

All Must Meet Their Obligations

Yamaguchi Mitsutsune examines the principle of “common but differentiated responsibility” in tackling global warming.

The phrase “common but differentiated responsibility” was first acknowledged as one of the principles in the issue of global warming in Article 3 of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) adopted in 1992. The phrase basically means that developed and developing countries share the responsibility for protecting the climate system but to varying degrees when the differences in the amount of past greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions are taken into account. Article 3 continues to refer to “respective capacities,” which has mainly been interpreted as indicating ability to pay.

Since it is only a question of time before the amount of GHG emissions from developing countries overtakes that of developed countries, the framework of the Kyoto Protocol where the obligation to reduce and control is placed on the developed countries alone cannot possibly be an effective countermeasure. However, developing countries have used the principle of “common but differentiated responsibility” as a pretext

for rejecting any additional obligations. In 2001, the United States announced that it was withdrawing from the Kyoto Protocol citing as one of its reasons that the main developing countries had not adopted numerical targets. Conversely, the world is now caught up in a vicious circle, where developing countries do not undertake any obligations because the United States, the largest emitter, has not assumed its reduction obligations. Recently, however, the United States has set a loose target.

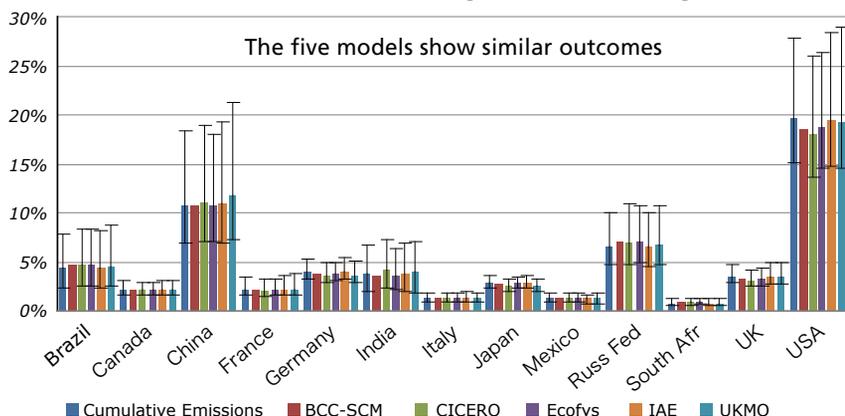
We are instinctively convinced that most of the responsibility for the increase in GHG concentrations lies with the developed countries that have squandered fossil fuel since the Industrial Revolution to promote industrial development. Certainly, whatever the future may hold this is true for the past when we look at the issues in terms of CO₂, the energy source that contributes the most to global warming. However, CO₂ is not the only greenhouse gas and it is also emitted by deforestation and changes in land use.

Please consult the graph. This is part

of the materials that the research group MATCH presented at COP13 in Bali. Using three representative GHGs, including CO₂ (and incorporating changes in land use), the five models for China, Norway, Germany, Japan and the United Kingdom show the ratio of impact by country (G8 + 5) on rising temperatures over the past 100 and some years. As is clear at first glance, there are hardly any variations between the models. The United States is in the lead followed by China, Russia and Brazil with India and Germany nearly level. Even when one of the models was used to change the cumulative period, the outcome was essentially the same. In short, rising temperatures are mainly the result of manmade activities of the major emitters including developing nations. Consequently, developing countries must not evade their obligations solely for reasons of “common but differentiated responsibility.” Even less so if we consider future emissions. Naturally, prior to this, the participation of the United States is an absolute condition in the eyes of the global community, and there is cause for optimism at this time.

Should developing countries then assume reduction obligations according to their share of the responsibility for the past and the future? This is where the burden of “ability to pay” enters the picture. It is thought that earnings per capita are a valid indicator of reserve capacity to pay. In general, this capacity is lower in developing countries than it is in developed countries. In recent years, however, the earnings of certain developing countries have grown exponentially and the simple demarcation between developed and developing countries has become unsuitable. While it is still a prerequisite for the sake of future generations that wealthy countries including the United States assume the cost of reductions to a degree that surpasses their own contributions, the only alternative for alleviating the harm caused by global warming is that all countries, with the exception of the Least Developed Countries, meet their obligations according to ability. ▣

Contribution to Temperature Increase in 2005 of Emissions from 1900 to 2005 of CO₂, CH₄ and N₂O Including Land-use Change and Forestry



Source: N. Höhne, J. E. Penner, M. Prather, “Modelling and assessment of contributions to climate change,” final report; Bali, Indonesia; 5 December 2007; www.match-info.net/data/MATCH_Bali_DEC05.ppt

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