

# WHERE THE RICH GOT THEIR WAY: ON THE CLIMATE CHANGE CONVENTION AT KATOWICE, POLAND

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Conservation, Sustainable Development, and EIA

“COP-24 brings little cheer on the climate front for developing countries.” Protesters on the sidelines of the summit in Katowice, Poland. AFP

The 24th Conference of the Parties (COP-24) of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), [held at Katowice in Poland](#), brings little cheer on the climate front for developing countries. With the [passage of the so-called “rulebook” for the implementation of the Paris Agreement](#), the developed countries have largely succeeded in establishing a global climate regime that gives them the strategic advantage and assuages some of their core concerns. This signals the making of a new, contradictory situation where the scope and complexity of the regime are fundamentally at odds with the very purpose for which the regime has been constructed.

At the heart of this strategic success is the substantial rollback of differentiation between the global North and South in climate action. The first step of this process [began with the Paris Agreement](#), when the developed nations were allowed to make voluntary commitments to climate mitigation, on par with the developing nations, without any benchmark to ensure the relative adequacy of their commitment. At Katowice this process went further, with uniform standards of reporting, monitoring and evaluation for all countries. These reporting requirements, while superficially impressive, appear in their true light when we realise that in their uniformity they are intended as much for Maldives as the U.S. The real targets of this uniformity are, of course, not the poorest nations, who have been provided exemptions, but the larger developing nations. While all developing nations are ostensibly allowed flexibility in these reporting requirements, the concession has been hedged in with a number of conditions, with the intention of forcing them to full compliance in short order.

The reporting requirements are also marked by a pseudo-scientific concern for stringency, which is far in excess of the accuracy of climate science itself. Indeed, the recent Special Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) on global warming at 1.5°C estimates substantial uncertainties in the quantum of cumulative global emissions that are still allowed before the global carbon budget of the world is exhausted. In the face of such uncertainty, the requirement of reporting as little as 500 kilo tonnes or 0.05% of national emissions per country has little scientific significance. More pernicious is the uniformity of the stringency in reporting being expressed in percentage terms. Elementary mathematics informs us that a smaller percentage of the emissions of a large emitter will be a larger quantity in absolute terms compared to the larger percentage of emissions of a small emitter.

But the crux of the problem is the contradiction between the onerous nature of these universal rules and the total lack of initiative by the developed countries in taking the lead in climate mitigation. All developed countries continue to invest in fossil fuels either through direct production or imports. Some do so because of the downgrading of nuclear energy due to domestic political pressures. Others are still trying to wean themselves off coal by shifting to gas. Overall, as the International Energy Agency reports, the use of fossil fuel-based electricity generation continues to rise for OECD countries.

In the event, the dispute that broke out at COP24 over whether the Special Report of the IPCC should be welcomed or merely noted must be considered a red herring. Despite the vociferous

pleas of the Least Developed Countries and the Small Island Developing States for the former choice, in the absence of adequate action, such symbolic gestures are clearly of little value. Indeed, the report itself appears to have been used to generate a sense of urgency in stampeding countries into approval of the “rulebook” rather than point the way to more substantial mitigation by the developed nations.

The Special Report, for instance, did little to inspire the developed countries to increase the quantum of climate finance as well as speeding up its delivery. It has been the long-standing argument of the developing world that the bulk of climate finance must be from public sources. In contrast, the developed countries have succeeded in putting other sources of finance, including FDI and equity flows, on par in the accounting of the flow of climate assistance that developing countries need. As the “rulebook” stands today, private sector flows or loans, which will increase the indebtedness of developing countries, are to be considered adequate fulfilment of developed country obligations under the UNFCCC.

Much of the pressure exerted by developed countries at COP24 had the active backing and instigation of the U.S. Despite the public posturing by other G-8 heads of state outside the climate summits, the marked synergy between the U.S. and its political and strategic allies in pushing through several critical elements of the “rulebook” was no secret.

India, despite its articulation of the need for equity in climate action and climate justice, failed to obtain the operationalisation of these notions in several aspects of the “rulebook”. Even though it pushed for equity, particularly in the benchmarks for the periodic review of the Paris Agreement, it failed to press home its point. Successive dispensations in New Delhi have fallen short of doing the needful in this regard. In contrast, Brazil held its ground on matters relating to carbon trading that it was concerned about and postponed finalisation of the matter to next year’s summit. Regrettably, while India has not been shy to hold out against the global nuclear order it has not extended this attitude to protecting its interests in the emerging global climate regime.

It is now evident that New Delhi underestimated what was at stake at Katowice and the outcome portends a serious narrowing of India’s developmental options in the future. A number of environmental and climate think tanks, NGOs and movements have also done their share to disarm the government in the negotiations. Buying uncritically into the climate narrative of the developed nations, they have been continually urging unilateral domestic action on moral grounds, while ignoring the elementary fact that global warming is a global collective action problem. Despite the significant number of Indians at COP24, the broad articulation of India’s needs was at the lowest ebb seen in the last several years.

At the final plenary of COP24, the Like-Minded Developing Countries grouping echoed India’s reservations on the neglect of equity and climate justice in the final form of the “rulebook”, while the broader G77 plus China combine expressed its regret at the unbalanced nature of the outcome, with its undue emphasis on mitigation by all. But with the “rulebook” nevertheless having been adopted, COP24 signals a global climate regime that benefits and protects the interests of the global rich, while leaving the climatic fate of the world, and the developmental future of a substantial section of its population, still hanging in the balance.

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India has the technological capacity, the financial resources, and the need for a simple, transparent basic income scheme

**END**

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