

Guest Article #35

Why Has It Not Been Possible to Reach Agreement on Climate Change?

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The failure of the recent climate change negotiation in Copenhagen is partly due to the complexity of the issue at stake, and to the absence of clear and effective mechanisms for dealing with a negotiation of this nature.

Put simply, it is about moving towards a zero emissions economy in a diverse, competitive, highly technified and disparate society, which has lacked the will to incorporate limits to economic growth and to transform the dominant model of development. It is also about a society which knows the implications, both political and economic, that this change entails, and which understands and recognizes the devastating consequences that a lack of collective action will have on protecting the integrity of the planet, the ecosystems and the societies we live in. This presents a tremendous dilemma over responsibility, for the here-and-now and for future generations.

Given the dimension of the challenges and their complexity, it is understandable that the focus and the negotiation tools being used are not the most appropriate for achieving the desired results. Or at least, that is what the precarious results until now have shown.

Deep down it is not only about negotiating an effective reduction of emissions through transforming our energy and production systems, but rather it is about a negotiation that will affect economic and social systems, and the balance of power. Hence the great difficulty and challenge for world diplomacy. In other words, it implies a change of culture, a revision of current political principles on cooperation and socioeconomics, and a technological revolution. It is not something that can be achieved overnight, and as such it requires a process of transition if we are to achieve the desired goals. The problem is, the threats of climate change do not bring hope and postponing these decisions is extremely costly and unethical.

Creativity and innovation are required to advance in a negotiation of these dimensions. The traditional systems for negotiating are not sufficient, and this is something that the negotiators themselves should reflect on and pay special attention to.

In the field of complex multilateral negotiations various examples of success exist, one of which has been the case of the Biosafety Protocol, a negotiation that in the eyes of the negotiators and observers seemed impossible, but which managed to close the divide between diverse and conflicting commercial and environmental interests.

Despite the differences that exist between the two issues, the climate change negotiations and those relating to the transboundary movement of genetically modified

living organisms and the implications for the biotechnology industry, world trade and protection of the environment, have similar elements. In both cases these are issues on which the traditional groups of countries within the United Nations system no longer share common interests, presenting a first difficulty in the format of the negotiations. In both cases there are some very powerful delegations and some with obvious weaknesses, and the “owners” of the technology have a significant advantage over those that lack it. And although the effects of climate change and biotechnology affect everyone, it is always the poorest who suffer the greatest consequences.

In this context the current situation is characterized by a series of responsibilities and interests that, despite being shared, are differentiated and lack a balance for facilitating the negotiations.

In an attempt to square the circle, the Heads of State and Government established a “group of friends” with which they attempted, behind closed doors, to impose an agreement. This did not work given that the process lacked transparency and, unsurprisingly, generated a contrary reaction and increased the sense of mistrust.

What could mark a great difference in the negotiations is a change of format, based on a deep analysis of the elements involved in a negotiation of such a complex nature. A format that orders the discussions, with a participatory focus, centred on concrete proposals and results, and with spaces for informal consultations to recover lost confidence accompanied by a patient leadership, good-humoured, independent, decided and effective, that guarantees neutrality for all those involved and encourages their active participation. A good example, and in similar circumstances, has been the “Vienna Setting”, a format developed during the Biosafety Protocol negotiations, which included various of the afore-mentioned principles and demonstrated its effectiveness under extreme conditions.

This is not the ideal time and there are limited spaces for manoeuvre, but given that it is a negotiation where strategic interests, both political and economic, are subject to a constant pressure from society, its organizations, the world media and the private sector, and from the need to take decisions as time is running out, it can only be hoped that the next rounds produce a revision of the negotiations and their format to achieve the necessary results. This is something that Chancellor Merkel is surely aware of, given that the future success of negotiations in Mexico will depend on the contributions and progress made in Germany. Above all, a bit of good luck is also needed.