

Poznan Climate Talks: fiddling while the earth burns

by Oscar Reyes
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The UN Climate Conference in Poznan, Poland failed to achieve any breakthrough towards a global climate deal – a sign not merely of bad timing, but of a fundamentally flawed system that takes no account of climate justice, argues Oscar Reyes

11,000 delegates (including 1,500 corporate lobbyists), 13,000 tonnes of carbon consumed, and two weeks wasted: the UN Climate Change Conference in Poznan, Poland made only glacial progress towards a new global climate treaty, due to be signed a year from now in Copenhagen. “It’s going to take at least a riot to make any difference to the extraordinarily slow progress” joked Henry Derwent, CEO of the International Emissions Trading Association (IETA) at one side event in the conference venue. If things carry on at this pace, he should be careful what he wishes for.

From binding global emissions targets to the limits of the carbon market, none of the main issues tabled at Poznan were resolved – and the more pressing discussion on how to leave fossil fuels in the ground went entirely untouched. The “biggest achievement of Poznan,” according to Poland’s environment minister Maciej Nowicki, who chaired the talks, was the start of the UN’s Adaptation Fund, which is designed to help the poorest countries tackle the severe effects of climate change that they are already experiencing. But it is hard to spin this failure as a success. With financial bailouts currently running into the trillions, the Fund’s starting figure of \$80 million a year is derisory – even the UN’s own modest calculations talk of \$28-67 billion per year needed for adaptation by 2030.

The most optimistic interpretation that can be put on the Poznan conference was that the timing was bad. While delegates there were talking themselves to a standstill, French President Nicolas Sarkozy (who currently holds the EU Presidency) was ratcheting up air miles in a mission to agree a watered down EU climate policy. The US sent a lame duck delegation to Poznan with a mandate to agree nothing.

Other industrialised countries followed suit. Canada loudly made excuses – variously “waiting” for the USA, China, India and Brazil to act – but was silent on its rush to exploit the Alberta Tar Sands, arguably the most environmentally destructive source of energy on the planet. Japan, meanwhile, provided a comic turn when its lead delegate explained his country’s commitment to technological innovation in terms of his own personal commitment to reduce his number of weekend showers from eight to three.

Deeper reasons than just timing explain the failure at Poznan, though. The current pattern of each country or bloc waiting for the others to show its hand will not continue indefinitely, but the tendency to treat climate talks as trade negotiations is unlikely to change. Moreover, there remain a series of fundamental problems that are extremely unlikely to be addressed at Copenhagen.

One of the most basic stumbling blocks is intrinsic to the UN negotiating process itself – where the intergovernmental bias pits one country or bloc against another, with each defending a conception of “national interest” that reflects elite class interests above the needs of the whole population. In Poznan, this meant that Indigenous Peoples and forest communities were shut out of discussions on deforestation – and continue to be denied any status parties to the negotiation – even as negotiators discussed how to commodify their land in the form of “forest carbon”.

The flip side of the same coin is that the corporate influence on the talks grows stronger by the year. The largest non-governmental organisation at Poznan was IETA, while roughly half of the event space within the conference grounds was “privatised” (see <http://climatecrashers.blogspot.com/>). The result is that public interest organisations are being squeezed, even as corporations are courted with their own “Business Day” offering privileged access to negotiators, senior officials and ministers.

The issue is not simply one of who negotiates or has access, however, but of how those discussions are framed. Instead of seeing climate change as a cross-cutting issue, negotiations are parceled up into obscure sub-committees of sub-committees, which then further sub-divide the debate into an acronym soup of technicalities and private language games. For those wanting to follow the process, the main negotiations are currently take place in an Ad Hoc Working Group on Long Term Cooperative Action (AWGLCA), which talks about 'shared vision' and 'long-term goal' - in other words, what targets are needed for emissions reductions globally, who will be bound by these, and what structures will be put in place to ensure they are reached.

