

The Climate Change Flap at the G8: A Spat over Detail, not Substance

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Rostock, Germany,

The news in the lead-up to the G8 meeting here in Rostock is the dispute over the proposed declaration on climate change. German Chancellor Angela Merkel wants the rich countries to make a commitment to limit global warming to two degrees centigrade. This will involve cutting greenhouse gas emissions to 50 per cent of their 1990 levels by 2050 and increasing energy efficiency by 50 per cent by 2020. This had drawn predictable opposition from George W. Bush. However, to contain further damage to his battered image, Bush announced his intention of calling a conference of the biggest greenhouse gas polluters to deal with global warming. This has alarmed Merkel, who wants to keep the process securely within the United Nations.

It is tempting to compliment Merkel, as many have done, but anybody would look good beside Bush. Indeed, a close look at the G 8 draft declaration that has emerged under the German presidency reveals that this is more a quarrel over detail than over substance.

Given the immediate, extreme threat posed by global warming underlined by the most recent report of the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the 50 per cent reduction from 1990 levels by 2050 figure is simply too little too late. As the German Green MP Barbel Hohn noted at a Berlin conference on Sunday, the rich countries should be talking about at least an 80 per cent cutback.

Growth is Still Sacrosanct

The leaked draft reveals why Merkel cannot offer more. The guiding principle of the document's approach to climate change is to "decouple economic growth from energy use." In other words, economic growth remains central and sacrosanct, meaning no cuts are proposed in consumption levels. For instance, instead of calling for a radical cutback in automobile use, the declaration accepts as given that the number of motor vehicles will double to 1.2 billion by 2020, and the challenge is to expand production and accelerate development of non-fossil fuel alternatives for future cars such as synthetic biofuels and CO₂-free hydrogen.

The reason the draft declaration cannot call for deeper cuts in greenhouse gas emissions is that its authors realize that maintaining a growing "efficient and competitive economy" while radically reducing greenhouse gas emissions is not technologically feasible at this point. The solution: lower

the targets and try to convince the public that this is simply being realistic.

The G8 Approach: Look for Technofixes

There are three elements in the declaration's strategy for dealing with climate change. One is increasing energy efficiency-or getting more bang for every unit of energy generated.

A second element is diversification of the means of generating energy. Here the draft pays the obligatory nod to renewable energy sources like wind and solar, but the emphasis is on nuclear. Indeed, the G 8 draft goes out of its way to favorably position an energy source long opposed by the environmental movement owing to its proven dangers as a key alternative owing to its allegedly minimal contribution to global warming. Specifically, the draft states that the G 8 leaders "endorse the peaceful use of nuclear energy by those interested countries that are also committed to non-proliferation and international nuclear safety standards...endorse international initiatives to further develop peaceful and carbon-free nuclear energy and to realize the potential for nuclear energy to contribute to the energy needs of developing countries...[and] will examine creative ways for international finance to make nuclear energy more available to developing countries."

The third element is technological innovation. Here the document stresses accelerated development of futuristic technologies to address global warming. The paper specifically urges "prioritizing national and international research and technology cooperation...of the different carbon capture technologies and to clarify geotechnical conditions for secure CO₂ storage." Indeed, this is a document that is obsessed with technofixes, among them "clean coal, carbon capture and storage, offshore windpower, second generation biofuels, hydrogen..." James Lovelock of Gaia fame may be wrong in his advocacy of nuclear power as a way to deal with climate change but he is right that there will be something like a 40-year gap before such new technologies become really feasible-and by then it will be too late.

The climate change section of G8 declaration is really but one long and all-too transparent exercise to get around the reality that the only real effective response to climate change is radically reduced economic growth rates and consumption levels, particularly in the North, and in the very near future.

Promoting Investment and TRIPs

The other parts of the declaration are even worse.

Curiously enough, the declaration begins with a long disquisition on the merits of foreign investment flows that is addressed to developing countries who are warned that "erecting barriers" to capital flows will "result in a loss of prosperity." According to the document, "freedom of investment is a crucial pillar of economic growth, prosperity, and employment." It does not take too long to sense that the G8 is telling particularly China, Brazil, India, and the other dynamic developing economies that their investment regimes need to be more hospitable to western investors.

Continuing in this vein, the second part of the document is also addressed to developing countries. Innovation, it says, is central to economic growth, and it can only continue to play this role if there is "strong protection and enforcement of intellectual property rights." The writing bears the fingerprints of the northern pharmaceutical industry and the high tech lobbies. Again, it does not take any special effort to figure out that the G 8 is warning Thailand, India, Brazil, and the African

countries to stop using methods like compulsory licensing to enable their populations to gain access to cheap drugs to fight HIV-AIDs and other pandemics, and telling China and the Southeast Asian countries to restrict the diffusion of advanced technologies through tighter enforcement of corporate intellectual property claims.

Targeting China, Recycling Africa

There is, interestingly, a section entitled "Responsibility for Raw Materials: Transparency and Sustainable Growth." The G8, the document states, seek "to support resource rich countries in their efforts to further expand their resource potentials while promoting sustainable development, human rights, and good governance." Why, one asks, is the G 8 suddenly concerned with "increased transparency" in the extractive sector when their corporations have so long opposed efforts to control their depredations in the developing world? The answer is transparent in their "call on our trading partners to refrain from restraints on trade and distortion of competition in contravention of WTO rules and to observe market economy principles." China, which has been concluding scores of mineral extraction agreements in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia, is undoubtedly the main target of this section. The document reflects the fear among many rich country governments and corporations that the Chinese might end up shutting them out of many resource-rich areas.

As for the G 8 Declaration on Africa, it is mainly a recycling of old unfulfilled promises of raising development aid, along with the usual platitudes about promoting good governance, institutionalizing "market-friendly" development frameworks, more effective and cleaner public financial management, and "improving our response to fragile states." The Financial Times notes that "At the Gleneagles summit in 2005, the G8 committed itself to increasing overall annual aid levels by \$50 billion by 2010 and doubling aid to Africa. Official figures show almost all these countries are behind their targets."

We usually do not find much to agree with the Times editorial page, but this time it is hard to dispute its judgment that "Nobody expects much from this increasingly outmoded talking shop of the complacent rich."

P.S.

* Walden Bello is executive director of Focus on the Global South and professor of sociology at the University of the Philippines.