

Meeting on ‘Climate Change and People’s Voice’
Rajiv Gandhi Institute for Contemporary Studies, Jawahar Bhawan, New Delhi
October 5th, 2015
(Prepared by: RGICS team)

Minutes of the meeting

The meeting was based on a brainstorming among experts, on the issue of justice in climate policy and negotiations, in the context of the position India should take at the upcoming 21st Conference of Parties in December in Paris. The focus was on ensuring equity and justice not just in international negotiations on climate change, but equally for the people of the country.

Barkha Deva, Associate Director of the RGICS, started the discussion by flagging the issue of ‘climate hypocrisy’ in India. While there is a war on poverty in external forums, this is not being reflected in policies within the country. This is because this debate is an elitist debate and the voices of the people are not coming in. India current policy stand on climate change puts in a contradictory position domestically and globally.

Garima Sharma, from RGICS, gave the introductory address in which the following issues were raised:

- The political mobilization around climate change in India is currently very weak.
- The prevailing public discourse on climate change needs to be developed into a radical political agenda.
- Climate change policy has been impacted upon by local circumstances and reactions as well. This was reflected in the IPCC’s latest Assessment Report which sought to highlight the importance of local knowledge systems.
- In the domain of the cultural politics of climate change, the local is becoming distinctive within global politics and structuring the latter.
- This has challenged what had come to be a ‘post-political’ sphere in climate change governance, characterized by depoliticization and a tendency to reach consensus through economic and technocratic processes. But the democratic processes that foreground these policies may not take into account the knowledge system at the local level.
- Four levels of gap :
 - Experts on climate governance make arguments based on a system of trade-offs – it becomes morally acceptable to offset the benefits in one area with costs in one area. This is not being contested at the national level.
 - Lack of people’s participation in decision making. EIA is not really happening.
 - Systematic attacks on civil society groups, especially those attacking the pro-fossil fuel approach.
 - Ambiguous moral position in international negotiation.
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Chandra Bhushan, from the Centre for Science and Environment, raised the following issues:

- Critiqued the basis on the Sierra Club’s ‘War on Coal’, since US is closing down coal because it has gas. It is not the case that Sierra has much impact. Running a gas based power plant is much cheaper than a coal based power plant. Energy politics of every country has to be based on energy endowment.

- Contested the assumption that India is going to stop using coal anytime soon. The poorest have the most right over coal. The coal based power plants do not supply electricity for the poor. We need to change the discourse to solar for the rich, coal for the poor.
- In India, big corporate houses have controlled gas and it has cheated Indians of that gas.
- Solar energy is extremely land intensive. Solar panels are often put on the roof but the roof today, is the most important real estate. If we are thinking about big solar, we also have to consider alienation of land on a large scale. This govt. is talking about 100 GW of solar – close to 3-4 lakh hectares of land. The land that India currently gives to coal is close to 20,000 hectares. Energy politics deeply implicated in land.
- We have to focus on equity and differentiation in global negotiations. There has been a grandfathering of emissions by rich countries. There needs to be historical responsibility for climate change. 70% of the emissions have been from the developed world. Even if today India decides that it is going to stop a small percent of its 6% emission, it is not going to effect the climate for the next 100 years. Therefore the developed world needs to bring down its emissions drastically. Developing countries cannot drastically solve the problem.
- There is a huge danger in the way India has submitted its INDC. In case of carbon sequestration, we are talking about 500 hectares of forest development every year. But over 50% of the forest cover is degraded in India. Why is it degraded – because of overuse. What about joint forest management and social forest management? Basic rights of people will be trampled upon in the name of value change. Forest politics that will play out in this country will undo a lot of commitments India has made in India.
- How do we include victims of climate change in the national and international climate debate? Any slight variation in weather means that farmers cannot sustain themselves. If there is a small variation, farmers do not have any coping capacity. Extreme rainfall, hailstorms, high wind destroyed wheat, gram, mustard: main crops in UP, Haryana, Rajasthan. The system of loss estimation, set up by the colonial state in the 19th century depends on the patwari who has to check how much loss has been suffered. That report goes to the district administration, then the state administration. Often the reports are smudged to make the compensation to the farmers lower. Farmers are not informed that they have insurance – because the insurance is only for loan, not for compensation. On what basis farmers should get compensation depends on the whims of political leadership. Our current system is not geared to build resilience of people according to climate change. If we really want victims of climate change to influence politics, then they have to be part of the process of building resilience infrastructure to cope with climate change.
- Should we discuss climate or should we discuss development? Is climate change adaptation any different from development? Wasteland development board – it is dead now – in order to discuss the loss of top soil. Joint forest management, social forest management – all developed in the 1980s. Climate is a very limiting lens to

when we look at inclusive climate debate. We can refer to the terms of good climate debate.

