

Report on the Special Event
“Climate Change Negotiations: Road to Copenhagen
Tuesday, 13 October 2009

During the special event organized by the Division for Sustainable Development, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), the panelists provided different perspectives on the best way forward to address the climate change challenge at Copenhagen and beyond. The panelists presented interesting discussions on key elements for agreement at Copenhagen, including mitigation, adaptation, technology and finance. There were also questions by delegates concerning issues to be discussed at the summit in December.

The discussion was moderated by the Chairperson of the Second Committee, H.E. Mr. Park In-kook, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Korea to the UN. The panelists were: Dr. Robert Orr – Assistant Secretary General for Policy Coordination and Strategic Planning, Dr. Massimo Tavoni – Research Associate, Princeton Environmental Institute, Dr. Tariq Banuri – Director, Division for Sustainable Development (UNDESA), Dr. Michael Levi – Director, Council on Foreign Relations, Program on Energy Security and Climate Change, and Dr. Jessica Seddon Wallack – Director, Center for Development Finance, Institute for Financial Management and Research, Chennai, India.

The Chairperson stated that expectations are high for the UN climate conference in Copenhagen which happens in a mere 55 days. The question is what criteria should be used to determine success in Copenhagen. He acknowledged that ambition is necessary to achieve the goals suggested by science and suggested that a workable agreement needs to support countries’ adaptation needs, as well as provide for technology and financing.

He highlighted the United Nations Secretary-General’s expectations for Copenhagen stated at the UN Climate Change Summit last month in New York, saying that the Secretary-General underlined the importance of a successful deal which must involve all countries working towards a common, long-term goal to limit global temperature rise to safe levels consistent with science as well as ambitious emission reduction targets from industrialized countries by 2020; developing countries will need to increase actions to limit the growth of their emissions while they pursue green growth with substantial financial and technology support; a successful deal must strengthen the world’s ability to cope with inevitable changes; a deal needs to be backed by money and the means to deliver it because without proper financing and without unlocking private investment, including through carbon markets, the solutions we discuss are mere fantasies; and a deal must include an equitable global governance structure that addresses the needs of developing countries. The Chair also stated the views of the President of the UN Foundation, Tim Wirth, regarding the UN climate conference in Copenhagen, namely, that new mechanisms for international collaboration in the development and deployment of clean energy technologies, as well as new funding for poor countries that have already been hit hard by the impacts of climate change, are building blocks that can be the basis

of real success in Copenhagen. With these words the Chairperson gave the floor to Dr. Orr.

Dr. Orr referred to the achievement made at the September General-Assembly summit in New York, saying that the quality of engagement of the world leaders was felt during the summit and there is hope that their gathering will accelerate the pace of negotiations in advance of the UN climate change conference in Copenhagen. Such achievements include the Japanese Prime Minister's announcement of creating a carbon market to cut its greenhouse gas emissions and the readiness of China to do more as promised by the Chinese President as well as the readiness of the EU to do more. It shows that leaders of the world are engaged internationally and domestically. However, he also pointed out that there is still a lot of work to be done between now and Copenhagen and the pace of negotiations is not commensurate with need.

He also talked about the recent Bangkok climate change discussions, stating that the question of a single or two-track instrument was discussed. He stated that it is an issue of substance and not only form and that the Kyoto Protocol and LCA need to be brought together. He also underlined the need to get to the specifics of financing and not only to have general commitments.

Dr. Orr also talked about a very high level of commitment of world leaders who are constantly engaged and answering questions from Member States. He said that consultations are under way whether to have yet another summit before Copenhagen or to have some other means of consultation among world leaders. He also stated the necessity to discuss adaptation and in this context said that the Commission on climate change and development will convene a high level panel on this issue at the beginning of next year.

Dr. Massimo Tavoni noted the growing world population and indicated that emissions would grow by widely varying degrees across and within nations over the next 20 years. Only a small percentage of the world's population is responsible for the bulk of carbon emissions. About 600 million people (10 percent) of the global population are the emitters of half of the world's carbon; 1.5 billion people are responsible for 75 percent of the global total.

The individual calculation of carbon emissions would form the basis of a more equitable formula. There have been gross inequalities in emission distributions of carbon among nations and individuals. Presently, the world average annual carbon dioxide emitted per person is about 5 tons. Each American produces about 20 tons yearly while each European produces about 10 tons of carbon per year.

