

The West vs. the Rest

How developing countries took control of climate negotiations and what that means for emission reduction.

By Robin Guenier

The main reason why, despite countless scientific warnings about dangerous consequences, greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions continue to increase is rarely mentioned. Yet it's been obvious for several years – at least to anyone willing to see it. It's this: most countries outside Western Europe, North America and Australasia are either unconcerned about the impact of GHGs on the climate or don't regard the issue as a priority, focusing instead for example on economic growth. Yet these countries, comprising 84 percent of humanity, are today the source of 75 percent of emissions.¹ Therefore, unless they change their policies radically – and there's little evidence of their so doing – there's no realistic prospect of the implementation of the urgent and substantial cuts in GHG emissions called for by many Western scientists.

To understand how this has happened, I believe it's useful to review the history of environmental negotiation by referring in particular to five UN-sponsored conferences: Stockholm in 1972, Rio in 1992, Kyoto in 1997, Copenhagen in 2009 and Paris in 2015.

Stockholm 1972

In the 1950s many Western environmentalists were becoming seriously concerned that technological development, economic growth and resource depletion risked irreversible damage to humanity and to the environment.² Clearly a global problem, it was agreed that it had to be tackled by international, i.e. UN sponsored, action.

The result was the *UN Conference on the Human Environment* held in Stockholm in 1972.³ From its outset it was recognised that, if the conference was to succeed, an immediate problem had to be solved: the perceived risk was exclusively a Western preoccupation, so how might poorer countries be persuaded to get involved?⁴

After all, technical and industrial development were essentially the basis of the West's economic success and that was something the rest of the world was understandably anxious to emulate – not least to alleviate the desperate poverty of many hundreds of millions of people.⁵ The diplomatic manoeuvrings needed to resolve this seemingly irreconcilable conflict set the scene for what I will refer to as 'the Stockholm Dilemma' – i.e. the conflict between Western fears for the environment and poorer countries' aspirations for economic growth. It was resolved, or more accurately deferred, at the time by the linguistic nightmare of the conference's concluding Declaration which asserted that, although environmental damage was caused by Western economic growth, it was also caused by the poorer world's lack of economic growth.⁶

After 1972, Western environmental concerns were overshadowed by the struggle to deal with successive oil and economic crises.⁷ However two important European reports, the Brandt Report in 1980 and the Brundtland Report in 1987, dealt with the economic gulf between the West and the so-called Third World.⁸ In particular, Brundtland concluded that, because poverty causes environmental problems, the needs of the world's poor should be given overriding priority – a principle to be enshrined in the climate agreement signed in Rio. A solution was the now familiar *sustainable development*.⁹

Rio 1992

Western environmental concerns were hugely reenergised in the late 1980s when the doctrine of dangerous (possibly catastrophic) global warming caused by mankind's emissions of GHGs, especially carbon dioxide (CO₂), burst onto the scene.¹⁰ As a result, in 1992 the UN organised the landmark *Conference on Environment and Development* (UNCED) – the Rio Earth Summit.¹¹ It was the first of a long series of climate-related international conferences that led for example to the so-called 'historic' Paris Agreement signed in 2015.

A key outcome of the 1992 Earth Summit was the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Adopted in 1992 and commonly known as 'the Convention', it's an international treaty that came into force in 1994. It remains to this day the definitive legal authority regarding climate change.¹² Article 2 sets out its overall objective:

‘The ultimate objective of this Convention and any related legal instruments that the Conference of the Parties may adopt is to achieve ... stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system.’

