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COMMENT

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Arrested development > UN climate talks have lost the momentum of Cancún

The prolonged wrangling over the meeting agendas is jeopardizing the credibility of the UN climate process. These agenda disputes reflect deep political disagreements. Also the political culture of the UNFCCC needs changes via increased transparency and openness to ministerial-level decisions and guidance.

Climate negotiators, observers and lobbyists gathered again at the traditional two-week intersessional meeting from 6 to 17 June in Bonn. The meeting ended with a round of formally polite but implicitly bitter remarks, the kind that professional diplomats are well schooled in making when feeling frustrated.

Some progress was made, notably on climate change adaptation, but many technical issues concerning for example financing and reporting were held hostage by fundamental political debates that cannot be solved at the civil servant level. The general task of adding clarity to options on crunch issues for ministerial-level decisions in the forthcoming Durban meeting in December was left half-completed at best.

The relative success of the Cancún meeting in December 2010 gave rise to some cautious optimism. Perhaps the Copenhagen disaster was behind us now, perhaps there would be an emerging agreement to get down to some unglamorous institution-building work before the next attempt at an ambitious and binding treaty. Such work would include crafting new architecture for the long-term financing, technology, adaptation, transparency and comparability of the climate actions of major emitters.

Yet the spirit of Cancún turned out to be merely a quick breath of fresh air. The first negotiating week of the year in Bangkok was practically fruitless. The first four days of the Bonn meeting also went mostly on procedural wrangling. The conflict naturally has a substantive dimension – interpreting the Cancún decisions, agreeing on how and when to take them forward. The substantive political disagreements revolve around the sources of financing, the transparency of developing country actions, and the second commitment period of the Kyoto protocol. Kyoto is of great importance to developing countries, as it symbolizes the “firewall” between the differentiated commitments of developed and developing countries.

The prolonged agenda tussle poisoned the mood of the climate talks, which in Cancún was still high on “saving multilateralism”. There seems to be a general mood among key developing countries that they were too compromising in Cancún, that the time is now ripe to take a tougher stand towards the North rather than operationalizing the Cancún outcomes. China especially feels uncomfortable with the transparency compromise achieved in Cancún. Second, the US remains cautious over the crucial financing

issue. The last budget discussions in the US reinforced the undesirability of Washington being seen as promising any considerable financing to the South.

Third, long-time obstructionist Saudi Arabia thrives on the procedural conflicts, and is clever at utilizing the political space that opens up when big players are in disagreement. Saudi Arabia is specialized in provoking conflicts in the intersessional meetings, while staying out of the media spotlight. Lastly, the unlikely adoption of a second commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol slows down the agreement on the more technical and mature agenda items as well.

Agenda disputes as such are nothing new in the UN climate process. However, there is a worryingly growing tendency to utilize the agenda in bargaining over the actual outcomes. It is very hard to convince the wider public that the money to organize the multilateral meetings is being well spent, if an ever-increasing part of the discussions seems highly procedural.

One key issue in avoiding the excessive agenda talks is an appropriate and clear division of labour between “political” decision-making in the yearly Conference of Parties and the “technical” decision-making

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in the intersessional meetings. This is easier said than done, and naturally not a silver bullet that solves big political disagreements. However, increased precision and clarity in the political-level decisions could contribute to the problem in the short term. It is well known that civil servants in many delegations are reluctant to implement the decisions made by political leaders. In the longer term the whole culture among the UNFCCC delegates must be developed towards more openness for ministerial inputs and other political guidance.

Another way of taming the agenda wrangling is also to increase the level of transparency, which would make blocking tactics and obstructionism more uncomfortable. There are several good examples of open and inclusive practices within the UN. Many different forums allow for more flexibility for observers to participate in contact groups. As noted by Mexican Ambassador Luis Alfonso de Alba in Bonn, the climate process needs to change its collective mentality and get used to that kind of flexibility.

The EU has championed, and definitely should continue to champion such initiatives, as they are in line with both the EU's normative ideals as well as its interests. In the

corridors, some smaller EU member states have expressed reservations towards the increased openness of contact groups. The argument is that increased transparency would drive the "real discussions" further into cabinets and smaller groups, and that this would endanger small country influence. But in the event that the transparency of the agenda-setting is successfully increased, it is precisely the EU that stands to win, and Saudi Arabia's obstructionism that stands to lose, alongside the uncompromising line of China and the US.

The UNFCCC cannot afford to take its current status in world politics for granted. It must renew itself and find its strengths. Otherwise it will dwindle into just another forum of discussion with limited relevance to serious policy-making.