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COPENHAGEN

Bridging a 180 degree gap

By Jayanta Sarkar, Director CSIRD

When 193 world leaders were slogging at Copenhagen's Bella Centre during a December fortnight under the glare of international media to find ways of arresting the damages being done to climate, outside everything was going on much the same way. It was business as usual – more profit, more growth, more of competitive edge, and of course more pollution in the process! Around this time at a place 2500 km from the Danish capital, 15 top-flight airlines announced their plan to use a new type of jet fuel prepared from coal and petroleum coke – condemned as the two worst pollutants. This new product is supposed to cost less than the conventional fuel now in use, according to its maker. If the propellant proves to be as good as these words, it sure will find a good market. Happy flying, pollution or no pollution!

The message on the bottom line is clear – emission control can wait but not the reduction in fuel bill, nor the urge to be one up on others. What Samuel Butler said about 'The Way of All Flesh' is true as much of the way of all business. But then nothing in history is permanent, unchanging, or unchangeable. At one time slave labour was considered indispensable for the running of trade and business, but then it too has gone, at least in its crude, obnoxious manifestations. One of these tomorrows could – and will – see a world distancing itself from the suicidal ways of making a living that sooner or later will only spell the doom of all that mankind has come to live with, and also love! US President Barrack Obama rather guardedly summed the conference saying – and he could not have been more ebullient – that it was a "meaningful agreement" and that letting the opportunity slip would have led to "frustration and cynicism".

But that is not how some of the poorer countries feel. They feel frustrated and cynical. What was produced in a last-minute face-saving document with five countries sitting around a table, the US, China, India, Brazil and South Africa, fell much short of even the minimum expectations. This was not surprising, though, as the two basic issues involved are seemingly irreconcilable – global climate and global development. The distance between the two is 180 degrees – nothing less. Still, one has to try. World leaders have been talking of climate since the Rio conference in 1992. The Copenhagen show was one more of that ilk. There was tremendous media hype about it. And so when it ended the way it did – no specific deadline, no definitive plan of action, no firm commitment – many were disappointed. What the five countries – who between themselves represent nearly half of the world population – produced was the best of a bad situation. Two of them, China and the United States, are the two largest emitter nations. And their economies are super-active. The United States alone accounts for nearly 25 per cent of the world gross domestic product. China is in the midst of a karma yagna. India is one of the fastest emerging economies. Brazil and South Africa are coming up fast. And in course of time the other less privileged countries would join their ranks. One day they too will put their signature on the world development map.

But for the present, many of them felt that the meeting had little meat for them. They have a valid point. Hardly much was said or publicised of the threat faced by the island states and the low lying areas from rising sea levels. A Sudanese delegate put it blandly. The draft text, he said, was like an invitation "to sign a suicide pact". Among other loud protestors were Papua New Guinea, Venezuela, and Tuvalu. However, there

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was one saving grace. Hardly any member has taken the conference outcome very seriously! They have reasons. The Copenhagen Accord is a non-binding document. The verification of individual state's concurrence with the norms laid down has been left vague and open. There are domestic compulsions to contend with. The United States, for instance, will go for a legislative election in a few months' time and its 'cap and trade' policy still faces strong reservations in many quarters. Most other countries have priorities other than climate to contend with.

The 'undecided decisions' from Copenhagen gives one full year before any of the nations has to seriously think of effecting or committing a 'real' emission cut. Making the cut is not an easy proposition. The biggest challenge is what to do with coal – the most widely used fuel, still effectively the cheapest of them all, and the also the highest pollutant. Paul J Meier of the University of Wisconsin has worked out that coal has the highest CO₂ emission level if one takes mining and drilling, plant operation, and disposal of waste together. Coal tops the list with an emission level of 1041 tons equivalent of CO₂ per gigawatt hour. Natural gas comes next. It has a CO₂ equivalent of 622 tons. Solar power does much better with 39 tons. And nuclear power rounds up with a score of only 17 tons, a shade higher than wind power's 16 tons. The cue line is clear: either try to do away with coal, or do something to make coal a little less harmful.

But coal has the logic of numbers on its side. China gets nearly 80% of its energy supply from burning coal. India and the USA use coal to meet more than 50% of their energy requirement. New coal-based plants are being built all the time and they will be around for at least 25-30 years. France has been one notable exception. Nuclear power meets nearly 80% of its energy budget. Anyway, the nations have now got a reprieve till the next meeting scheduled for December in Mexico. All those who had loudly shouted from house tops that they were going to reduce emission by 10%, 20%, 40%, and so on, can take things a little easy for the time being.

It would be cynical, though, to contend that there will be only more of such talking sessions and little of substantive actions. There are way outs, and many of these are known. If they have not been tried, that is because there is no 'one size fits all' type of solution. Various ways to cage the good old King Coal are being attempted. Why not sequester the carbon in coal? Clean coal technologies – still considered by many as chasing a chimera – could be developed. Even a 70/75 % success in such an effort would be a big thing. There could be underground and overground gasification which will neutralise much of the carbon and produce a less offensive form of fuel. And finally there could be alternative energy sources less harmful than burning coal. Several newer technologies are being mooted or are on the drawing board. But the world loves coal. When man first learnt in the late 17th century that there could be another source of energy other than the sun and the animal muscle, coal has become part and parcel of the economic scenario. Even though it is treated as a dirty commodity, coal is big business. Sea-borne coal trade is growing and the fuel is going to hundreds of ports across the globe. People find it difficult to think of a coal-less world. However, some entrepreneurs have seen the writing on the wall. The world of business has now taken an initiative. In one such instance, Duke Energy of the US and Huaneng of China have got together to work for devising friendlier coal. More such cases will follow.

