ECONOMY AND ECOLOGY 20.10.2023

Saving Earth requires greater cooperation

Eight years on, and the praised Paris Agreement has failed to reach its targets. A globally pervasive geopolitical mood of disunity is to blame

Inside the halls of the *Parc des Expositions* in the Paris suburb of *Le Bourget*, fists punched the air, embraces were shared and some shed tears of joy. It was 12 December 2015, after about 20 years of labour, when an agreement billed as mankind's last hope to save humanity along with our only life-sustaining planet Earth was palpable. Understandably, the French government – which played host – hailed the Paris Agreement as 'unprecedented in climate change negotiations'. And it certainly *was* a first. Yet, eight years after then French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius' symbolic seal of the deal by banging his green gavel, the plan may well be in a parlous state.

But a clause in the accord serving more than a simple discursive purpose offers reason for hope. Article 14 stipulates that ever so often, there will be stock taken 'of the implementation of the Paris Agreement to assess collective progress towards achieving its purpose and long-term goals'. It is with little fanfare, compared to the accord's emergence, that the United Nations released the first Global Stocktake on 8 September, which, above all, should assess each state's policy outcomes on limiting average global temperature rise to below 2 degrees compared to pre-industrial levels and also ensure increases do not go beyond 1.5 degrees. But instead, the UN's 46-page stocktake turned out to be a 'general assessment of national climate policy outcomes', contained in National Determined Contributions (NDC), taken out of hundreds of thousands of pages describing how each country has been mitigating climate change and adapting to its impacts. Unfortunately, and perhaps anticipating that useful accountability would imply transparency, the stocktake was negotiated in a way that countries were not named, not even regions. In true community spirit, every state received the same grade.

The failure of multilateralism

The obfuscation from not reporting precise implementation data exemplifies a failure in multilateralism, undermines trust and is a forerunner to the present global state of multipolarity. A stocktake detailing states' failures would have added to existing global crisis that eludes the best of assembled minds at multilateral gatherings such as the G7. And so, the worthless stocktake was filed away without much fuss. But its authors were quite diligent to inform, for example, that efforts in redressing climate change by Africans – whose negligible emissions to cause climate change – and by Americans – with historic emissions to match the entire European Union and who, when not unabashedly suggesting the Chinese are to blame for climate change, are claiming the war in Ukraine worsens climate change – have come to nought.

As if Africans and Americans are likely to suffer the same fate from climate change impacts, the stocktake concludes that 'the global community is not on track towards achieving the long-term goals of the Paris Agreement, despite progress made'. Such implied shameless sharing of responsibility contrived in the expression 'global community', besides rendering the stocktake useless, presupposes the existence of such a community that has the same resources and capacities, that is similarly induced, by a common ambition to implement and is subsequently also quite motivated to avert global calamity from climate change impacts. Not one of those assumptions is true as the present state of multipolarity clearly reveals. French President Emmanuel Macron, for example, observed last year that the United States has withdrawn 'from most of the agreements it had contributed to building...such as on the climate, with the Paris Agreement', and he warned of a 'great fragility of multilateralism'.

The unfulfilled need for a substantive transfer of renewable energy technologies from developed to developing countries, for example, reflects a failure within this imagined global community that is unresponsive to other lives within it.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz puts its astutely while recently debating at the UN assembly: 'multipolarity is not a normative category but a description of today's reality'. The stocktake provides empirical evidence of that 'reality', arguing that 'strategic capacity-building support to developing countries needs to be scaled up.' Such support principally is to increase renewable energy technologies and access to climate finance that developing countries can afford.

The unfulfilled need for a substantive transfer of renewable energy technologies from developed to developing countries, for example, reflects a failure within this imagined global community that is unresponsive to other lives within it. A preservation of 'effective multilateralism' is Macron's idea of a solution. But as such failures reflect the lack of global cooperation on – as yet – the greatest challenge to our planet, it calls to question whether multilateralism isn't simply a normative idea. However, there is the caveat that climate change impacts results in death, and since no society condones wanton loss of life, which has resulted from climate change induced drought in the Horn of Africa, this could save the accord from becoming a simple discursive norm.

Peace and energy are integral to development

One undisputed fact that the stocktake thankfully did not fail to mention is that 'climate change threatens all countries.' That is critical to note since to prevent the environmental crisis becoming a global humanitarian crisis, particularly 'for those who are least prepared for change and least able to recover from disasters' – namely Africans – there is an urgent need to increase support for adaptation measures, particularly in developing countries, and to minimise loss and damage from climate change impacts. However, it remains unclear precisely whether, for example, it is the Americans or Chinese who must now step up and assume greater responsibility to save African lives.

The current stocktake will be on focus during COP28. 'The importance of collective action has never been clearer' states its president-designate, Sultan Ahmed Al Jaber, thereby highlighting the geopolitical mood of disunity in his letter to political leaders expected to attend the next COP.

Germany is exceeding the internationally agreed 0.7 per cent of Gross National Income contributions to Overseas Development Assistance, the country is in a good position for its aim to reform the UN's Security Council, as well as multilateral

The fact that 'the world is not on track to meet the long-term goals of the Paris Agreement' is news only to those who've been ignoring the present fate of the most vulnerable to climate change impacts. Yet, those who recognise the impertinence of such an attitude are aware that there are numerous multilateral efforts to realise the full potential of the agreement. But, obviously, multilateralism is not working effectively to solve global public problems. Macron's ambition for Europe to gain 'strategic autonomy' provides political confirmation. And

institutions such as the World Bank Group.

Scholz's lament on multilateralism, that 'we today – especially today – need the courage, creative energy and will to fill in the rifts, which are deeper than ever' describes a world short of cooperation. Yet, the chancellor's matter of fact statement that German policy will not be insular and his promise that Germany 'will stand by those suffering the greatest hardship' gives hope amidst despair and despondency. Especially considering that Germany is exceeding the internationally agreed 0.7 per cent of Gross National Income (GNI) contributions to Overseas Development Assistance, the country is in a good position for its aim to reform the UN's Security Council, as well as multilateral institutions such as the World Bank Group. This is good because peace and energy are integral to development. Yet, instead of arguing that 'we all have to do more together to achieve the Paris climate goals', Scholz should emphasise the greater and mostly unmet responsibility of developed countries.

The accord's first stocktake reveals that politicians now face immanent tasks to affect practical and meaningful global cooperation on climate change and restore cooperation towards a common good — to ensure global temperature increases do not go beyond 1.5 degrees. The NDCs must serve a useful purpose beyond stating policy promises to realise that goal. And so, the next stocktake due in 2028 must hold each state accountable against those promises. Assuming responsibility contributes to building trust, which is essential for multilateralism to work as it should.