It’s an objective that’s failed. Far from being stabilised, after 1992 emissions accelerated and, by 2018, emissions per annum had grown by nearly 70 per cent.¹³ This was essentially because the Convention attempted to solve the Stockholm Dilemma by dividing the world into two blocs: Annex I countries (essentially the West and ex-Soviet Union countries – the ‘developed’ countries) and non-Annex I countries (the rest of the world – the ‘developing’ countries). This distinction has had huge and lasting consequences – arising in particular from the Convention’s Article 4.7:

*‘The extent to which developing country Parties will effectively implement their commitments under the Convention ... will take fully into account that economic and social development and poverty eradication are **the first and overriding priorities** of the developing country Parties.’¹⁴ [My emphasis]*

In other words, developing countries were, in accordance with Brundtland’s conclusion, expressly authorised to give overriding priority to economic growth and poverty eradication – even if that meant increasing emissions. And that’s why the Annex I/non-Annex I bifurcation has plagued international climate negotiations ever since: for example, it’s the main reason for the Copenhagen debacle in 2009 and for the Paris failure in 2015 (see below).

Annex I countries had hoped – even expected – that the Rio bifurcation would be modified so that, in line with their development, major developing countries would eventually become members of the Annex I group.¹⁵ But such hopes were dashed at the first post-Rio climate ‘Conference Of the Parties’ (COP) held in Berlin in 1995 (COP-1) when G77 countries (larger developing countries) plus China insisted that, if the process was to proceed at all, there must be no new obligation imposed on any non-Annex I country.

This principle arose *inter alia* from ‘the Berlin Mandate’ – confirming the bifurcation and its associated ‘*common but differentiated responsibility*’ principle as institutionalised tenets of the Convention. And, before the next climate conference in 1996 (COP-2 in Geneva), G77+China made it clear that this should not be changed.

Kyoto 1997

The impact of this was made harshly apparent at the next conference: COP-3 in Kyoto in 1997. Kyoto was supposed to be critically important – the original hope had been that negotiations would result in all countries accepting commitments to reduce their GHG emissions. But because the US had decided that it wouldn’t accept obligations that didn’t apply to other major countries¹⁶ and because of the Berlin Mandate, in the event the agreed Kyoto Protocol reduction obligations applied only to a few, largely Western, countries.¹⁷ As a result and because developing countries were refusing even to acknowledge that they might accept some future obligation, it was becoming obvious to some observers that the UN process was getting nowhere – somehow the developing countries had to be persuaded that emission reduction was in their best interests.

But how? The passage of 25 years hadn’t resolved the Stockholm Dilemma – difficult enough in 1972, the UNFCCC bifurcation and Berlin Mandate had made it worse. Yet it was recognised that, were it not for these, developing countries might simply refuse to be involved in climate negotiations, making the whole process meaningless – something the UN and Western countries refused to contemplate. So, if Kyoto was a failure, it was arguably a necessary failure if there was to be any prospect of emission reduction. And that was the story for the next twelve years: at successive meetings the major developing countries, ignoring increasingly dire climate warnings from Western scientists, refused to consider amending the UNFCCC bifurcation.

A result of that refusal was that developing countries’ economies continued their spectacular growth, resulting in rising living standards and unprecedented poverty reduction.¹⁸ And unsurprisingly, emissions also continued to grow: in just 12 years, from 1997 (Kyoto) to 2009 (Copenhagen), increasing by 30 percent.¹⁹

Copenhagen 2009

In 2007, the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (the IPCC), a body that reports every seven years on the current physical scientific understanding of climate change, published its fourth report (AR4) – a report that intensified the West's insistence that urgent and substantial emission cuts were essential.²⁰

A result was an 'Action Plan' agreed at the 2007 climate conference (COP-13) in Bali.²¹ It set out how it was hoped all countries would come together at Copenhagen in 2009 (COP-15) to agree a comprehensive and binding deal to take the necessary global action. Many observers regarded this as hugely significant: Ban Ki-moon, then UN Secretary General, speaking at Copenhagen said, '*We have a chance – a real chance, here and now – to change the course of our history*'.²² And, as always, dire warnings were issued about the consequences of failure: UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown for example warned that, if the conference failed to achieve a deal, '*it will be irretrievably too late*'.²³

