

**An argument prepared for the motion:
“China and India are right to resist binding emissions targets”**
Tom Reilly, Research Fellow, Science & Technology Policy Research Unit,
University of Sussex

Support for the motion is based upon the following facts and scientific knowledge:

- 1) the energy required for economic growth is largely derived from the burning of fossil fuels, creating greenhouse gases (GHGs);
- 2) GHGs stay in the atmosphere for centuries¹; and
- 3) the current stock of GHGs in the atmosphere is such that their flow must be rapidly reduced to prevent catastrophic climate change.

This combination of factors creates *intra-* and *inter-*generational issues of equity. The first arises because the risks from reducing emissions now are slanted disproportionately towards the poor - who are least responsible for the current stock of emissions in the atmosphere. The second because people today are facing consequences from the development path forged by others in the past and, in turn, decisions made today about how to handle these consequences (as laid out in number 3) will have significant, but uncertain, consequences for future generations.

Past evidence tells us that *creating* a developed economy is more emissions intensive² than *maintaining* a developed economy. Furthermore, China and India are already invested in the tried and tested growth model outlined in 1) above, and have lifted hundreds of millions of people above the global poverty line³ as a result. The logical conclusion to draw from this is that asking them to cut back on emissions is like asking them to cut back on economic growth and poverty reduction. Treading a ‘greener growth’ path means moving into

¹ This is a stylized ‘fact’: Some GHGs last in the atmosphere for much longer than others. The point is, though, that GHGs have life expectancies that span generations.

² Emissions intensity refers to emissions per unit of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). But developed countries, typically, produce more emissions per capita than developing economies – e.g. the USA produces about four times the emissions per capita of China today, and about five times those of India.

³ The Global Poverty Line (GPL), aka the ‘dollar-a-day’ poverty line. The correct amount is actually \$1.25, i.e. people living below the GPL have the sort of life a person in the USA would have if they had less than \$1.25 (at 2005 prices) a day to live on. This \$1.25 takes account of purchasing power parity, which means that someone below the GPL in China or India is not better off than someone below the GPL in the USA.

uncharted territory with the intra-generational risks that are involved being shifted towards the poor, who have more at stake than any other group.

The world's largest cumulative emitter⁴, the United States of America, has thus far refused to take a clear lead on this issue, instead requiring that some developing countries - particularly India and China - make commitments too. We have a situation here that whiffs a little of the banking crisis; the gains from GHGs have been privatised by a minority⁵, while the pains from limiting them, which have largely been necessitated by those gains, are shared by everybody. Even though those born into relative wealth today are not responsible for the 'sins' of their predecessors, they nevertheless find themselves in a world of inequality where there is a greater awareness of the consequences of actions.

Another risk factor to consider is not only is GHG mitigation potentially more burdensome on the poor, but so is *non*-mitigation; i.e. the adverse effects of climate change also fall disproportionately on the poor. Thus the inter-generational risks shift towards the poor in a way that is, in fact, an incentive for mitigation in India and China even in the absence of binding targets.

The difference between risk and uncertainty is worth emphasising. Risk can, theoretically, be measured by using past evidence, but uncertainty exists when there is no such guide from the past. The latter applies to two key, interrelated, issues. Firstly, the problems that will be caused by the potential temperature increases linked to climate change are beyond the scale of history⁶. Secondly, the extra GHG cutbacks the rich need to make relative to the poor, to share the risk equitably, is unknown.

Let's borrow an analogy that developing country leaders have used: Binding GHG targets being asked of them are similar to a rich person eating a meal in an expensive restaurant, then inviting a poor neighbour in for a coffee before asking to split the bill. If we take this

⁴ I.e. the USA has emitted more of the current stock of man-made GHGs in the atmosphere than any other country.

⁵ There is more than just the USA in this (significant) minority being referred to, of course, but most of the others made a commitment to the targets agreed in the Kyoto Protocol.

⁶ We do know, however, that if global temperatures fell by about 5⁰ C then we would be in an Ice Age.

analogy further and imagine that the poor neighbour just pays for the coffee, then is this the end of the matter? Unfortunately, it is not. There are complex interactions between decisions made today, regarding GHG emissions, and events in the future. When it comes to relating the price of a material good today to the consequences (or 'price') of a binding emissions target today, it is like trying to imagine how the price paid for the coffee today affects the price of coffee in the future, the future quality of the coffee, the future availability of coffee and the future ability to pay for coffee. What is more, of course, the poor neighbour may also want to partake in a little more than a cup of coffee in the future.

In summary: When considering the uncharted territory that a greener development model represents, the financial risks being borne disproportionately by the poor, and the uncertainties involved - indicating a flexible approach would be best - then it becomes clear that China and India are not resisting being bound to GHG emissions per se, they are simply resisting being bound to poverty and inequality. Resistance to this is rational, thoughtful, and what is more, it is the right thing to do.