However, there is relationship between global poverty alleviation and climate change policies. The world's poor do not need to be denied fossil fuels by 2030; annual emissions would be negligible. It is possible to reduce poverty and cut carbon emission at the same time. Addressing extreme poverty by allowing almost 3 billion people to satisfy their basic energy needs with fossil fuels does not interfere with the goal of fossil fuel emissions reduction. The high emitters would need to reduce their energy consumption by a larger percentage to make up the difference. As a conclusion he said that we need to

think of countries' responsibilities to their citizens to provide basic energy services and, in this context, determine national obligations for greenhouse gas reductions by counting the number of individuals who will emit above the level associated with meeting basic energy and human development needs.

Dr. Banuri highlighted that development is a basis for cooperation in climate change and that investment is the key. Sustainable development is about building bridges between climate change and development. A lot of momentum and consensus is needed. Renewable energies' development is a tool for achieving climate change policies. There should be a concerted global effort to make renewable energy affordable.

Renewable energies are expensive; fossil fuel is also expensive for the poor but still affordable to many in developing countries. Investment on a large scale is key to bringing down the cost of renewables. In this context, he mentioned World Economic and Social Survey which focuses on an investment-led approach which needs to be front-loaded, with public investment leveraging, or crowding-in, private sector investment. International donor support will be needed for such investment in developing countries.

The relationship between energy consumption and human development is very clear – up to a threshold, every increase in energy consumption has been associated with an increase in human development. So, below that threshold, without access to modern energy services, human development is difficult to achieve.

The question is how CO₂ emissions are going to be cut in developing and developed countries. A development approach based on sovereign, conditional and joint commitments could transform climate change into a positive sum game. That would require joint goals focusing on full employment and energy security in the North and “catch up” growth and energy access in the South. Therefore, investing in scaling up renewable energy across the planet and making renewable energy affordable to all are essential. This can be achieved by setting a common target for renewable energy and investment, with the “magic figure” of bringing investment to one dollar per watt.

The feed tariff approach guarantees that any renewable energy generated will be purchased and fed into the power grid at given rates (tariffs), different for different technologies. This has succeeded in a number of countries and localities. Now is the time to scale it up globally. This will encourage individual investors to develop renewable plants so the costs can be reduced through economies of scale. In developing countries, in the meantime, low renewable energy prices require subsidies, which are constrained by limited public resources. Hence the need for support from a global renewables fund.

Dr. Michael Levy talked about the importance of making a difference on the ground and argued that the UN climate change conference in Copenhagen should focus on that and not so much on the instrument to achieve it, even though in his view it should be a legally binding instrument for developed countries and voluntary for developing countries.

He argued that there should be creation of a strong regime for measurement and review of what countries are doing and a registry for all countries to include their commitments of the measures adopted at the national level. Countries' efforts need to be transparent, visible and understandable for all. Developing countries should concentrate on measures for poverty alleviation, energy security, and pollution reduction, and developed countries are more likely to provide support if efforts are linked to outcomes. However, in his view, a coercive system would not work, as there is a danger of setting commitments too high or too low. Rather there should be a virtuous cycle in which action on the ground gives countries' lessons and confidence that bolder actions are possible and even desirable. Focusing on a complete deal at Copenhagen is not worthwhile; rather efforts should be made to get a comprehensive agreement. Negotiators should strengthen existing national policies and seek targeted emissions cuts in both rich nations and the developing world.

Dr. Levy also underlined the extraordinary importance of adaptation as an area where we can get near term progress, but it should not be tied as a twin to mitigation. We should aim for concrete progress in adaptation regardless of what happens with mitigation.

The United States action in climate legislation is encouraging. A sustained political effort is needed to curb carbon emissions.

Dr. Jessica Seddon Wallack put the emphasis on transparency, which she said is good not only internationally but domestically and based on the Rio principle that individuals should have appropriate access to climate change information from their respective governments. Black carbon is among the sources of emissions which could be reduced through economic development: with higher incomes, households would be able to substitute cleaner energy sources for the burning of biomass for cooking and heating, a switch which would have significant health and other benefits. Open burning of biomass in agricultural areas is another source of black carbon, as is incomplete combustion of diesel fuel. Tropospheric ozone, another by-product of incomplete combustion of fossil fuels, can also contribute to the greenhouse effect as well as adversely impact health and crop yields.

As well as climate benefits, addressing these sources of air pollution can have important health and distributional benefits, particularly in developing countries. Air quality and air pollution have a place in Copenhagen and science and institutions should urgently look into these issues.

A number of questions and comments from Member States focused on building trust in negotiations in Copenhagen and bringing developing countries on board by concentrating more on adaptation. They also emphasized the need for an integrative approach to climate change by mainstreaming it in all sectors. The issue of forests and the adverse impacts of deforestation were also underlined. New, predictable and adequate sources of funding were also stressed as of crucial importance to developing countries that are ready to move if they are provided with means to deal with climate change.