There was one seemingly encouraging development at Bali: developing countries accepted for the first time that emission reduction by non-Annex I countries might at least be discussed – although they insisted that developed countries were not doing enough to meet their Kyoto obligations.²⁴ So the key question of how far the developing countries might go at Copenhagen remained obscure – for example was it at least possible that the larger 'emerging economies' such as China and India and major OPEC countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia might cease to be classified as 'developing'? The EU and US not unreasonably thought that should happen: it was by then obvious that, unless all major emitting countries, including therefore big developing economies, were involved, an emission cutting agreement would be neither credible nor effective. Some Western negotiators hoped that the bifurcation issue might at last be settled at Copenhagen.

But it wasn't. In the event, developing countries refused to budge, insisting for example that developed countries' historic responsibility for emissions was what mattered. As a result, the West was humiliatingly defeated, with the EU not even involved in the final negotiations between the US and the so-called BASIC countries (Brazil, South Africa, India and China).²⁵

One commentator noted:

'There was a clear victor. Equally clearly, there was a side that lost more comprehensively than at any international conference in modern history where the outcome had not been decided beforehand by force of arms.' ²⁶

The Copenhagen failure was a major setback for the West.²⁷ It was now established that, if the developing countries (including now powerful economies such as China, India, South Korea, Brazil, South Africa, Saudi Arabia and Iran) rejected a suggestion that their economic development be subject to emission control, that position would prevail. Yet by 2010 these countries were responsible for about 60% of global CO₂ emissions ²⁸ and, without them, major global emission cuts were clearly impossible.

The years following Copenhagen, from Cancún (COP-16) in 2010 to Lima (COP-20) in 2014, reinforced the West's concerns as developing countries continued to insist they would not accept binding commitments to reduce their emissions.²⁹

Paris 2015

It was becoming obvious that, if there was to be any prospect of emission reduction, there had to be some fresh thinking. So the UN proposed a new methodology for the summit scheduled for 2015 in Paris (COP-21): instead of an overall global reduction requirement, a new approach should be implemented whereby countries would individually determine how they would reduce emissions and that this would be coupled with a periodic review by which each country's reduction plans would be steadily scaled up by a 'ratcheting' mechanism.

But, when countries' plans (then described as 'Intended Nationally Determined Contributions' (INDCs)) were submitted to the UNFCCC secretariat prior to Paris, it was clear that little had been achieved: hardly any developing country had indicated any intention of making absolute emission cuts. Instead their INDCs spoke merely for example of reducing CO₂ emission intensity in relation to GDP or of reducing the percentage of emissions from business-as-usual projections.³⁰

In any case, other provisions of the Agreement signed in Paris in effect exempted developing countries from any obligation, moral, legal or political, to reduce their emissions.³¹ For example, the Agreement was described in its preamble as being pursuant to *'the objective of the Convention [and] guided by its principles'* and further described, in Article 2.1, as *'enhancing the implementation of the Convention'*. In other words, the developed/developing bifurcation remained intact and developing countries could continue to give overriding priority to economic development and poverty eradication. Moreover, under Article 4.4 of the Agreement, developing countries, in contrast to developed countries, were merely *'encouraged to move over time towards economy-wide emission reduction or limitation targets'*. Hardly an obligation to reduce their emissions.

It was not an outcome many wanted. For example, when ex UN Secretary General Kofi Annan was asked in early 2015 what he would expect to come out of the Paris summit, he replied:

*'Governments have to conclude a fair, universal and binding climate agreement, by which every country commits to reducing emissions of greenhouse gases.'*³²

And Western negotiators had intended that Paris should have a very different outcome from that achieved. Hence this 2014 statement by Ed Davey, then UK Secretary of State responsible for climate negotiations:

*'Next year in Paris in December ... the world will come together to forge a deal on climate change that should, for the first time ever, include binding commitments to reduce emissions from all countries.'*³³

But it didn't happen. Developing country negotiators, led by China and India, ignored the West's (in the event feeble) demands. And Western negotiators, determined to avoid another Copenhagen-type debacle, didn't press the issue. Hence the Paris agreement's failure to achieve the West's most basic aim: that powerful 'emerging' economies should be obliged to share in emission reduction.

