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Beyond Copenhagen: Questions for the future

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Can we justify the world's attention focusing so single-mindedly on international climate change negotiations in Copenhagen? Meanwhile, Darfur, Iraq, and Afghanistan burn; malaria kills millions of children; and many who created the financial crisis continue to benefit from it.

The predecessor to the talks now on in Copenhagen were those in Kyoto, Japan, in December 1997. The resulting Kyoto Protocol entered into force in 2005.

It led to immense confrontation amongst governments, non-governmental organisations, and the private sector during the years of trying to ratify or block it.

THE LIMITS OF KYOTO

Even if implemented fully, the Kyoto Protocol would not do much to avert climate change. Consider how little many climate change scientists and negotiators have done to reduce their emissions.

How many have cut air flights by 5 percent below 1990 levels, in line with the Kyoto Protocol's demand for emissions reductions by affluent countries?

Still, the Kyoto Protocol has been better for the world than "business as usual."

A legally binding agreement might or might not be reached in Copenhagen. But how could a legally binding agreement be a goal in itself?

If the agreement covers only emissions reductions or covers only dealing with climate change impacts, is that satisfactory? What if climate change measures cause other sustainability and environmental problems?

Consider the suggestion by some climate change researchers to paint roofs white to reflect sunlight. Paint requires oil and energy to produce. Those who can afford a property with a reasonably sized roof to paint tend to drive to purchase paint and brushes.

Washing the brushes afterwards sends paint into the sewer system. As the paint weathers, it runs off into nearby rivers and streams. And then re-painting is needed.

Painting roofs - and potentially driveways, roads and the like - white might reflect sunlight, but at what cost to environmental pollution?

And then there's the plan, part of the current negotiations, to reduce deforestation and forest degradation. That's laudable and is needed.

But many propositions on how to make the changes have been top-down, controlled at the national level. That is despite decades of evidence showing that, even though local control is not a panacea, sustainable resource management tends to fail without full and effective local consultation and participation.

LIMITS OF INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENTS

International agreements have not stopped arms and drugs smuggling. How could an international agreement stop those interested in cashing in on the forest-protection scheme from taking advantage of isolated villagers?

These complexities won't be resolved in Copenhagen. And without them being resolved, how could efforts to reduce deforestation and forest degradation be viable over the long term?

Humanity's contribution to climate change did not start with the climate change negotiation process. It will not end with a Copenhagen agreement - or any agreement on climate change.

Even a perfect and binding agreement on reducing greenhouse gas emissions combined with adequate programs for dealing with climate change's effects would address only one of humanity's many problems.

Those include overexploitation of resources such as fisheries and forests, injustice and inequality, oppression and lack of governance choices, and the continual threat from disasters not caused by climate change, from tsunamis to volcanic eruptions.

Climate change must not be neglected, but it must not be allowed to distract us from other important issues of sustainability.

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