Leila Choukroune, from the Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities, New Delhi, talked about bringing back the political into the debate – especially one that is so governed by technical terms. Drawing parallels between climate and trade regimes, she raised the issue of equity, highlighting:

- Is equity within the law or outside the law in climate change discussions?
- Many agreements on equity and trade are non-contractual and non-binding. We see similar agreements being signed on climate change.
- Developing countries often don't know how to use these agreements to their advantage.
- It is not effective because of the vague nature of the language. Justiciability is difficult and not very effective.
- A large part of electricity deprivation in India is economic. Capacity building has considerably increased but the number of people who remain unconnected to India remains high.
- The idea that there isn't enough space in India for solar energy is not correct because there is enough land in India that is uncultivated in India that can be used for solar energy.
- Out of the entire energy basket available in India, only 14% can be used for electricity.
- Building political and institutional capacities to link up with technical solutions like solar panel is to be based on a people-based framework. We need panchayats/cooperatives who can argue that energy generated has to benefit the people it is taking land from.

Philippe Humbert, associated with the John Jaures Foundation, Paris, made the following arguments:

The world of energy is on the verge of a revolution or a systemic change, shifting from unclean, relatively expensive energy towards a new world in the next decade. Climate change is a major political issue, however one cannot deny pure market mechanisms too. Externalities – all the negative impacts of climate change – quality of air, quality of water etc. are not accounted for in the profit and loss accounts of companies.

The power of lobbies is enormous, resulting in billions of subsidies for oil, gas industries etc. compared to money spent on new energy. The government must be a major stakeholder – climate change must be worked into the political debate in a big way and discussed in a democratic forum. Public money should instead be pumped into networks to provide off-grid populations subsidised energy.

The potential of renewable energy is vast - maybe inexhaustible, and addresses the structural energy gap in India. Solar/ on-shore wind energy for new investment is less expensive than any other form of energy. Solar energy is a decentralised form of energy – Compared to massive plants required to exploit other forms of energy, solar energy can be deployed extremely quickly (eg. a 50 gigawatt plant can be built in a year) – one can thus disseminate more units over the country as required.

It is an opportunity for the empowerment of local communities – a way to fight monopolies even if a community is financially weak .

Supriya Singh, from the Indian Youth Climate Network, raised the following issues:

- Climate policy should be designed for youth. Knowledge of climate change is not democratized. Breaking it down further to states and sectors is even difficult.
- Lack of vulnerability assessment.
- Examples of states which are laggards:
 - J&K: people do not want bulbs, but raised demands for grinders. Females there, demanded for torches for moving out. The volunteers of IYCN trained people from Reasi for basic repairs of solar panels.
 - Maharashtra: In Hiware Bazar, people have developed a successful model of water conservation by themselves.
 - Rajasthan: Suggestions were made to design a reservoir in Barmer to meet the water demand without considering the local geographical situation.
- Data is crucial for planning & policy design. However the information exists, it is difficult to access. Only some states like Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka have made data available. Fertilizer association also sells data for northern states.
- India has been fighting for equity at international level, whereas equity within India has been completely ignored. Most of the policies are exclusionary in nature. Discussions do not happen around a comparison of excessive emissions by rich in India vs emissions by rich in other countries.
- Knowledge should be downwards up. Top down approach of policy planning is destroying it further. There should be understanding of what government is doing, what communities have done in the past and what new technologies are coming. For example, it was observed that no farmer suicides happened in Barmer (where farming is largely a traditional practice), whereas massive suicides were recorded in Vidharba.
- The discussion should be focused around survival emissions vs lifestyle emissions. E.g. building of metro required huge amounts of energy which in return generates emissions.
- In Bangalore, rag pickers have ID cards. Issues of exclusion starts there, since all the rag pickers were backward and not a single rag picker was Brahmin. People with no jobs became rag pickers for the sake of ID cards with which they get permission to live in the city and then take the job.
- We need to have numbers to shape policy. Policy discussions should happen at right forums. Environmental issues should be discussed at mohalas.
- Knowledge is a key or value addition that should be brought in and should be linked to the lower people.