The Stockholm Dilemma was still unresolved.

Might that change in the future? Well, despite an IPCC ‘Special Report’ in 2018 recommending huge emission reductions by 2030,³⁴ events since 2015 indicate that’s unlikely. For example, UN Secretary General António Guterres convened a climate ‘action summit’ for September 2019, calling for national plans to go carbon neutral by 2050 and new coal plants to be banned from 2020.³⁵ But, in response, the environment ministers of the so-called ‘BRICS’ countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) reaffirmed their commitment to ‘*the full implementation of the Paris Agreement adopted under the principles of the UNFCCC, including the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities*’ principle.³⁶ In other words, these five countries (the source of 44 percent of emissions) were insisting that they should continue to be exempt from any reduction obligation – whatever the IPCC might recommend.

Unsurprisingly Guterres’ summit was a failure: Japan, Australia, South Korea and South Africa were excluded because of their support for coal and the US, Brazil and Saudi Arabia because they’d criticised the Paris Agreement. Yet absurdly China and India were allowed to speak despite being the world’s biggest coal developers and despite India saying that it was in no position to enhance its NDC (the term now used for INDCs). And China’s representative said nothing about how or when Beijing might improve its NDC, let alone start a process of emission reduction.³⁷

It was not surprising therefore that COP-25 (December 2019 in Madrid) got nowhere, with China, India, Brazil and Saudi Arabia in particular indicating no serious intention of reducing their emissions.³⁸ Might that change – might major developing countries enhance their NDCs as required by the ‘ratchet’ provision of the Paris Agreement? The test will be the next UN conference (COP-26) to be held in Glasgow in November 2021 – postponed from 2020 because of the COVID-19 crisis.³⁹

Nothing that’s happened recently justifies optimism. For example, coal consumption in developing countries, especially in India, China and Southeast Asia, is still increasing,⁴⁰ as are overall global emissions.⁴¹ The early 2020 emission reductions caused by Covid-19 lockdowns seem likely to be short-lived: as countries emerge from the pandemic determined to strengthen their economies, emission increases will almost certainly continue.⁴²

The harsh reality is that nothing has really changed since the Copenhagen debacle over ten years ago.

Conclusion

At the time of the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 the West's emissions were 46 percent of the annual global total – today they're only 25 percent of a far greater amount. Thus it's clearly impossible for the West alone to meet scientists' calls for urgent and substantial emission reduction. That can only happen if the rest of the world changes its climate policies. And that's most unlikely. Yet this key issue is largely overlooked in the West – by left and right, by 'denier', sceptic, 'lukewarmer' and 'alarmist', by the mainstream media, most scientific papers, most blogs, all activists and many respected academic and scientific organisations, by politicians, governmental and non-governmental organisations and by financiers, banks, celebrities and social media.

What so many seem not to have noticed is that, over the past forty years, the nature of the climate debate has radically changed as a result of major political and economic developments throughout the world: what was once the Third World has for several years been powerful enough to ignore the West and take charge of environmental negotiation. The increasingly meaningless distinction between the 'developing' world and the 'developed' world initially introduced by the West as a way of getting poorer countries involved in climate negotiation has paradoxically become the reason why progress on GHG reduction has become virtually impossible.

And there seems to be little the West can do about it.

Guenier is a writer, speaker and business consultant – now retired. He has an MA from Oxford and is a barrister. After twenty years as CEO of various high-tech companies, he founded (1995) an independent business consultancy, Guenier Ltd, specialising most recently in project risk; an early assignment was as CEO of the Central Computing and Telecommunications Agency reporting at ministerial level to the UK Cabinet Office. He was founder chair of the medical online research company, MedixGlobal. He has been a regular contributor to TV and radio and has had speaking engagements throughout the world. He has various charitable interests and is a Freeman of the City of London.

