

Imperatives Amid Uncertainty: The Case for Global Action Against Dangerous Climate Change

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Good morning everyone. Thank you Scott for the introduction.

I wish to thank Ben Richardson for extending to me the invitation to speak before you today. I have had a messy schedule and will continue to deal with one till 2008 ends and I am very thankful for his patience.

For helping get me here, I also want to thank a good friend of mine, Claire Stockwell, who for many years now has probably been the the best dressed delegate in the international climate negotiations. She may have only a total of two minutes sleep in all of three days but she is guaranteed to show up chipper and completely elegant whatever the vile machinations of the negotiating team of Saudi Arabia, Canada and the US on any given day.

You will find in the November 2005 issue of Rolling Stone magazine a beautiful sketch of human thinking about the topic of this conference. It's in the article by the writer Bill McKibben, who tried to divide an all-too human appraisal of the issue that brings us all here today in his own inimitable way.

First, said McKibben, there is the "I wonder what will happen?" era.

At some point this is followed by the "Can this really be true?!" period.

Later on, this is superseded with the era he called "Oh shit!"

Oh shit. This is the era that all too many today now find themselves in. And out of the realization that things have gone really bad, more and more are now finding themselves riding the crest of wild mood swings.

There is quiet fear. There is paralyzing despair. There is energizing anger. For those who have had their fare share of campaigning, notwithstanding the bad climatic situation that we find ourselves in today, I suspect there have even been moments of insane joy, not over ecological or human tragedy but over the incremental inches when negotiations did not end as hoped for but which did not capsize as the bad guys wished, when the side of the good guys advance, particularly looking back since the time the issue of climate change first leaped out of sophisticated thermometers and into lunch conversations, salons, farms and factories, boardrooms, and even pillow talk.

And rightly so. This is personal. It has to be. Otherwise we won't make it.

It can be unnerving talking about the gravity of risks that we will increasingly face without dramatic action. I think it is easier for some to talk about the problem in terms of parts per million concentrations of carbon in the atmosphere, or the tiny temperature increases on the dial that takes the place of millimeters of distance that we are covering as we slide steadily towards the cliff.

I can understand.

I think the language of hard science is needed not just for accurate information but to separate from pain those who have to measure the very impacts of the colossal ignorance and incredible indifference that have brought us to where we are today.

Since the mid-20th century, increasing global temperatures have been changing the face of life as we know it, largely because of human production of greenhouse gases.

Its consequences are disproportionately slamming down on those who are least responsible for the problem.

We live in one planet where the sun seems to shine on two worlds.

Without dramatic cuts in greenhouse gas emissions, the payback for the poor will be immense:

- In a few decades, the lives of millions of people will be threatened by floods due to rising sea levels, especially among small islands and in the mega-deltas of Asia and Africa where many are already drowning in oceans of poverty.
- Diseases borne by insects that thrive in warm temperatures will flourish and envelope areas previously unreached, swarming the lives of impoverished households with illnesses and further straining the already over-burdened health systems of developing nations.
- By 2050, over a billion people are expected to face severe fresh water shortage.
- Dry areas will get drier. In some countries, crop yields could drop by 50 percent by 2020.
- We may see the mass extinction of species, which will further reduce to desperation families who rely on the biodiversity of their ecosystems for their livelihood.
- Countless families will be subjected to the wrath of more intense storms and drought, without any other means of shelter apart from the empty pledges of rich nations.

To name but a few of the impacts.

This much the scientific community shared to us last year, on the occasion of the release of the Fourth Assessment Report of the the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

The picture has not changed much, except for the fact that the prognosis is becoming more grim.

What do I tell all of you here, who represent if not the affluent then the enlightened from our respective hemispheres?

To say that despite everything that we have done so far we have not done enough seems to be insensitive. But to the families on the receiving end of climate change, this is the simple truth.

To the developing world - to the most vulnerable - the unfettered increase in global temperatures will be an unimaginable, terrible thing, like the collapse of Lehman Brothers and Merrill Lynch, but on a daily, household basis.

Have we really done enough?

What do we tell the child in South Asia who has learned to live with fetid floodwaters swirling around her waist and who now, because her family needs to move again to higher refuge, will have to again parse away a dream of slippers or new pencils from her wishlist this year?

What do we tell the mother who today faces her children with nothing -- neither food nor the table they once had -- because the rains that should have fed their crops did not arrive again as expected, and when it finally came it came in such an unrelenting torrent that it washed away everything?

What do we tell the father living in a village where fresh water fed by receding Himalayan glaciers is rapidly dwindling? The father who is thinking more and more of the available water that his household badly needs, which is on the other side of a mountain range, across the border and under the protection of a people fearfully aware of the thirst increasingly governing the lives of others.

