

Geoff Keey

# A Momentary Lapse of Reason?

What did the person on Easter Island say when cutting down the last tree? That was a question posed to US academic Professor Jared Diamond by a student in a lecture on how societies appear to knowingly overshoot their resources. He referred to the incident in his book *Collapse: why civilisations choose to fail or survive*, which describes a string of societal collapses as a result of failing to address environmental problems.

Professor Diamond's book ought to be compulsory reading for all the negotiators and politicians and their advisers involved in the climate negotiations because they are repeating errors Diamond identified in his book: wrong values, poor strategic choices and denial. Copenhagen was so disturbing precisely because the world's leaders know they face a serious threat to humanity and yet failed to properly address it.

To understand why Copenhagen failed, it is important to look behind the publicly visible and immediate causes – such as

incompetent Danish chairing and an impracticable negotiating text – to the underlying reasons behind the failure.

## **Why was there a 200-page negotiating text?**

During the 2009 UNFCCC (United Nations Convention on Climate Change) negotiations many countries, New Zealand included, seemed unready to negotiate. Negotiators lacked a mandate from their

capitals to consolidate text and come to the compromises needed to make progress. This lack of a mandate led to the 200-page text with its thousands of brackets that negotiators faced at Copenhagen.

The two ad-hoc working group chairs were able to take the initiative to consolidate the text only after the threat of a further Danish text emerged at Copenhagen. Sadly, this effort was sabotaged by the United States during the process of handing over the negotiating text from the working group on long-term co-operative action to politicians. The US ambushed the hand-over process with demands and refused to allow the hand-over to occur until its demands were met. After 10 hours of stalemate, the US got its way, opening a retaliatory floodgate of demands from other countries. The effect of this was to destroy the practicality of the negotiating text.

New Zealand's own strategy was part of the problem. New Zealand failed to meet the commitment it made in Poznan by delaying announcement of its target. Then, when asked to provide information on the proportion of its target that would be met through offsetting, forestry or domestic emission reductions, New Zealand refused, saying that there were too many uncertainties to provide that kind of information, despite Environment Minister Nick Smith giving projections about the emissions trading scheme in Parliament.

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## Developing country concerns about comparability have been exacerbated by the low level of ambition of developed countries, in terms both of numerical targets and the relative amount of domestic emission reductions versus offsetting through clean development and land use, land-use change and forestry(LULUCF).

New Zealand's best contributions in 2009 were probably when negotiators were in UNFCCC chairing roles, rather than implementing government policy.

The underlying problems with the negotiating texts and the lack of progress relate to three main issues. The new US administration's failure to make progress in the Senate on climate change legislation has meant the US negotiators were not ready to strike a deal. This fed into the wider lack of ambition from developed countries (on both finance and targets). This in turn fed into the widely differing views of what constitutes a fair distribution of effort.

Added to this mix was a marked shift in power towards China and its allies in the BASIC group of countries (Brazil, China, South Africa and India).

### The emergence of China

Along with the rest of the BASIC group, China is now a dominant player in climate change. Rising emissions and a strong economic position have given China considerable power in the negotiations. Its approach at Copenhagen appeared to be driven by the desire to preserve development space and avoid long-term targets it considers would result in an unfair distribution of effort. A factor in China's reticence was anxiety over whether low-carbon development will deliver the rate of development China needs to avoid civil unrest. Lesser factors included increasing advocacy from climate sceptics and a common belief that climate change negotiations are a Western plot to constrain China's development.

China's controversial blocking of the 80% by 2050 target for developed

countries appears based on its concern about the level of per capita emissions developing countries would be allowed under a global goal of 50% cuts by 2050 and a developed country goal of 80% cuts by 2050. China's assessment is that this would allow developed countries to pollute at twice the rate of developing countries. Put bluntly, why would China willingly agree to a long-term path that allows its strategic competitors to pollute at twice the level of its own citizens?

Long-term comparability, rather than external verification of its emissions, may be the real bottom line for China which might have conceded verification in Copenhagen if it had received something in return from the US. However, without the backing of Congress, President Obama had nothing to offer.

The BASIC countries are now consolidating their position by proposing to fund adaptation for vulnerable countries, taking the diplomatic initiative from developed countries.

### Comparability is a critical issue in climate change negotiations

Three approaches have emerged at climate change negotiations during year: a justice approach that is based on principles of historical responsibility, historical debt and an equal share of a common resource, for which Bolivia is an obvious proponent; a baselines approach that compares targets against 1990 baselines, favoured primarily by the European Union; and abatement costs, which is favoured by those countries that have failed to reduce emissions (such as New Zealand and the United States) and so have a greater amount of work to do to reduce emissions. The UNFCCC

approach of responsibility and capability appears to have slipped off the agenda entirely.

Developing country concerns about comparability have been exacerbated by the low level of ambition of developed countries, in terms both of numerical targets and the relative amount of domestic emission reductions versus offsetting through clean development and land use, land-use change and forestry(LULUCF). Offsetting and forestry imply that developed countries are deferring structural change to their economies and developing countries are concerned that offsetting will mean that cheaper abatement in their countries will be sold to developed countries, leaving them with considerably tougher emission reductions when it is their turn to take on unilateral targets.

