns the notion of what constitutes 'success' in the negotiations. Appraising the Durban Agreement as a 'historic breakthrough'¹, many see Durban as a positive development. However, this appraisal is based on a certain formulation of success which we consider as misguided and incapable of realizing an international agreement that can be considered equitable, sustainable, and just.

The current formulation of success

The shared belief in markets and the view that the transition is largely an economic and technological question reflects Annex B's core commitment to a commodity-based paradigm of policy-making. In this, the current formulation of success is to realize an agreement that gives priority to resolutions of environmental conflicts that are least-cost and, where possible, conducive to economic growth. To that end, the market-based 'flexibility mechanisms' were introduced. Reducing the atmosphere to a resource, 'good' climate change policy then represents an opportunity to obtain optimal value for the atmospheric services. Durban reinforced this commitment to a commodity-based paradigm (Taminiau 2011). Despite efforts within the commodity-based paradigm, the international community is yet to realize significant emission reductions of GHGs.

A bifurcation in perspective

We posit that such a formulation of success restricts the potential for the international community to formulate an equitable, sustainable and just agreement. This recognition revolves around the bifurcation in perspective between developed and developing countries. Instead of a low-cost

commodity-based paradigm emphasizing emission reductions, developing countries prioritize a political discourse of development. This bifurcation produces undesirable consequences of agreement in terms of equity and justice and it results in tremendous difficulty in realizing agreement of sufficient environmental integrity. Several of these arguments are briefly discussed here.

Developing countries emphasize the principle of equity and conclude that this principle is not being upheld. For example, the developing countries note the dichotomy in responsibility for and vulnerability to the issue of climate change and the differentiation in origin of GHG emissions in terms of developing country survival and developed country lifestyle choices (Agarwal & Narain 1995).

The focus on market efficiency leads to developing country concern that this reflects an effort to minimize the burden of mitigation activity on polluter industries and countries while neglecting vulnerable communities and countries (Najam, Huq, & Sokona 2003). While often touted as an active support of sustainable development, the CDM's efficiency gains (*i.e.* monetary outputs) are prioritized and privileged over the contribution to sustainable development and thus does not significantly contribute to sustainable development (Olsen 2007). The highly skewed CDM portfolio towards a handful of countries further elucidates the failure to fulfill needs and wants equitably.

While commodification of the atmosphere² is seen by some as an appropriate management structure, others see the potential of corporate interest reflected in the established exchange structure (Schreuder 2009). Instead of being driven by the need for emission reductions, it is driven by the profit motive (Byrne & Glover 2001). Such an approach neglects the political

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¹ See e.g. European Commission Memo/11/895 : <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=MEMO/11/895&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=fr>.

² The term 'commodification' is used here to refer to a social process by which phenomena (social and natural) are transformed from their intrinsic and autonomous existence into a social, political, and/or economic value; it thus becomes a fungible object available for use and exchange.

economy realities of an unequal nature in an unequal world (Byrne et al. 2002).

The current definition of success is antithetical to our objectives and needs

The prominence of the commodity-based paradigm and the bifurcation in perspective between developed and developing countries leads to a current approach and formulation of success that fails to provide in both sustainability and equity, reduces developing country autonomy to select development pathways, and allows the developed countries to shift and evade their responsibilities to the developing countries. We conclude that the current definition of success is antithetical to the world's shared objectives and needs.

Envisioning a reformulation

Instead, CEEP argues for the adoption of principles of ecological justice as the basis of acting on issues of climate change. In CEEP's approach, ecological justice for climate action concerns the simultaneous pursuit of ecological sustainability and social justice through international policy. In this, we argue for the reformulation of success away from the imposition of emission reduction targets achieved through market-based policies towards country-context specific sustainable development objectives. In this, we view it as a prerequisite that developed countries take domestic mitigation responsibility while supporting developing countries' sustainable development efforts. We identify developments in the international community that together provide a new foundation for action and new mechanisms and processes to formulate such action, and renewed motivation and momentum for such action. Momentum for change is provided by the *Rio+20* worldwide review of progress towards sustainable development.

