

December 12, 2011 3:35 pm

Economy and the environment

By Dipu Moni and José María Figueres



Climate catastrophe: one-fifth of Bangladesh could be flooded as sea levels rise

The global climate talks in Durban have demonstrated that those most responsible for climate change feel least responsible for the problem, despite possessing the greatest capacity to address it, writes Dipu Moni.

The flip side is that those worst affected are taking high degrees of responsibility for a problem they had little role in creating, and possess the least capacity to resolve.

In the lead up to Durban, many of the world's large carbon emitters made the low level of their ambitions clear. Japan, Canada and Russia -pronounced their reluctance to carry the Kyoto protocol forward and, as yet, no new commitments on emissions have been agreed. There is also still no clarity on the levels of finance that would be available to support crucial climate actions in low-capacity developing countries over the next decade.

Sadly, the current policies on the table fall well short of any reasonable target for reducing emissions, and put the world at risk of much higher warming than 2C. This would be catastrophic, in particular for vulnerable countries such as my own. Just as sad are the subtle efforts by some of the countries who bear the biggest responsibility for climate change to take advantage of divisions among the complex interests of other states who are desperately seeking solutions.

Let us not forget that low-lying countries, such as the Maldives, face the existential threat of total submersion from rising sea levels brought about by

climate change, while Bangladesh faces a very real risk of about one-fifth of the country being flooded.

This is why the Climate Vulnerable Forum, which represents 19 countries from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America and the Pacific, recently put forward a 14-point declaration that articulated a firm determination to do as much as possible to bring about a resolution to the climate crisis.

Just as major emitters pursued their low-ambition strategies in Durban, our members have reiterated their high ambitions. This includes a determination to undertake voluntary mitigation actions and to pursue parallel programmes for adaptation that are crucial for safeguarding the wellbeing of our communities.

For its part, Bangladesh has allocated \$300m of taxpayers' money to finance programmes under the national climate change strategy. Other vulnerable countries have taken similar steps.

We remain, however, marginalised and newly emerging economies with large pockets of poverty. Our ability to act continues to be constrained by our low capacity – chronically so, in some cases – compared with the developed nations.

In this sense, the call for climate finance is not just a brazen demand for cash by developing countries. Climate finance will actually make a very real difference in contributing to the additional reductions of CO₂ that are crucial for the world to meet any target for limiting global warming. Furthermore, since capacities are so low among our vulnerable countries, we know that for every dollar of climate finance not forthcoming, human lives, infrastructure and livelihoods are put at greater risk.

The current situation is alarming, and sitting idle is not an option. Climate change implies too great a peril.

Bangladesh is ready to lead by example. We and the other members of the Climate Vulnerable Forum aim to catalyse change and action to mitigate this growing crisis, and call upon the world's major carbon emitters to give manifest commitments to do their part to address the challenges of climate change.

Durban has not endorsed a robust agenda for change. But reason and justice inspire us to lead from the front. This gives us confidence that, in time, we shall prevail.

The writer is foreign minister of Bangladesh

.....

The UN climate change talks in Durban illustrate just how tough it is to squeeze valuable outcomes from rich and powerful governments that adamantly pursue bad policies, writes Jose Maria Figueres.

Indeed, the continued post-ponement of climate action by governments fearful of the economic consequences not only defies the growing momentum in wider society and business to embrace green development, but it also goes against any reasonable sense of economic acumen.

Experiences from Costa Rica – my own country – show how misguided economic policies can ultimately come at a great cost to prosperity.

Once, Costa Rica was almost completely covered with primeval tropical forest. However, such was the rate of deforestation in the country that by the mid-1970s, more than three-quarters of the forest cover had been destroyed. Stripped of its natural asset, Costa Rica's economy began to suffer amid increasing shortages of the ecosystem services provided by the forest – vital to -sustaining key sectors such as agriculture, -industry and energy.

A good example is water. Much of the water required by Costa Rica's homes and businesses is generated by the forests. Why? Because the forest draws and captures rainfall and deposits water into the natural supply chain. Water is also vital to Costa Rica's energy supply – more than 90 per cent of the country's energy is derived from renewable sources, such as hydroelectric projects. As such, any decrease in water supplies has a tremendous impact on development.

The reason for this environmental mismanagement was simply bad policy, which mistakenly assumed that all forested land was unproductive. Banks, for example, provided loans to farmers to clear their lands of forests. Ignorant of the economic reality, Costa Rica was inadvertently shooting itself in the foot.

Fortunately, this damaging course was reversed before it was too late. This required government policies that looked at the environment as an economic opportunity, not as a cost. The proceeds of the 1995 carbon tax continue to finance a simple scheme that pays forest owners directly for the water they contribute to downstream consumers. They are also paid for the carbon they sequester through the growing of trees.

Today, forest covers about 50 per cent of Costa Rica. This also helps to fuel the ecotourism industry – the country's second-largest source of income after the information technology sector.

But we should not stop there. The transition to a low-carbon economy would create huge opportunities for entrepreneurs to reinvent many of our productive processes, while creating hundreds of thousands of jobs in new industries and sectors.

The world's largest carbon emitter governments have spent the past two weeks in Durban discussing more of the usual bad policies. At the same time,

the grassroots “Occupy Durban” movement, the refusal of poor countries in the Climate Vulnerable Forum to be silenced on the issues affecting them, and the commitment of the businesses gathered at the World Climate Summit all give reasons for hope.

Twenty years ago, climate concern was marginal at best. Today, all sectors of society are pushing for a new green agenda. We must hope that governments will catch up with us eventually.

The writer is a trustee of Dara, an organisation that campaigns for effective aid, and a former president of Costa Rica