Soumya Dutta, from BJVJ and Beyond Copenhagen, raised the following issues in the context of democratizing climate policy cooperation:

- India has two climate change policies one for international negotiations and other for national requirements. In 2007 for the first time, out of the Bali Conference, India made its commitment on what it will do.
- National phase of climate change policy was evolved in 2008. The National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) came up with a single committee with 27 members, out of which 26 were from Delhi (all bureaucrats technocrats) and one was a big industrialist from outside Delhi.
- The NAPCC came up with eight mission documents. Later states were told to come up with their action plans called SAPCC (State Action Plan on Climate Change). The NAPCC is full of wish list and has no action plans.
- Due to the lack of funds made available, State had to depend on foreign agencies for their funding such as UNDP and GIZ. As a result many SAPCCs were prepared by technocrats of these external agencies and ignored local voices.
- Manipur was the first state to open its policy formulation process to academicians, scientists and public at large in 2011 to make Manipur SAPCC vibrant. Thereafter Nagaland and Assam followed.
- If the lessons from 2012 consultation in Srinagar and early 2013 consultation which was held in Dehradun were kept in mind, the damage from 2013 disaster which took place could have been minimized.
- Some of the action plans/suggestions made by NAPCC and SAPCC have undermined the local geographical and environmental requirements and thus are counterproductive, such as building big reservoirs in highly fragile Himalayas region.
- It has been observed that the some corporate vested interests have influenced SAPCCs. The forest dense state Manipur decided to construct a green express highway and also there is a proposal to construct LEED certified building. These two initiatives are either not required or not viable in local conditions. Civil society and other progressive groups and institutions have no chance to intervene in NAPCC but there is a chance to work in SAPCCs. However, for such intervention we need to build our capacity.
- Till 2009, India policy on climate change was determined by external pressures. In 2010, in Cancun, it was decided that every will do its bit based on voluntary commitments, with an endorsement of the pledge-and-review system. In Durban 2011 the international climate change policy regime shifted its vision to the Intended Nationally Determined Contributions.

- The much glorified bi-lateral deal between China and USA actually shifted the entire goal post of the climate change policy debate. Both of them have changed their base year from 1990 to 2005 as the emission in 2005 was on peak in both of these nations.
- The hydro metrological disasters have increased by $\frac{3}{4}$ times in last hundred years. Upper limits of emissions should be defined. The current reports are very conservative. A progressive report should focus around what is demanded by science and should not be based on what countries are saying.
- Dependence on government actions is not sufficient. Global society should work on the frame for climate change since there is a global governance failure. By 2050 the effect of climate change will intensify, so it is great concern to our future.

Soumya Dutta, also talked about post-disaster assessments and raised the following issues:

- In post-disaster management, the most important thing that breaks down is the local economy. In this way, one can make sure that people have the means to rebuild their homes and lives.
- The second thing one needs to take into account is migrant labourers, those with no identification, records of residence. Their bodies or lives are not even taken into account in post-disaster assessments.
- The Himalayan “cloud burst” that affected Uttarakhand and bordering areas recorded a level of rainfall, over 244 mm in a day, that has never been recorded before.
- Warnings by the Indian Metereological Surveys do not reach the district management. What breaks during disaster is the chain of command that goes from the top and the chain of information that comes from below.
- There should be community empowerment for managing disaster responsibilities. One of the best examples is Columbia – a large part of which is mountainous.
- In India, two geological areas most vulnerable to climactic disaster is the coastline and the Himalayas, and the post –disaster relief provided by the government is close to nothing.
- All the government attention in the Uttarakhand floods disaster was focused on improving the conditions of the 4 dham highways.
- Government action is often determined by media attention. Climate funds won’t come to India because there are enough LDCs who have little economic resources and which will receive most of the climate funds. Even the green climate fund that has to provide 100 billion dollars every year by 2020 has only 8 billion dollars. India should demand that it has a right to climate finance.
- We need to develop our own community-centric disaster risk reduction plans. There are several elements to it
 - We have grassroot levels panchayati raj and cluster of panchayats level institutions.
 - Enrich these institutions with technical knowledge.
- In this context, overall, a rights-based approach to disaster management becomes important.

Renuka Saroha, an independent consultant, focused on changing the urban attitudes towards climate change. Planting drives and other piecemeal measures have failed to suffice in both curbing climate change and impacting people greatly. The need of the hour is to mobilize the youth through sustained, organized interactions in which political parties should play a key role.

Nandikesh Sivalingam, from Greenpeace, focused attention on the necessity of phasing out coal. We need to have a moratorium on further mining and impose strict emission control standards on thermal power plants to address the health-related externalities.

Emerging points for the political agenda:

- There ought to be a moratorium on mining in highly sensitive ecosystem areas.
- The cess on coal should be increased.
- There should be no new coal plants – ‘war against mindless mining’.
- High emission standards for thermal power plants from the point of view of health.
- There should be a mechanism akin to LAPA – Local Adaptation Plan of Action – with focus on local level solutions to climate change. It is currently happening in Nepal where they are making climate change vulnerability maps in each village, employing both technical and traditional knowledge.
- SAPCCs could become a focal point for political mobilization. In consultations at state and district level, strengthen review and monitor mechanisms. There we could bring in role of people and alternate energy.