Conflict about historic responsibility for greenhouse gas emissions

February 23 2013

The commitment to reduce greenhouse gas emissions should be allocated based on countries' historic responsibility for the emissions. This logic was recognized early on in climate negotiations. But the countries are still disputing how it should be interpreted and applied.

When the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change was adopted in 1992, "historic responsibility" was established – that is, the countries that release the most greenhouse gases also have a greater responsibility to reduce emissions. To some extent this is also reflected in the convention, where the industrialised countries (OECD) have made a greater commitment than the developing countries.

But despite twenty years of negotiations, there is still no prevailing consensus on how the historic responsibility should be interpreted in detail. Rather, the conflict has become sharper. So argues Mathias Friman, who recently defended his doctoral thesis at Water and Environmental Studies (WES) at Linköping University in Sweden. In his study, he brings out two different interpretations of the historic responsibility, which have come out in climate negotiations.

"On one hand there is proportional responsibility, namely responsibility in proportion to impact on the climate. This gives the industrialised countries the greatest responsibility, and has given rise to a number of different models; there are thousands of ways to calculate this."

"Another interpretation is moral responsibility, where the countries

contribute to reductions based on their capacity. This also gives the industrialised countries greater responsibility, but opens up a way for the new developing countries to make a greater commitment."

While the developing countries argued for proportional responsibility, in accordance with the principle "the polluter pays", it was countered by the rich countries with two main arguments: One is that it is far too difficult to calculate exactly what proportional responsibility means in the commitment. The other is that we cannot hold previous generations responsible for something they didn't know was harmful.

The rich countries prefer to talk about moral responsibility, more based on capacity. This way, rapidly developing countries like Brazil, China, Mexico, South Africa, and India could also have greater commitments imposed as their capacity increases. China, for its part, has argued for historic responsibility calculated on a per capita basis.

Up until 2007 it historic responsibility was fairly silent in the negotiations, Friman states. The concept had been accepted, but the issue had been referred to an advisory body where various calculation models were worked out. Now, there are a range of such models and it is more difficult to blame it on "it can't be calculated," he says. The issue of historic responsibility has returned to the negotiations, and the conflict has become sharper.

"It is understandable that the conflict will heat up considerably now that historic responsibility will actually be translated into a range of commitments," Friman says, citing the United States as an example:

The US says it wants to take the lead in climate work through committing to decreasing its emissions by 3% up through 2020, as compared with 1990. On the other hand, if the responsibility would be calculated proportionately, the US would end up with a reduction

requirement closer to 50-60%.

Right now it's difficult to see a solution, Friman states, who in his thesis also reviewed the rules for dialogues within the climate convention. Rules for decision-making are absent, and the mechanisms for conflict resolution other than through negotiation are very weak. Among other things, this means that all decisions must be taken in consensus and that agreements must be accepted or rejected in their entirety – something that paves the way for sharp contradictions and intense conflicts, he states.

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