

## Preface

### The World at the Climate Crossroads

This book goes to press as the Copenhagen climate conference is only a few weeks away. It is depressingly clear that Copenhagen will at best produce a 'political' agreement—just as the Bali conference did two years ago—but not a global climate compact with time-bound, quantifiable, legally binding and enforceable goals or measures. Yet, the world needs a strong, comprehensive and fair global climate agreement based on exemplary international cooperation and solidarity. Such an agreement is an absolute precondition for averting irreversible climate change.

Stabilising the climate by the end of the century demands that the earth does not heat up beyond 1.5 to 2° Celsius above preindustrial levels and greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere do not exceed 450 (and according to a growing number of experts, 350) parts per million of carbon dioxide-equivalent. This means that the world must begin making greenhouse gas emissions cuts right away and reduce its emissions by at least 50 percent by 2050 in relation to 1990. This cannot happen without concerted, collective, well-focussed actions by nations, especially the major emitters.

However, the chances of a global agreement emerging on such actions—and even on the principles and criteria underlying them, to be captured in a 'political' agreement—are receding by the week. In place of global consensus and solidarity, there are growing rifts and contestations. The Bangkok and Barcelona talks preparatory to the Copenhagen conference (officially called the 15th Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change) witnessed a significant widening of the divide between the Global North, comprised of the world's industrially developed countries, and the Global South, consisting of the developing and far poorer nations, which are home to four-fifths of humanity.

The North, which is primarily responsible for causing climate change, is reluctant to accept its obligation to combat it. Indeed, it seems to be turning its back on the very foundation of the UNFCCC, based on the premise that the developed countries must take the leadership in combating climate change.

The North is threatening to withdraw from some important commitments it made under the Kyoto Protocol (1997) and the Bali Action Plan (2007). At stake is the principle of differentiated responsibility for climate change and for fighting it, and the distinction between

the North's legal obligation to reduce emissions rapidly and the South's right to compensation and financial and technological support for its mitigation actions.

The Northern countries' emissions reduction offers for the post-2012 period are meagre. Nor are they willing to finance climate stabilisation adequately. The offers made by them so far, such as \$25-50 billion in annual funding support, fall woefully short of the \$150-500 billion estimated to be necessary.

Some countries of the North, such as the United States, would like some of the larger, more advanced countries of the South such as China and India to cut their emissions, which are currently growing faster than the rest of the world. The US certainly wants to introduce a distinction between the bigger, fast-growing developing economies and the rest of the South in respect of climate change mitigation. However, that is not the sole reason why the North is balking at making the minimum commitments required of it.

The Southern countries, for their part, emphasise historical emissions and the North's responsibility for causing climate change. A case can indeed be made out for bringing under the ambit of climate change mitigation the more affluent classes and strata of the Southern countries, in particular, the bigger fast-growing 'Plus Five' economies: China, India, Brazil, Mexico and South Africa. (This is the subject matter of a good deal of discussion in this volume.) This will need a change in the existing UNFCCC arrangements.

However, the North has mounted an assault on the Kyoto Protocol and the principle of differential responsibility itself. Faced with this attack, the 'Plus Five' countries are under pressure to express solidarity with the rest of the Global South, collectively represented in the Group of 77 plus China. But there are countervailing pressures from the North to divide the G-77+China group. The US in particular is exerting strong bilateral pressure on the 'Plus Five' countries to break ranks with the rest of the South. It wants them to report their mitigation actions to the UNFCCC every two years—a demand the US makes on the developed countries too, though not on the rest of the South. The US also wants the 'Plus Five' to reduce the energy (and hence emissions) intensity of their GDP. But the US is prepared to yield little in return.

China is expected to announce further cuts in energy intensity and other mitigation measures largely as

a result of this pressure. Brazil has set a target of a 40 percent reduction in emissions caused by deforestation by 2020. And India indicated at the November 16–17 informal meeting of 50 ministers at Copenhagen that it is prepared to take on commitments to reduce the energy intensity of its GDP with ‘corresponding emission reduction outcomes’ by 2020, besides reporting its actions to the UNFCCC every two years.

