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New momentum from below for the international climate process

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New momentum from below for the international climate process

Bonn, 11 November 2013. The release of the first part of the new IPCC report has once again made it clear how severely humans and ecosystems will suffer from the effects of climate change. The message seems to have been received: Following the release of the report, US Secretary of State John Kerry and European Commissioner for Climate Action Connie Hedegaard stated that now action must really be taken. Unfortunately it is not to be expected that this thirst for action will also be found among the international negotiators. Starting today they are meeting in Warsaw for the 19th Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in order to pave the way for a global agreement that is to be worked out by 2015 and will enter into force in 2020. There are still many issues to be resolved for the time between 2015 and 2020 as well. The scepticism regarding the results to be expected in Warsaw is based on the lack of progress that has been observed for several years and does not match the urgency with which the IPCC and other institutions are referring to the threats from climate change again and again. Different routes must therefore be sought in order to give new stimuli to the international process.

Weakening multilateralism

The international climate process is primarily hindered by the fact that the individual country groups are pointing their fingers at other groups and demanding that they start doing something and that they should accept commitments to reduce their emissions. The developing countries are reminding the developed countries of their historical responsibility, while developed countries are referring to the increasing emissions in many emerging developing countries. Both arguments are reasonable: According to Germanwatch, the reduction commitments of all developed countries are insufficient to limit global warming to the target of 2 °C. On the other hand, their emissions have at least no longer risen since 1990, while the emissions of developing and emerging countries have increased by 223% between 1990 and 2008. The complexity of the challenges as well as the wide variety of different interests questions the

idea that the multilateral approach through the UNFCCC is the sole approach to a solution.

'Follow us' instead of 'after you'

The necessary new stimuli are coming increasingly from below; namely from companies, municipalities and nations that are developing activities for more climate protection. In 2005, for instance, a number of megacities founded the global network C40 with the aim of reducing emissions and promoting adaptation measures. Rotterdam is one of the now 63 participating member cities. While the Dutch government has reduced its climate protection efforts, Rotterdam is aiming to cut its emissions in half by 2015 in comparison to 1990.

More and more companies are also becoming active in climate protection. Unilever, for instance, is planning to cut its emissions in half across its entire production cycle by 2020. Walmart intends to move toward getting 100% of its energy from renewable sources. Both companies are thereby setting themselves more ambitious goals than the countries in the climate negotiations.

The initiative of nine of the world's poorest countries (Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, Ethiopia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Mozambique, Nepal, Rwanda, and the Gambia) for the development of low-carbon development strategies is also worthy of note. These countries have contributed practically nothing to the causes of climate change but are especially hard hit by its effects. Their primary concern is fighting poverty and promoting economic and social development, while reducing emissions is at the absolute bottom of their priorities. Their strategies are generally aimed at balancing the aspects of development and poverty reduction as well as reducing emissions and adapting to the impacts of climate change. These strategies are to be viewed within the context of a newly developing self-conception of developing countries as also being part of the solution and no longer only being part of the problem. Prakash Mathema, the Chair of the Least Developed Countries Group, said in March 2013 that the group must move away from an 'after you' mentality to a 'follow us' one in which it

demonstrates to other countries the ways in which the complex challenges can be addressed in an equal way.

The UNFCCC has also begun to strengthen the linkage between the international negotiations and individual activities: Their 'Momentum for Change' initiative is aimed at generating more visibility for such activities in order to keep all stakeholders informed and to motivate them to increase their efforts to reduce emissions.

Top-down and bottom-up approaches must go hand-in-hand

So has multilateralism failed? Surely not, but over the years it has become apparent that the solution to the climate problem is more complex than originally assumed and that it demands a fundamental change in the way we think and in our economies. The world needs a comprehensive and binding approach to addressing the global problem of climate change. Yet in the meantime we have also learned that small-scale approaches must be pursued at all levels and supported by targeted incentives in order to accelerate the process and avoid the existing obstructions. This will enable the parties involved to learn from one another while at the same time reinforcing their trust in each other that there is interest in joint

solutions, which may also have a positive effect on the multilateral negotiations.

Warsaw as a 'transition conference' can become an important milestone for the integration of the national and local activities. In this regard, the efforts of the poorest countries deserve special attention as well as financial and institutional support for the implementation of their strategies, as they have often only existed on paper so far. It would also contribute to bringing the two country groups closer together if the developed countries would provide this support within the framework of climate finance. The integration into the international process might also be promoted by linking the initiatives of the poorest countries for low-carbon development with their mitigation (NAMAs) and adaptation (NAPs) strategies within the UNFCCC in order to avoid duplications.

If the efforts of the pioneering countries start off positively then this may inspire other countries to follow this path. In the end, the poorest countries may thereby not only develop their economies and societies in a sustainable way. Despite their low emissions, they may rather also provide significant stimuli to the negotiations for a new international climate agreement.



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