New Zealand's approach of having a 50% reduction by 2050 and relying almost exclusively on offsetting and forestry sets a particularly bad example.

Developed countries, for their part, are facing political pressure as firms in their countries compete with firms in developing countries like China and India. The opaque political system in China exacerbates concerns within developed countries that claimed emission reductions may not be real.

Ultimately, comparability goes to the core of diplomatic gaming at the climate change negotiations. Political leaders are acting like the proverbial farmers in the 'tragedy of the commons': unless they show leadership to put aside some of their national interest in favour of the global interest, everyone suffers. A common understanding of comparable effort may be needed to enable leaders to have the courage to tackle climate change.

### The Copenhagen Accord

On first reading, the Copenhagen Accord looks promising. However, the fine print on emission reductions and financing shows that it is a backwards step from the Bali Action Plan.

The proposed developed country targets are bottom-up targets. This ignores science and undermines the UNFCCC process, which is based on setting a science-based aggregate target

and then agreeing to individual targets that will deliver the aggregate. This bottom-up approach will fail to deliver the kind of reductions needed to avoid dangerous levels of climate change because countries will not be forced into ratcheting up their effort. This has been shown in the pledges seen to date in the accord, which are at the lower end of pledges being proposed in a UNFCCC context.

Further, the pledge on short-term finance is not what it seems. The British government has already admitted that its fast-track finance is largely a reclassification of existing funding and may include money that has already been spent. This is likely to be repeated elsewhere.

The long-term financing is also very problematic. The pledge itself is very weak, merely supporting a goal of mobilising finance, with no explicit commitment to deliver. The financing is also proposed from such a wide variety of sources that it is unclear what the \$US100 billion per annum by 2020 might mean in practice.

The UNFCCC has carefully provided guidance to countries over the status of the accord to ensure parties understand that it has no legal weight, and only time will tell what weight it has. At the time of writing, the BASIC countries have agreed to support the accord, but are seeking at least five sessions of the ad-hoc working groups before COP 16 in Mexico.

Within ASEAN, Malaysia, Brunei and Vietnam seem very unlikely to support the accord, while Indonesia and Singapore are likely to support it. The Philippines and Thailand are likely to support the accord but only offer aspirational targets. A number of other developing countries are also likely to associate with the accord to access finance, but also only offer aspirational targets. The Marshall Islands is offering a 40% cut by 2020 to up the moral pressure on developed countries. A group of Central and South American countries, led by Bolivia and Cuba, refuse to support the accord, as does Tuvalu. Developed countries will almost certainly all join the accord.

#### Challenges for New Zealand

New Zealand will need to be better prepared than it was last year. This was most publicly reflected in New Zealand's

handling of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. Prior to the meeting, Foreign Affairs Minister Murray McCully publicly announced that New Zealand didn't want the time taken up with 'Copenhagen issues', despite clear signals that climate change would dominate the agenda. At the meeting New Zealand came with an offer of agricultural research that was so clearly mismatched to the occasion that Prime Minister John Key was forced into a public u-turn by the other leaders present.

There are signs that New Zealand is no longer viewed as a serious player in climate change negotiations: the United States claimed the credit for the agricultural alliance in its media release; John Key was publicly dropped from a BBC debate at Copenhagen and appears to have been excluded from the core group negotiating the accord; and New Zealand appears to have been dropped from a ministerial chairing role during the second week of the negotiations. All of this occurred despite New Zealand being a contributor to the Greenland Dialogue. Consequently, New Zealand needs to be wary of moves away from the UNFCCC process. This move is about large countries taking control from weaker ones. New Zealand is likely to be a loser if the UNFCCC process is sidelined. At least at the UNFCCC the country has a veto; outside the UNFCCC process, New Zealand may be presented with agreement text and asked to sign.

New Zealand needs to act on the advice of the prime minister and listen to vulnerable countries. One of the biggest disappointments for me has been observing ministers launch into strong criticism of countries that are merely asking for action needed to enable them

to survive. If New Zealand risked being completely wiped off the map, wouldn't we expect our leaders and diplomats to be strident too? New Zealand sends its soldiers overseas to kill on lesser provocations.

#### The global challenge

On the present track the world is headed towards at least 3°C warming by the end of the century. This has dire implications for huge numbers of people. If it happens, it will almost certainly be the kind of disaster that has befallen past civilisations.

Developed countries will need to face up to their responsibilities on both targets and financing to build confidence in the negotiations. Unless they are willing to deliver emission cuts of at least 40% below 1990 levels by 2020, major emitting developing countries will strongly resist taking on commitments. Without significant new finance, poorer developing countries will have no incentive to take action.

Major developing countries will need to realise that a right to development may well be irrelevant if climate change wipes out their capacity for development through drought, desertification, salt water inundation and other impacts.

The leadership of all countries will need to show the courage to find common ground on what is their fair contribution to a science-based effort to tackle climate change. Subordinating scientific evidence of likely impacts in favour of short-term nationalistic economic gains is the sure path to failure.

The deserts of Iraq were once the agriculture-driven cradle of civilisation. It is a lesson our leaders should never be allowed to forget.

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