The complexity of the negotiations cannot be explained by a reliance on scientific evidence either, since not only the solutions offered but even the scenarios discussed at the UN are inadequate to the scale of the climate crisis. While there is growing scientific evidence that 350 parts per million of CO₂ in the atmosphere is a safe level at which to stabilise the climate, the scenarios under discussion tend to start only at 450 ppm - and these further flatten out the unpredictability of 'slow feedback mechanisms' in an effort to create graphs that policymakers can digest.

Even then, optimistic graphs plotting a course to tackling climate change only bring us so far. While scenarios for emissions reductions show sweeping downward curves, the pattern of existing emissions all points in the opposite direction. The International Energy Agency's World Energy Outlook 2008, for example, points to a growing energy demand of 1.6 per cent per year on average between 2006 and 2030 - an increase of 45 per cent. Emissions from agriculture and transport are growing even more rapidly. These are structural problems relating to how we produce energy and food globally, and which are 'locked in' by "amongst other factors" a pattern of continued investment in fossil fuel based energy infrastructure, a food system based on large-scale industrialised agriculture, and a free market model that increases the gap between where products are produced and consumed. Yet instead of considering how to address these major drivers of the climate crisis, the UN climate regime accommodates itself to the continuation of this 'business as usual', translating the climate crisis into a problem of market failure which it then looks to the market to resolve.

The Kyoto Protocol, agreed in 1998 as the main international instrument for addressing climate change, is a case in point. At its heart lies a system of carbon trading, a multi-billion dollar scheme whose basic premise is that polluters can pay someone else to clean up their mess so that they don't have to. The premise is that the "hidden hand" of the market will then provide a guide to the cheapest emissions cuts. But this kind of economic efficiency is generally not what is the best for the climate. Such a market abstracts from the source of emissions "from mines to factories" to a commodity called 'carbon'. In the process, reductions from industrial sources are rendered equivalent to activities like tree planting ('sinks', in the jargon) "a scientific nonsense, which as a side-effect has seen the international debate framed in predominantly financial terms. The price of this commodity is then set by the market itself, but this is driven by speculation rather than ecological fundamentals. What we are left with is a climate regime that is built around the same failed system that led to the recent financial collapse.

The problems with carbon trading in general are then compounded by the specific 'offset' mechanism that lies at the heart of the UN's largest carbon market scheme, the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM). This was initially billed as a means to drive sustainable investment in countries without binding emissions targets. Yet in practice, it has amounted to a zero-sum game for counting dubious 'emission reduction' projects in the global South as a reduction in the North. By various extraordinary conjuring tricks, investments in large dams in China, coal plants and pig-iron factories in India, and palm oil refineries in Indonesia are treated as if they were the same as emissions reductions in Europe, Canada or Japan. The assumption that such expenditure is 'additional', and therefore counts as a reduction "has been shown time and again to be bogus. One recent survey by International Rivers, a non-governmental organisation, found that 76 per cent of projects were already completed by the time they were approved as eligible for the scheme.

In social terms, the CDM is also a disaster. Billed as a means of transferring cash for development, it has basically just outsourced the task of reducing emissions "with transfers going almost exclusively to large corporations, rather than affected communities. To take just one example, the Allain Duhangan Dam in the Indian Himalayas was approved for CDM registration in May 2007, despite the fact that the the Office of the Compliance Advisor/Ombudsman of the World Bank verified that the project developer had not ensured enough irrigation and drinking water for affected villages. The project was also temporarily halted and fined for blatant violations of Indian forest conservation law due to illegal felling of trees, dumping of waste and road construction.

Which brings us, finally, to the most fundamental failure in the international climate regime: its lack of justice. Climate change is not a problem caused by 'humanity' in general. It has been driven by the overexploitation of resources by one part of humanity for over 250 years, when Northern countries (and, at a later point in history, the former Soviet bloc) industrialised their economies on the basis of cheap energy prices. Climate justice means that these same countries should shoulder the responsibility for fixing the problem. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) itself refers to 'common but differentiated responsibilities', but unless this is taken seriously then there may be no deal in Copenhagen – or, even worse, a bad deal that exacerbates the climate divide rather than closing it.

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