Meanwhile, the impasse on fundamental principles and North-South differentiation persists. If it remains unresolved, there may not be even a decent ‘political’ agreement at Copenhagen, only an inadequate, paltry agreement lacking in ambition.

Regardless of who is to blame for the impasse, it shows the world in very poor light: it is unable to summon up a worthy response to a grave crisis that threatens millions of livelihoods and the well-being and security of all of humanity. The urgency of action to combat climate change, so strongly emphasised by climate science, stands in sharp contrast to the measly, risible commitments to real action, which are determined by domestic social and political factors in a relatively small number of countries. If the globe is driven inexorably and rapidly towards irreversible and destructive climate change, as it well might, it is these factors—and lack of political leadership in particular—that must be blamed for the catastrophe.

Lack of political leadership is stark in some of the world’s most powerful states, not confined to the developed North. The starkest case is that of the US, which has made its entire position in the UNFCCC process at Copenhagen and beyond dependent and conditional upon the passage of a domestic climate-related legislation, the American Clean Energy and Security Act, moved by Senators John Kerry and Barbara Boxer.

The hope that the US would adopt a qualitatively new and positive climate policy under President Barack Obama lies in tatters. Obama simply does not have the political space to push through an ambitious climate change legislation. The fate of the Kerry-Boxer Bill will determine if and with what commitment and mandate the US will participate in the global negotiations. The Bill mandates a meagre 7 percent reduction in US emissions by 2020, to be achieved through generous allocations of emissions permits, and trading based on them. This is one order-of-magnitude below the necessary critical threshold.

Yet, so uneven is the global climate playing field that a single nation can hold the entire world to ransom with its domestic—and highly parochial and protectionist—preoccupations. The US accounts for a quarter of the globe’s emissions. This share gives it disproportionate power and leverage in the climate arena, which is even greater than in, say, the nuclear weapons field, which too

is monopolised by a handful of states, but where Russia acts a balancer of sorts.

The huge asymmetries of power in the climate arena speak to a deeper pathology, of skewed and uneven development across the world. This only underscores the importance of a thoroughgoing reform of the present international order. The world is in dire need of leadership which can catalyse such reform, beginning with critical areas like climate stabilisation. And that leadership is not about to materialise. It is hard to see how quickly and through what process of leadership even the present impasse in the climate talks can be broken.

The climate crisis occasions critical reflection and rethinking on many issues: the dominant market-based economic development model pursued in a majority of the countries of the world; the issue of low-carbon lifestyles based on a qualitatively different relationship between production, consumption and natural resources; the urgency of ensuring that underprivileged people—the worst victims of climate change—do not suffer further pain because of the world’s failure to negotiate an effective climate agreement; and the whole issue of reforming the international economic, political and security order—which remains unaddressed.

The climate crisis confronts India with a number of questions and some tough choices. India is emerging as a major power despite the domestic prevalence of deprivation and poverty. Yet, there is no serious debate within the country on how and to what ends India should deploy that power. How can it be used to make the world a better place, or at least a less unequal, unjust, conflict-prone and violent place? How can India combine the long-overdue domestic task of fighting poverty and deprivation while promoting global justice? In what specific ways can India contribute to the climate stabilisation and developmental equity agendas?

The Indian policy-making elite relishes power and is drawn to it, but does not pause to ask what purposes power should serve. The climate crisis should bring home to Indian policy-makers the reality of many domestic, regional and global asymmetries in the distribution of privilege and power. That should, hopefully, encourage a discussion on the nature, content and purposes of power.

Equally important, the climate change debate should provoke serious engagement with the Gandhian legacy of austerity, itself premised upon a radical critique of industrialism and consumerism. Mahatma Gandhi theorised a way of life that seeks harmony between human society and nature. At the same time, he formulated a central, overarching criterion for evaluating all proposals for economic growth and development based on what they would do for the poorest of the poor.

