



TACKLING CLIMATE CHANGE: DOOMED TO FAILURE?

Events: The 1992 Rio 'Earth Summit' (the UN Conference on Environment and Development) was the first international conference to give significant attention to the issue of climate change. It did so by establishing the Framework Convention on Climate Change (FCCC), and by calling for greenhouse gases to be stabilized at 'safe' levels. Although it was accepted by 181 governments, the FCCC was no more than a framework for further action and contained no legally binding targets. The Kyoto Protocol to the FCCC, negotiated in 1997, went further, in that, for the first time, legally binding targets were set (for the period to 2012) for states to limit or reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. Its chief limitation was that the USA (then the world's largest emitter) failed to ratify the treaty. In addition, as targets were only set for developed states, emerging powers such as China (which, in 2008, overtook the USA to become the world's largest emitter) and India were excluded. In 2009, the UN Climate Change Conference was convened in Copenhagen to develop a successor to the Kyoto Protocol. The conference, nevertheless, merely agreed to 'take note of' the so-called 'Copenhagen Accord'. This pledged to prevent rises in global temperature of more than 2°C above pre-industrial levels, but failed to create any new legally binding obligations on any country to cut emissions, or to set a global target for emissions cuts. These are deficiencies that no subsequent UN climate change conferences, including the 2015 Paris Agreement, have been able to overcome.

Significance: Some have argued that Rio, Kyoto, Copenhagen and UN conferences have contributed to a record of steady, if unspectacular, international progress on the issue of climate change. Rio created a framework within which the issue could be addressed; Kyoto set binding targets for the developed world; and Copenhagen, for all its limitations, moved beyond Kyoto in that it was marked by the participation of the two biggest players, the USA and China. Yet, the dominant response to these events has been one of frustration and disappointment, with some warning that the failure of the international community to take robust action over climate change will ultimately have catastrophic implications. Why, when some argue that climate change is the most urgent and important challenge currently confronting the



international community, has international cooperation over the issue been so difficult to achieve?

A number of obstacles stand in the way of concerted international action over climate change. First and foremost, although all states acknowledge the threat posed by climate change, tackling the issue imposes major costs on individual states, in terms of investment in sometimes expensive strategies, and accepting lower levels of economic growth. In such circumstances, states are encouraged to be 'free riders', enjoying the benefits of a healthier environment without having to pay for them. A second obstacle is tension between developed and developing states, based on what the FCCC refers to as their 'common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities'. Many in the developing world believe that targets should be set to reflect the fact that developed countries have a historic responsibility for the accumulated stock of carbon emitted since the beginning of the industrial age, which has provided the basis for their level of economic growth and prosperity. Attempts by the developed world to ensure that the costs of tackling climate change are shared globally, are, therefore, seen as morally unfounded and a denial of the developing world's right to prosperity. Finally, many in the green movement trace increased emissions levels, or 'carbon industrialization', back to the spread of materialist and consumerist values that ensure that economic and political systems have come to be geared towards growth and rising living standards. Unless this ideological and cultural dimension of the problem is addressed, international action is destined to remain weak and ineffective.