

Durban Climate Fudge – the Futility of Single-Issue Treaties

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As the climate talks in Durban conclude with yet another fudged, delayed and grossly inadequate outcome, climate negotiations are beginning to look less like a failure of political will and more like simple stupidity. In what other area of governance on this planet, after all, are decisions ever made on the basis of just *one* issue? Where in an individual nation, for example, does the government ever keep its population satisfied by legislating on *one* issue alone, without bringing in or taking into account *other* issues that allow those who may be unduly disadvantaged to be compensated in some way? Indeed, without being able to mix and match different issues so that what some may lose on one issue, they can gain on another, national-level governance—our present nations and representative democracy itself—would hardly have come into being at all!

The point is that globalisation has reached a depth of economic and environmental international integration that old-style, single-issue treaty-making simply doesn't work anymore. Just take almost any global issue and you'll always find there are some nations that would lose out badly from any meaningful agreement, whether it's the largest emitters that would lose out in a climate agreement, nations with strong financial centres that would lose from a financial transactions (Tobin) tax, or developed nations whose farms and countryside would go to rack and ruin if tariffs on agricultural products were globally abolished.

But on we go, madly trying to tackle global problems one issue at a time; in this case trying to get the big losers in any binding climate agreement—the U.S., China and India—to agree to deep and binding emissions cuts which, because there is no mechanism to compensate them, plainly *aren't* in their interests. So is it any surprise the talks effectively go nowhere or the agreement is wholly inadequate? Little more than “kicking the can further down the road”?

But if some *other* global issue were included alongside the climate negotiations—a global transactions tax (Tobin Tax), for example—the billions of dollars this tax would raise could be used to compensate the big losers on the climate part of the agreement, as well as to assist developing countries to adopt clean technologies (*and* it might help calm financial markets to boot!). Moreover, making the Tobin Tax the subject of *global* negotiations, rather than the European Union trying in vain to force it on the UK, would neatly meet the UK's condition that Tobin must be implemented globally if it's to gain Britain's support. By mixing more than one issue in a single *global* negotiation, in other words, opportunities for compensations and trade-offs are created and the chances of making it in everyone's *interests* to co-operate become vastly greater.

Some may object that rich countries should, in the name of global justice, simply suffer their disadvantage without any compensation or complaint. But isn't it time we accepted that co-operation rarely results from exhortations to *justice*, but rather from a well-designed deal that's sophisticated enough to be in everyone's *interests*?

It would be nice, then, if before we completely ruin our chances of civilised survival on this planet, we recalled the lesson that global co-operation requires not just simultaneous action by all nations, but a *multi-issue* policy framework; a framework which provides the absolutely vital opportunities for trade-offs and compensations between nations without which meaningful co-operation becomes impossible. This is a lesson we learned centuries ago at the *national* level, but how much longer are we going to keep ignoring it at the *global* level? How much longer can we *afford* to keep ignoring it?

12th December, 2011.

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