



Industrialised Countries Endanger Success of Copenhagen Climate Summit

An interim report by Wolfgang Sterk, 14 December 2009

While the climate negotiations usually revolve around abstract figures and mechanisms and most negotiators exhibit hardly any sense of urgency, the small island nation of Tuvalu last week reminded the climate summit what these negotiations are actually about: the very existence of whole nations. In a passionate speech Ian Fry, a delegate from Tuvalu pointed out that most of the population lives at only 2m above sea level and the highest point of his country lies at 4m. Like other small island states, Tuvalu is therefore in danger of being submerged by the rising sea level. Fry's plea to the assembled international community was therefore: "The fate of my country lies in your hands".

For most of Africa climate change is also an existential threat. According to the IPCC, an increase of the global mean temperature by 2°C, as aimed for by the EU and other countries, would mean an increase of 3.5°C on the African continent, with drastic impacts on for example food production and water availability. The small island developing states and the Least Developed Countries therefore call for keeping the global temperature increase below 1.5°C and stabilising the atmospheric CO₂ concentration at 350 ppm (parts per million). They have also made clear that they have not come to Copenhagen "to sign a suicide agreement".

However, the current pledges by industrialised countries are not even in line with the 2°C target. The lowest concentration scenarios assessed by the IPCC in its fourth assessment report - stabilisation of atmospheric concentrations at 350-390 ppm CO₂ - would give a 50% chance to achieve the 2°C target. The IPCC considered that to achieve this stabilisation level, industrialised countries would need to reduce their emissions by 25-40% below 1990 levels by 2020, in addition to a substantial deviation from projected emissions growth in developing countries. To give a high chance of achieving the 2°C target, the Wuppertal Institute has recommended that industrialised countries should reduce their emissions by at least 40% by 2020. At the moment, the pledges by industrialised countries add up to less than 20%. Most of the gap is caused by the USA, who have put a maximum target of 4% below 1990 levels on the table.

In addition, while the new agreement has not even been concluded yet, many industrialised countries are already working to drill loopholes into it. One such loophole involves emissions from land use, land-use change and forestry (LULUCF). Many industrialised countries intend

to determine LULUCF emissions on the basis of projections rather than historic data, and many of these projections are based on an increase of logging rates. If actual logging rates remain below the projected levels, countries would be awarded emission credits.

Surprisingly, France has now stood up against most of the other EU countries and demands LULUCF accounting rules that reflect actual emissions. On this basis, the environmental organisations in Copenhagen awarded France a “ray of the day” – as opposed to the “fossil of the day” usually awarded to the worst blockers.

The current ambition level of industrialised countries is therefore far from adequate. Industrialised countries frequently point to rising emissions in China and other rapidly industrialising countries as an excuse. However, $\frac{3}{4}$ of historic emissions since the start of industrialisation were emitted by industrialised countries and even today per capita emissions in Southern countries are a fraction of industrialised countries’ emissions. While each Chinese emits about 4.5 t per year and each Indian emits even less, 1.5 t, each German emits more than 10 t and each US American even more than 20 t. In addition, all emerging economy countries have in fact put ambitious climate action programmes on the table.

Evidently, most of the industrialised countries are still not prepared to take the lead on combating climate change, as they committed to in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change of 1992. At the same time, climate science makes clear that there is no time for further delays. The latest special report by the German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU) points out that if no substantial measures are taken within the next few years, already the German government that will enter office in 2013 would have no room for manoeuvre left and would be reduced to negotiating unrealistically high reduction targets.

From the middle of this week heads of state and government will assemble in Copenhagen to finalise the Copenhagen agreement. As Ian Fry pointed out, they will hold the fate of whole nations in their hands. In particular the heads of the industrialised countries will need to substantially increase the level of ambition of their countries. Otherwise, even a formally successful agreement will have to be called an environmental and social disaster. ■