Around 750 million people rely on glacial melt waters today from the Himalaya-Hindu-Kush region. If today we are witness to the carnage wrought by fossil-fueled conflicts, tomorrow, without meaningful, urgent climate action, we will see more resource-driven wars.

Not so long ago I met Lina Tagusi, a mother of four in a poor, indigenous community south of the Philippines who was testing by tasting the toxin level in poisonous yams that she was forced to feed her children. The yams were so toxic that it required numerous preparations - after it was dug from the ground it was scrubbed and then washed and then sliced into very thin pieces, which were then left out to dry in the sun, and then wiped again and washed anew. To alleviate hunger, she fed her children a wicked root crop.

When I met her, Lina's village was still recuperating from a disastrous, prolonged drought that had visited her region three years previously.

"Last time old people in my village remember eating this was in World War II," Lisa told me. "It's like there's another world war," she said. They simply had no breathing space, apart from the deadly yams.

And maybe Lisa's right.

Unless we confront climate change on such a footing, ultimately everybody loses.

It makes me seethe in anger to hear the incredibly callous discussions in the US and the West about the bail-out package necessary to save rapacious corporations and executives.

What figure is Washington talking about? US\$700 billion?

And yet how much is needed to ensure that emissions levels are brought down drastically? Just a fraction of what it seems the rich countries are prepared to shell out to save the livelihood of destitute corporate marauders and mercenaries.

How much is needed to ensure that vulnerable countries are able to adequately adapt? The debate in vogue now in the West is about \$700 billion. Here is something to think about - the amount so far provided to finance the adaptation needs of least developed countries is \$92 million, which is less than what people in US spend on suntan lotion per month.

Science is telling us that we still have time to act, though the window for action is rapidly growing smaller.

At most, as the eminent scientist James Hansen reminds us, we have " ten years -- not ten years to decide upon action but ten years to alter fundamentally the trajectory of greenhouse gas emissions," if we are to keep global temperatures as far below 2 degrees as possible -- 2 degrees being the threshold of climate sensitivity beyond which damage to the earth's climate may become irreversible.¹

To accomplish this, we must confront an undeniable fact: global greenhouse gas emissions must go down by at least 30 percent if not 40 percent from 1990 levels by 2020, with huge emphasis on the high end of the range, with global emissions peaking by 2015 and falling afterwards.

To achieve this we need global action. Otherwise we won't make it.

And global action means confronting hard realities.

For starters, we need to confront the North-South divide, so that Annex 1 countries - the rich, those historically responsible for climate change and with the most capacity to act - actually take the lead in ensuring economy-wide domestic emission cuts, paying for a significant part of emission reductions that need to take place in the developing world, and channeling massive funding for adaptation to those who need it the most.

But we also need to see beyond this divide. We need to differentiate within the so-called developing country group, known to many as the G77, and recognize that countries such as Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Korea and Israel, with their higher per capita gross domestic product, should also begin to take on economy-wide commitments.

And yes, we also need to recognize that emerging economies with high total emission figures such as China, India, Brazil and South Africa should also begin to get engaged, either through sectoral or other quantified action commitments for emission limitations or reductions through, for instance, renewable energy targets or action to stop deforestation. By 2020, it is vital that they contribute to the global effort, in a fair and equitable manner.

It is vital to acknowledge clearly that for every year that action is delayed, the goals become much harder to reach while our ability to limit the damage and assist the peoples that will suffer the most will be progressively impaired.

There are those who will say that such action impinges directly on what some have taken to calling "the right to development". This term has been used recently and too often in the wrong context, and I find it misleading. It implies that economic development and climate action are incompatible. Studies -- and experience -- continue to demonstrate that this is not so.

While great investments in energy efficiency, renewable energy and more are required to decarbonize development in the South, the truth is, decisive climate action is itself a development opportunity that can help build a low carbon, more efficient and equitable economy.

We also need to surface a kind of unconscious chauvinism here and we need to confront it squarely. The fact is, reference to the "right to development" is sometimes made as an extension of the Ping Pong game between the biggest emitters in the North and the South, with OPEC countries cheering in the rafters. "You go first before I do," says one side to the other. Then the ball is whacked back to the other side. In the meantime, we are supposed to forget about the right of Bangladesh and Niger to survive and the right of Tuvalu and Fiji to keep their very culture from being extinguished by the rising tide.

So where should we begin?

The old saying remains valid: we must start from where we are and build from what we have. Good thing we're not starting from zero and building from scratch.

Public awareness of climate change is at an all time high, though understanding of the gravity of its impacts is still far from ideal. Sustainable energy industries continue to enjoy phenomenal growth while the number of countries adopting progressive sustainable energy policies such as feed-in tariffs continue to increase.

