The Fault Lines Emerge

By this stage in the second week, COPs usually enter a crucial stage where the negotiations hit a wall. The issues are always the same, namely how the principle of Historic But Differentiated Responsibility(CBDR) is handled. Essentially, how much mitigation by the Developed Countries will occur and how much climate finance will they guarantee to the Developing World to aid their sustainable development and climate adaptation strategies. How should rapidly developing countries such as China, Brazil and South Africa be accommodated in a new world order of climate governance? Positive sentiments often give way to hard realities at this stage, and so it was today.

The culmination of the consultations thus far was expressed in a Draft Agreement document circulated by the COP President this afternoon. It is always the crucial Presidential action in all COP meetings. For the first time the noble statements of intent are crystallised in print and countries see who has had their concerns acknowledged, and who has not. Thus it was today (Wednesday). The late night session of the Paris Committee was quite a brutal affair with country after country criticising the draft text offered by the Presidency. Of course trying to satisfy the demands of 194 countries is an impossible task and the language of the draft ultimately had to be vague enough to keep countries on board, and specific enough to be meaningful. For the first time this week countries used language such as ‘red line issue’ and ‘not negotiable’. How much is posturing and how much is genuine is difficult to ascertain, but for the first time this week the mood turned rather pessimistic. Many countries interpreted the text offered as unbalanced, but from different perspectives. Indeed the Malaysian delegate took the interpretation further by claiming the text could be considered balanced on the basis that it antagonised everyone to some extent.

The issue of targeting not a 2oC rise in temperature over pre-industrial levels, but rather a 1.5oC rise, has emerged as a major issue for many developing countries. The issue is especially considered a national priority for the Small Island Developing States. Of course this is understandable, given their inevitable demise should warming beyond this level continue. The reality however is that the world has already warmed by 1oC and there seems to be a disconnect between the science and the policy on this issue. To avoid a further 0.5oC of warming would probably require global peaking of emissions to have happened a decade ago and net negative greenhouse gas emissions to occur within the next decade. The insertion of such an aspiration in the final agreement is likely, but how operationalising it would occur in the context of a legal agreement seems not to have been thought out.

A similar issue arises for Loss and Damage which has also re-emerged as a major issue for the Developing World. How this would be operationalised in the context of financial transfers is extremely difficult to envisage. If the final agreement has legal status, can we envisage litigation efforts targeting countries following?

For all negotiations a point comes where a risk of overplaying your hand. This point is being approached with the risk that the Developed Countries could walk away from any agreement if compromise does not occur tomorrow. This would be a failure that is not currently being considered and the active intervention of the President to force compromise may yet be required.