A new foundation for action

'Durban' potentially provides for a future climate policy regime. In the meantime, however, climate change action will be articulated through a bottom-up and decentralized pledge-and-review framework (Taminiu 2011). However, the current pledges and actions are insufficient to realize the emission trajectory required to limit climate change to 2° C and it does not provide

incentives for ambitious action (CAT 2011). In effect, while the pledge-and-review approach was capable of increasing participation levels, it has done so by trading off strict compliance mechanisms and stringency. We consider it to be a reflection of the lowest common denominator.

However, it offers several characteristics that can form the foundation for a fulfillment of country-specific sustainable development objectives (see Table 1). For instance, the bottom-up characteristic allows developing countries to indicate their potential for action and communicate these to the international community. Bottom-up activities have the potential to produce meaningful and ambitious climate action. For example, in the U.S., local and regional strategies have surpassed and are likely to continue to surpass, in their quantitative and qualitative goals and actions, the commitments adopted by the COP process (Byrne et al. 2007). This can be explained as an outgrowth of the governance opportunities that bottom-up strategies offer (Byrne et al. 2007).

The active components of a new approach

The issue of sustainable development has gained more prominence in recent years. This is reflected in the introduction of, e.g., NAMAs, NAPs, the Technology Mechanism, Low-Carbon Development Strategies (LCDS), and the participatory Technology Needs Assessment (TNA) process. For example, NAMAs are placed "in the context of sustainable development" (UNFCCC, 2010 para. 48) and TNAs prioritize developing countries' sustainable development as the basis for identifying and selecting technologies (UNDP 2010).

Also, low-carbon technologies will be a significant component in climate change action. While promising, it is important that such technologies fit the country-context (ENTTRANS 2008). Considering the substantial differences in developing country circumstances, modern technology transfer without explicit consideration for the country context is unlikely to contribute to sustainable development (Wilkins 2002). This identifies a clear understanding of the local socio-ecological circumstance and the autonomy to articulate associated needs and wants of the local

Table 1. Main differences between pledge-and-review and targets-and-timetables

Targets-and-timetable	Pledge-and-review
Top-down (multilateral agreement)	Bottom-up (country driven)
Stringency divided in two groups	Continuum of stringency possible
Internationally binding	Domestically binding
Single component commitment	Multicomponent commitments
Static	Flexible

Source: authors

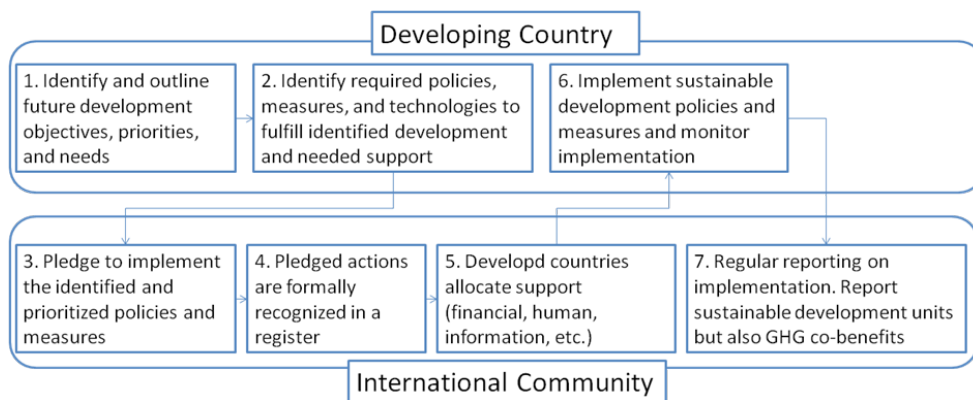


Figure 1. The phases of the proposed focus. Source: authors, adapted from RSA (2006)

community as a prerequisite for effective action. Stressing the link between climate change and sustainable development, Van Der Gaast & Begg (forthcoming) describe in detail how these mechanisms and processes can be used to refocus climate change into the wider context of sustainable development. They show that these mechanisms can be effectively used by developing countries to identify and prioritize sustainable development actions. As such, these mechanisms form important building blocks for supporting countries in formulating long-term pathways in line with socio-ecological and economic development objectives.