A country such as China, for instance, long pilloried by leading global polluters, is actually putting in place measures that will significantly limit its emissions by 2020 compared to present trends, which unfortunately cannot be said of major emitters in the industrialized world.

Most importantly, the two most important elements needed for the kind of global response required to turn things around are alive and kicking.

We have Kyoto, the only legally binding global instrument available for greenhouse gas emission reductions. For all its flaws, and as the product of too many compromises they are

many, our task is not to discard Kyoto and whittle away the small window that we have to come up with a theoretically better agreement. Our task is to drastically strengthen Kyoto and work towards a post-2012 agreement that is commensurate to magnitude of the challenge that we face today. We need to remind ourselves about how little time we have.

Because this campaign has a science-prescribed deadline. And there is no reboot button.

We also have insurgent movements from below that are rapidly gathering strength and linking arms across the globe in the fight against extractive industries, the proliferation of dirty, destructive energy projects such as coal-fired power plants and climate change-inducing transport development. What we need to do is to help make sure that civil society groups working on strengthening Kyoto build far stronger ties with the movements, and that movements mobilize to ensure that all countries, including target emitter developing nations, truly take on measures to limit greenhouse gas emissions, based on common but differentiated responsibilities.

It is easier, of course, to call for a stronger Kyoto agreement but far more difficult to itemize what it should contain. Issues remain contentious.

Let's go further to a practical plane and spell things out. It might be helpful to start with a sketch of what we don't want and proceed from there.

So, what do we not want to see as the Copenhagen round of negotiations end in 2009?

Here is an idea of a really bad outcome:

- Under the UNFCCC, an agreement constituting the absurd continuation of the long term dialogue -- a policy of protracted constructive ambiguity; an extension of the global stage where the new business-as-usual today is displayed: officials delivering speeches after speeches prefaced or finished with the words "business as usual is no longer an option" after which, nice speech delivered and with absolutely no progress made, people carry on business-as-usual.
- A successor to Kyoto without any teeth: neither deeper cuts among Annex 1 countries nor developing country commitments to decarbonize.
- An adaptation agreement that may take the form of a protocol, with little money and with little impact, for without dramatic emissions reductions, the adaptive capacity of society and ecosystems will simply be exceeded.

None of these outcomes will bring us any closer to the target of keeping global temperatures to as far below 2 degrees as needed. None of these agreements create win-win pathways for developing countries. It will not save the climate.

If these are the outcomes that we should avoid, what exactly should we work for?

We need:

- An agreed successor to Kyoto fortified with deeper cuts from Annex 1 countries, the inclusion of developing countries with the capacity to act such as Saudi Arabia and South Korea, and with a track encouraging the voluntary participation of countries such as China and Brazil to engage in sectoral cooperation agreements and follow the commitment route after 2020.
- The return of the US to the negotiation table with a far stronger cap-and-trade regime.
- A big technology transfer and adaptation package - a compensation package - that comes with (1) predictable, additional money that is commensurate to the magnitude of adaptive need; (2) delivery mechanisms that ensure that resources are rapidly directed to the most vulnerable; (3) a governance structure for the technology and adaptation funds that is under the full authority of the UNFCCC and not the unaccountable, non-transparent and inherently undemocratic World Bank; (4) the provision of sustained institutional support, capacity building, software training, and so on.

Such an outcome will signal to the world that a real shift towards real climate solutions is at hand. A real start, one that is grounded and with an ambition equal to the climate challenge.

But how do we get there? In the short time that we have, there's really only one way. And this is by combining the epic efforts being exerted by civil society organizations and progressive partners on the international negotiations arena -- with the equally determined resistance from the ground led by communities and peoples organizations fighting extractive industries and the spread of false solutions such as supposedly safe nuclear and supposedly sustainable agrofuels.

I have been fighting the spread of dependence on coal-fired power for over a decade and in this period I have had the privilege of working with fine women such as Jintana who led her community in defeating a monstrous proposed coal power project in Prachuab Kiri Khan, Thailand; and Maliwan who, with her people, continues to resist the expansion of the dreaded Mae Moh coal power station in Thailand that has claimed the lives of hundreds of villagers; and Romana, Elay and Athena who together in a spirited and years-long popular struggle killed a proposed coal plant in Negros Occidental, Philippines which probably delayed, if not stopped, a plague of coal projects from being constructed throughout their region.

The five fine women and the people they worked with fought dirty energy primarily to shield their communities from harm. But they did so, fully aware that, although the amount of emissions they could prevent would be negligible compared to developed country emissions, everything will count in the end. They fought with the climate clearly in mind because to them it was always about solidarity with the most vulnerable.

