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Institutions or Solutions?

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Sir,

Environmental governance beyond the nation-state is a pain. Even addressing a single issue can be problematic. There have been successes, for example, the Montreal Protocol, but the problem in that case was quite different to that of climate change. It involved a single problem, ozone, which was being destroyed by manufactured substances. And there was a solution. What we can learn from the Montreal Protocol this is that a clear institutional structure with a clear mandate is a necessary mechanism for effective environmental governance. Climate change involves a range of gases, most of which are produced from natural processes. Climate science is complex and there are huge uncertainties. This makes the politics of the convention excruciatingly difficult as signatories are unlikely to agree any legally binding instrument in the face of such uncertainties. This partially explains why little progress has been made.

We believe that accelerated climate change and increasing variability is the greatest universal environmental threat we face. We also recognise the necessity of sovereign institutional responsibility for the delivery of climate solutions. We also believe that adapting to a changing climate is an urgent need. Changing in response to new conditions is quite normal for people, as is dealing with risk, both current and new. We would not be where we are if we lacked adaptability. We also recognise that any solutions must be within a sustainable development context. We need to ensure our children have a future.

Our own experience of environment, disaster management and climate change policy negotiation and programme management comes largely, but not entirely, from developing countries. Our climate change effort is perhaps best captured by the Netherlands Climate Adaptation Programme (NCAP) which ran in fourteen developing countries from 2004-10 (<http://www.nlcap.net/>). Over that period, we were intensely involved in preparing and supporting developing country negotiation positions in the Conference of Parties, an experience that led us to write on the relationship between poverty and risk[1] [2] [3].

UNFCCC tries to deal with two separate problems; mitigation and adaptation. Mitigation is essentially a technology problem. Adaptation focuses on livelihood change. Technology will be a part of adaptation, but they will be very different technologies to mitigation. Adaptation is about people and their livelihoods. It seems counter-intuitive to try and address two very different problems within the same convention

The United Nations Framework on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has laboured long and hard to try and fashion an agreement to make meaningful cuts in greenhouse gas emissions within a sustainable development context. Developing an effective institutions and agreements for global environmental governance is hugely difficult. But things “are a changing” and perhaps more rapidly than the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Fourth Assessment Report suggested. Recent research that strongly suggests that extreme weather events are becoming more frequent and the Arctic Amplification may be the culprit in the perturbations in the Jet Stream [4] [5]. This raises the issue of whether or not the current institutional structure of UNFCCC is effective.

Developing an effective mitigation agreement is vital in order to avoid irreversible damage to global ecosystems for our actions. Perhaps it is time to reform UNFCCC such that its focus is on mitigation. That would give clear sovereign institutional responsibility for developing a mitigation agreement. What should happen to the adaptation responsibilities of UNFCCC? The existing UN institutional landscape offers some opportunities. But first we will deal with the thorny problem of sustainable development.

The expression sustainable development is problematic – it tends to support the Status Quo, not transformation, and does not translate well. Given that the developed or rich world has the monopoly on its interpretation – Status Quo – in effect we are saying we will not really change our lifestyles and, sub voce, ‘We really do not mind if other people are poor – yes we will wring our hands – shout out how appalled we are – send aid if we can afford it’. Some things are not “a changing.” Our consumerist model of development and our misplaced faith in neoliberal economics seem to have a vice-like grip on our thinking.

Perhaps we need a new definition or framework – perhaps human and ecological well-being would be a more inclusive way of looking at things. The title is not important, but we do need to focus on the environment (which we need) and people (which the environment doesn’t need). Adaptation is about people and their livelihoods and protecting them from climate risks. This is the role of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Reducing risk is the role of the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UN/ISDR). Promoting ecological well-being is the role of UNEP. We could frame all of this with a Convention on Climate Adaptation that could still be linked with the IPCC. We could then streamline the institutional structures and have lines directly to the national, sub-national and local levels. This new body would have sovereign institutional responsibility for developing adaptation within a framework of human and ecological well-being.

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