Notes and references

¹ See: <https://edgar.jrc.ec.europa.eu/overview.php?v=booklet2019>

² See for example Fairfield Osborn's book *The Plundered Planet* (1948), William Vogt's *Road to Survival* (1948), Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), the dire predictions in the Club of Rome report, *Limits to Growth* (1968) and, in particular, Barbara Ward's report, *Only One Earth* (1972). Many of today's environmentalists share the view that economic growth causes environmental degradation. An interesting example is Michael Moore, whose recent documentary *Planet of the Humans* (<https://vimeo.com/423114384>) has caused so much controversy amongst environmentalists. It's clear from this interview that an important reason for making the film was concern about what he sees as serious damage done to the natural environment by 'renewables': https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bop8x24G_o0.

³ Organised by Canadian Maurice Strong 'widely considered the creator of the global environmental movement': <http://tiny.cc/6h6lqz>

⁴ At the time these countries were commonly referred to as 'underdeveloped', as the 'Third World' or as the 'Global South' – sometimes as 'developing'.

⁵ Franz Fanon's book *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) was very influential in intellectual circles in the West at this time. Indian PM Indira Gandhi's keynote speech at the conference sets out the dilemma clearly: <http://tiny.cc/dl6lqz>. A significant comment: '*The environment cannot be improved in conditions of poverty.*'

⁶ See Part One, chapter I (especially 'proclamation' 4) of this UN report on the conference: <http://un-documents.net/aconf48-14r1.pdf>. For a detailed review of the conference, this is interesting: <http://tiny.cc/eq6lqz>.

⁷ See: https://www.federalreservehistory.org/essays/oil_shock_of_1978_79

⁸ For Brundtland, see *Our Common Future*: <http://tiny.cc/ol7lqz>

⁹ *ibid* – see paragraphs 27, 28 and 29 which do little to clarify the meaning of this rather vague concept.

¹⁰ Heralded in particular by James Hansen’s address the US Congress: <http://tiny.cc/8y6lqz>

¹¹ See: <http://tiny.cc/g46lqz>

¹² For the full text of the UNFCCC see: <https://unfccc.int/resource/docs/convkp/conveng.pdf>

¹³ See Note 1 above. Also the graphical and interactive presentation here is especially helpful: <https://knoema.com/atlas/World/CO2-emissions>.

¹⁴ The omitted words are concerned with a different, but arguably equally important, issue: finance and technology transfer from developed to developing countries. See Note 27 (below) re Hillary Clinton’s qualified proposal about \$100bn a year being made available for poorer countries by 2020.

¹⁵ See Article 4.2 (f) of the UNFCCC, under which parties might review ‘*available information with a view to taking decisions regarding such amendments to the lists in Annexes I and II as may be appropriate, with the approval of the Party concerned*’.

¹⁶ See the Byrd-Hagel resolution adopted unanimously by the US Senate in June 1997: <https://nationalcenter.org/KyotoSenate.html>. It stated that the US would not sign a protocol putting limits on Annex I countries unless it imposed specific, timetabled commitments on non-Annex I countries.

¹⁷ For the text of the Kyoto Protocol see: <https://unfccc.int/resource/docs/convkp/kpeng.pdf>. Note in particular how Article 10’s provision that it did not introduce ‘*any new commitments for Parties not included in Annex I*’ ensured that developing countries were not bound by the Protocol’s emission reduction obligations.

¹⁸ See this report about how China, by lifting more than 850 million people out of poverty, has accounted for more than 70 per cent of global poverty reduction since the 1980s: <http://tiny.cc/etmmqz>.

¹⁹ See: Notes 1 and 13 above.

²⁰ See: <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar4/syr/>

²¹ See: https://www.preventionweb.net/files/8376_BaliE.pdf

²² See: <http://tiny.cc/8tmmqz>.