But the coal resources are finite and one of these days the world will have to learn to live without coal. Maybe some environmentalists would then say 'good riddance' and celebrate. Some alternatives have been found and some more will emerge. The US Administration has agreed to put in \$100 billion a year till 2020 for helping to develop suitable technologies for taming coal. Nuclear power clearly enjoys an edge in the race to be crowned as the energy of the future. The reactor wastes pose a problem. The Yucca Mountain project in Nevada being built as a disposal site represents one kind of solution. Nuclear power companies could fund more such projects. A French company, Areva, has been doing good work with the radioactive waste produced in France's 58 nuclear stations. The other thing is the safety of the nuclear plants. The last 24 years since the Chernobyl disaster has seen no major accident. It has also been said that nuclear power is expensive. It is, but there are instances of the generation cost being brought down considerably through fuller capacity utilisation. Still another glitch in the scenario has been that only a few countries have the basic fuel, uranium, and that they may not offer it in a free market. The situation will not change till some other feedstocks, such as thorium, are found to be fully workable.

A bigger damning fact is that the threat of pollution is still viewed essentially as the 'rich man's fad'. To the world's poor it does not mean much. They think more about wherefrom their next meal will come and little or nothing about the purity of the air or water that falls in their lot. Health awareness is spreading but it is still not counted as a high priority. The fight against climate change will have no meaning till it trickles down to the base of the bottom, and not confined to glitzy conference tables. The poor still like to think pollution control as something distant, a task for someone else to do. Burning firewoods for cooking and heating means nothing to them. Nearly 40% of Indian families are said to still rely on pieces of wood as their source of energy. Changes are creeping in. But poverty threatens to snuff out the green shoots. Yet, the poor are not truly the worst offenders. That appellation goes to those who can spend the extra rupee, but still would not do anything. It is like knowing that nuclear bombs are dangerous, and yet doing nothing about the nuclear arsenal.

The dangers of greenhouse gases emission are real and close. They are showing up in regular outbreaks of fatal infectious ailments. More and more money is being spent on medicines. Farming is affected. Governments – that means, the common man – bear the cost, unless they disown any such responsibility. Powerful lobbies make the task difficult. Some of them want the status quo to continue, just as some others would like coal to vacate its space for their favourite products to come in. It is a war of contrary forces. Take the global coal industry. It is still largely controlled by some very powerful companies. They would not like to lose business. A leading coal company has been charged with nearly 1000 pollution norms violations but it has denied them flat. There has been huge investment on setting up manufacturing facilities for coal plant boilers, turbines, cooling towers, etc. There is big money to be made there. And all kinds of weird things happen. The story of how the University of East Anglia's Climate Research Unit (CRU) fudged the climate data on global temperature typifies how some very responsible people compromise their positions.

International conferences like Copenhagen see new equations emerging. The December meet brought together the foursome of China, India, Brazil and South Africa. China hogged much of the limelight. It did not mince words in its interactions with the United States, the natural master of ceremonies. The Chinese and Indian delegations tried to underscore an alleged fallacy in the perception that the developing world must share the same responsibilities like others. This would be a historical fallacy. As an Asian delegate put, “You had done it once. How can you mind if we do it now?” The West tried to pressurise China to take more proactive measures as it has become the world’s largest emitter of greenhouse gases. The Chinese deflected the point by talking about a principle of ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’ for ‘developing’ economies. The Kyoto Protocol accepted the point and made a separate niche for the developing countries. Copenhagen was different. It wanted everyone to make the same commitment, irrespective of the past or the future.

All that was achieved was a wishy-washy kind of understanding that global warming would be contained in the next 20, 30, 40 years. The Accord stated that the participating nations had committed themselves to containing temperature rises to within 2 degrees Celsius by 2050. That puts the onus on individual countries to work backward on how much emission cut they have to effect. And expectedly that has yielded a crop of numbers ranging from 2% to 50%.

One question, however, stands beyond these numbers. Are the days of cheap energy over? That looks certain if the world is finally weaned away from its attachment to coal, which has stood it well during the last several centuries. Even as a hypothetical question, it raises strong feelings. It is not a matter of change of habits. It is a matter of a paradigm shift. At the same time, there is a growing awareness that something has to be done. What it is? Prima facie, it seems to be a task for the technologists. But in essence it becomes a challenge for the economists. They will have to think of what to do with the array of issues like pricing, costing, globalisation of resources pool, and overall the propriety of national vis-a-vis international ownership of properties. In the end the deciding factor has to be the political will. One thing that makes any emission conference different from other similar meets is that here no one is going to be the single winner but all could become collective losers.