International arena activists and resistance from below -- combined and with common targets -- this to me is the real climate justice movement. The problem is two separate elements do not a movement make. Discussion and debate is slowly taking place but the conversation is far from established, because too many mistake disagreements for insurmountable differences. On one side are intolerant, narrow-minded ambitions that appear to disregard the confines of the arena available, or at least what will be in play in the next two or three years. On another is blinkered pragmatism that accepts as perpetual the enormous role played by instruments and institutions responsible for the massive disenfranchisement of poor peoples. Both perspectives forget or ignore the strength that one side can provide to the other -- and the urgency that should compel all to aspire for greater unities.

Because with the two elements combined, we would all be in a better position to deliver the right conclusions by Copenhagen, and to see the agreements through.

Combined, we will have better odds to implement the necessary goals of the global Greenhouse Development Rights project, which I believe should serve as an overarching framework as well as a bridge to further bind the global climate justice movement. The Greenhouse Development Rights project or GDR should be waged as a framing campaign nationally and used intensively both to confront large emitting local elites and to promote the urgent need to radically reorganize and reorient economies towards actually sustainable and equitable pathways. The GDR should be highlighted nationally with the view in mind of creating early momentum that can later allow the translation of its principles and aims into actual international text entering negotiations for the Third Commitment Period. The truth is, there is really more in common between the working peoples of the South and the North than there is between the poor and the rich in the North or the South. The conversation to overthrow the order that has brought about global ecological crisis needs to happen within the working class across boundaries.

Almost a century ago, the most famous luxury liner in the world sailed out on its maiden voyage as a symbol of what was thought to be the limitless reach that the wealthy had attained in the world. Everything was theirs for the taking, it seemed, until the fateful night the liner struck an iceberg, and the celebration of excess ended as a demonstration of folly with the sinking of the Titanic.

I can't fault you for thinking the story sounds like a story of our times. The parallels are obvious. There are even real physical links to the subject of this very conference. Here's an interesting fact. Though it cannot be directly related to global temperature changes, many believe that the source of the iceberg that sank the Titanic came from the Jakobshavn Glacier -- the fastest moving Greenland Glacier, which also happens to be one of the most closely monitored, climate-impacted places in the world today.

We can even discern the plight of peoples from small island nations facing oblivion in the words of a survivor of the Titanic, Helen Churchill Condee, who wrote about her experience: "The only space of deck slopes high towards the stern," wrote Condee, "and on this diminished point huddle the close pack awaiting death with the transcendent courage and grief that had been theirs for the last two hours.... Over the waters only a heavy moan as of one being from whom ultimate agony forces a single sound."²

But the parallel ends there.

Our world will not and does not have to be a planetary Titanic for a very simple fact. It should be obvious. Thanks to science, we know where the iceberg called two degrees is and how near we are to running into it. We also know that there is enough time, though so preciously little of it, to take control of our planet of a ship and to turn it around.

Our work is cut out for us and we must see this struggle through, together.

The writer Rebecca Solnit reminds us about an oft neglected imperative -- that our imagination must be adequate to the possibilities arrayed before us.

The Lord Buddha gave us the key tenet a long time ago: "There are only two mistakes one can make in the fight against climate change," he said. "Not starting, and not going all the way."

The Buddha is wise.

We should be wise, too. #

About the author of the paper: Renato Redentor Constantino is the Executive Director of the international financial institution watchdog NGO Forum on the ADB. He is also the managing director of the Constantino Foundation. A painter and published writer, Constantino is the author of The Poverty of Memory: Essays on History and Empire. He worked with Greenpeace for over seven years - as the regional campaigner for Greenpeace Southeast Asia, covering the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia; as senior advisor and campaign manager of Greenpeace China's climate campaign, and most recently as senior climate campaigner for Greenpeace International. Red, as he is known to friends and foes alike, has been involved in anti-coal campaigns for over a decade. He has worked on issues such as history, peace, poverty, the environment, human rights. He previously taught undergraduate courses in sociology, Philippine history and development. Red writes regularly for the leading business daily in the Philippines, largely on foreign policy issues and beer. He is married to Kalayaan and is the father of Rio Renato and Yla Luna.

This version of the paper contains incomplete notes. It also does not represent the views of Greenpeace or the NGO Forum on the ADB. Minor flourishes may also have been subtracted or added during its delivery in the Ottawa conference.

¹ James Hansen, "The threat to the Planet," New York Review of Books, July 13, 2006. Goddard Institute for Space Studies, "NASA Study Finds World Warmth Edging Ancient Levels," September 25, 2006. See <http://www.giss.nasa.gov/>.

² Robert Fisk, The Age of the Warrior: Selected Writings (HarperCollins, London: 2008)