Financial support is a key aspect for developing countries (Shrivastava & Goel 2010). It is important to realize that the current financial institutional framework actively supports the processes of industrialization, economic growth, material expansion, and globalization. As such, we find it prudent to reconsider the ‘green bank’ proposal that outlines a new global financial institution sensitive to the shortcomings of the World Bank, the IMF, and the WTO. Arguing that environmental markets are in a class of their own the introduction of an ‘International Bank for Environmental Settlements’ (Chichilnisky 1997) could support doing better with less instead of doing more with more.

Prioritization of sustainable development

With these developments in mind, we propose a new focus and a new formulation of success for the international climate change negotiation process which resembles the sustainable development policies and measures approach put forward by South Africa (RSA 2006). In short, we envision a modification of the newly formalized pledge-and-review platform towards a prioritization of sustainable development. In this, Parties use the participatory mechanisms of LCDS and TNA to identify their low-carbon and sustainable development pathways in line with their objectives, priorities, and needs. Through the modified platform, they can communicate the LCDS and TNA outputs to the international community (Figure 1).

With regard to decision-making, citizen involvement would entail – or at least support – local, participatory and accountability-based action, as supported by diverse institutions and processes for agenda setting and evaluation. In turn, as regards the outcomes of such decision-making, the commons-based approach promotes greater equity of impacts along ecological dimensions, where protection of the broader life web is explicitly valued (Byrne et al. 2006). The new focus moves away from the current economic least-cost activities and instead emphasizes issues such as public health, poverty alleviation, etc. Livelihoods-centered energy and economic development (Agarwal & Narain, 1995; Byrne et al. 2002) and participatory governance become hallmarks of the new approach. The new approach places shared social and environmental progress – for all communities – at the forefront of adjudicating technological choice and economic value. Whereas the current focus risks ‘lock-in’ of the dominant paradigm due to its excessive focus on efficiency, our proposed focus allows for a fundamental reorientation towards the inclusion of a social and ecological perspective (see Table 2).

Concluding remarks

In the current paradigm, the reality of production and consumption of commodities is structured and motivated by the logics of technology and capital. Environmental consequences and social harm are, at best, a residual concern. Whereas more comprehensive approaches that address economies from a more structural vantage point (e.g., sectoral or programmatic CDM) might be better suited to realize economy transformation and reflect broader interests, we view these attempts as an insufficient challenge to the hegemony of the commodification process over social and ecological relations. We argue that, when the final outcome of the Durban process follows the same formulation of success within a commodity-based paradigm, the international negotiations have lost sight of the basic questions of justice and are incapable of realizing sustainability and equity.

Table 2. Main differences between the current and the focus proposed in our position paper

Current focus of the negotiations	Proposed focus
Emission reduction targets	Sustainable Development objectives
Ecological colonialism/imperialism	Autonomy to outline development pathway
Techno-economic rationale	Values and needs based approach
Top-down approach	Bottom-up approach with international support
Static	Flexible
Commitment divided in Annex I and non-Annex I	Continuum of commitment possible
Minimal incentive to participate	Action positioned along domestic priorities
Imposed process	Ownership of process

Source: Authors

We have formulated an approach which prioritizes social and ecological relations and emphasizes an equitable distribution of capabilities to fulfill human needs and wants. The prioritization of sustainable development along a bottom-up discourse and a commons-based paradigm specifically incorporates sustainability, equity, and justice into the international efforts to address climate change. We would consider the reformulation of success and a refocusing of

the international community towards this target a historic breakthrough. Such a new paradigm measures success in terms of the formulation of low-carbon and sustainable development pledges in line with domestic priorities and objectives (identified through the use of TNA and LCDS) and how the identified mitigation and adaptation actions (in the form of NAMAs and NAPs) are intended to realize the formulated development.

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