²³ The full extract: *'If we do not reach a deal at this time, let us be in no doubt: once the damage from unchecked emissions growth is done, no retrospective global agreement in some future period can undo that choice. By then it will be irretrievably too late.'* See <http://tiny.cc/8ummqz>.

²⁴ In particular those confirmed by section 1(b)(i) of the Bali Action Plan – see 21 above.

²⁵ See this overall review of the outcome: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8426835.stm>.

²⁶ Rupert Darwall: *The Age of Global Warming*, 310

²⁷ The 'Copenhagen Accord' was an attempt by some countries to rescue something from this debacle: <https://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2009/cop15/eng/l07.pdf>. A non-binding document (the Conference only 'took note' of it) it stated for example that global temperature should not rise more than 2°C above pre-industrial levels – although it didn't specify a date for this.

Note: an important (and lasting) outcome of the Accord was the developed countries' goal of providing \$100bn a year by 2020 to poorer countries. It was proposed by Hillary Clinton (then US Secretary of State) with this significant qualification: *'the money is only on the table so long as fast-growing nations like China and India accept binding commitments that are open to international inspection and verification'* (<http://tiny.cc/dxmmqz>). Directly relevant to my article, this seems to have been forgotten in recent years. RG

²⁸ See Note 1 above.

²⁹ For example, this report from the 2013 conference in Warsaw shows how little had really changed over the years: <http://tiny.cc/azmmqz/>. And see this report on the 2014 conference in Lima: <http://tiny.cc/v0mmqz>.

³⁰ For example, China's INDC said only that it planned to *'achieve the peaking of carbon dioxide emissions around 2030'* (no mention of the level of such 'peak' or of what will happen thereafter) and to *'lower carbon dioxide emissions per unit of GDP by 60% to 65% from the 2005 level'*. And South Korea merely said that it *'plans to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 37% from the business-as-usual (BAU, 850.6 MtCO₂eq) level by 2030 across all economic sectors'*, i.e. emissions will continue to increase but not by as much as they might have done.

Note that 'Intended Nationally Determined Contributions' (INDCs) are referred to as 'Nationally Determined Contributions' (NDCs) in Articles 3 and 4 of in the Paris Agreement – see Note 31 below. All NDCs submitted to the UNFCCC secretariat can be found here: <http://tiny.cc/75foqz>.

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- ³¹ For full text of the Paris Agreement see: <http://tiny.cc/k2mmqz>.
- ³² See: <http://tiny.cc/15mmqz>.
- ³³ See the Ministerial foreword here: <http://tiny.cc/16mmqz>.
- ³⁴ See: <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>
- ³⁵ See: <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/un-climate-summit-2019.shtml>
- ³⁶ See: <http://tiny.cc/y8mmqz>..
- ³⁷ See these reports: <http://tiny.cc/banmqz> and <http://tiny.cc/mbnmqz>.
- ³⁸ See this report: <http://tiny.cc/5cnmqz>.
- ³⁹ See: <http://tiny.cc/jenmqz>.
- ⁴⁰ See for example these reports: <http://tiny.cc/fonmqz>, <http://tiny.cc/f5q4qz>, <http://tiny.cc/t807qz> and <http://tiny.cc/c207qz>.
- ⁴¹ See for example <http://tiny.cc/11e8qz> and <http://tiny.cc/vrg9qz>
- ⁴² See for example Fatih Birol's comments reported here: <http://tiny.cc/k65pqz>. And here: <http://tiny.cc/arnmqz>. Also see these reports: <http://tiny.cc/zsnmqz>, <http://tiny.cc/0g3nqz>, <http://tiny.cc/w78nqz> and <http://tiny.cc/90h9qz>. This is also relevant: <https://www.eia.gov/outlooks/ieo/pdf/ieo2019.pdf> (go to pages 23 to 26).