Indian policy-makers have all but destroyed and erased the Gandhian legacy, although they pay lip service to it. But the legacy survives among the people and the simplicity and frugality that is part of the life of a majority of Indians. Major elements of the Gandhian legacy are built into what has been called ‘the moral economy of the poor’. There is much to learn from it. It is necessary to integrate it into a new need-based development model, at the core of which is social justice, equity and environmental sustainability. Such a model must reject the centrality of the market as the allocator of resources and the pursuit of artificial market-created wants which spur unbridled consumption and accumulation. There is an acute need for such a model all over the world.

This is of course a long-term agenda. But that is no reason to shy away from the task of attempting at minimum a conceptual transition from the present state to that goal, and of rethinking and redefining development. Defending and extending the commons at every level, local, national and global, must form part of that transitional agenda.

Pessimism about managing the commons in cooperative and sustainable ways is unwarranted. We must take heart from the work of political scientist Elinor Olstrom, which shows that ordinary people can successfully manage the commons without the heavy-handed intervention of the market or the state—in total refutation of the ‘Tragedy of the Commons’ hypothesis.

The award of the economics Nobel Prize to Olstrom at a time when the world community is looking for ways of reversing the damage inflicted on the global atmospheric commons is an event of great symbolic significance. It shows that collective and cooperative solutions to the problems of the commons are not only possible, but in many ways preferable to market-driven or state-directed approaches. The climate debate, to which the global commons are of pivotal concern, has much to learn from this.

Finally, a word about the present author’s general perspective and disposition. I see myself not just as an analyst of environmental and developmental issues on which I have been writing as a journalist for more than 30 years. I am also a participant or activist in the Indian and international movements for environmental protection, sustainable development, global justice, and peace, who is firmly rooted in Asia, and in particular, India, where I live and work.

I have been primarily inspired by my association with activist groups in India which are engaged in the defence of livelihoods of the underprivileged, defence and extension of human rights, and protection of the environment—all within a framework of an alternative equitable model of development.

Some of the sources of my inspiration and undertaking are international too. I am a Fellow of the Transnational Institute, Amsterdam ([www.tni.org](http://www.tni.org)), a collective of scholar-activists spread across many nations, which has for decades engaged with issues of peace, justice, development and environmental sustainability. I have gained a great deal from my two decades-long association with TNI, and more recently with Carbon Trade Watch, a project of the Institute, with an outstanding record of activism against emissions trading.

I have similarly gained much from my association with the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, Uppsala ([www.dhf.uu.se](http://www.dhf.uu.se)), in particular with its *What Next?* Project, and as a member of its Board of Trustees. Larry Lohmann’s remarkable book *Carbon Trading* was a part of the *What Next?* project. I have also benefited from the ETC Group, which has developed a radical critique of new technologies which lay a claim to being a ‘silver bullet’ solution to social, environmental and political problems.

I firmly believe that it is vitally important to have a strong input from the Global South in the worldwide struggle against climate change, which today bears a strongly Northern impress—not just at the state level, but also in its civil society expression. Integrating the South’s experiences, sensibilities and methods of mobilisation and organising into the global struggle will be indispensable to making that movement truly international and infusing a strong element of pluralism and diversity into it.

States and international organisations have a crucial role to play in developing global and national programmes to combat climate change with the urgency they deserve. But society must take ownership of the programmes—and adapt and hone them to their needs to ensure their full development and transformation into instruments of radical change, a change of direction.

In the last analysis, the climate agenda can only be transformed if flesh-and-blood people, in particular, the underprivileged, participate in decision-making on climate issues and influence national climate policies and the global negotiations. The underprivileged have a live stake both in combating climate change, of which they are the principal victims, and in equitable sustainable development, which they have much to gain from.

It is only when grassroots-based people’s movements seize the climate and development agendas and bring them down to earth by linking them to their livelihood concerns that the world will have a bottom-up, comprehensive and enduring solution to the climate crisis. This book is written in the hope that it can make a modest contribution to this.