Salvaging Negotiations: Where We Go From Here

By Agus P. Sari

THE “COPENHAGEN ACCORD” that came out of the United Nations climate summit in December embodies important key messages, despite the failure of the conference to reach a final binding agreement. For starters, the accord commits to limiting future increases in the earth’s temperature to below 2°C. As such, greenhouse gas emissions need to peak as soon as possible, taking into account the recognition that for developing countries, where “social and economic development and poverty eradication are the first and overriding priorities,” the timeframe for peak emissions should be longer than for developed countries.

Low-emission development is indispensable to sustainable development. Among the options to mitigate climate change, the accord expresses a commitment to aid forest conservation in developing countries through the so-called REDD-plus: “Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries” and enhancement of carbon removals.

The accord also commits developed countries to provide $30 billion in financing to developing countries to combat climate change between 2010 and 2012, with funding to reach $100 billion per year by 2020. This amount includes support for mitigation actions such as REDD-plus, as well as actions to adapt to the impacts of climate change. The funds will be managed by a new entity called the Copenhagen Green Climate Fund. The fund will mobilize a wide variety of sources, public and private, bilateral and multilateral, including alternative sources. A governance structure with equal representation from developed and developing countries will be established. A so-called Technology Mechanism will also be created to accelerate technology development and transfer.

None of these commitments in the Accord, however, are legally binding. Instead of reaching a final decision at Copenhagen, the conference participants merely “took note” of the accord.

To many, this outcome was inadequate. Small island states, for example, rejected the accord because they viewed the 2°C limit as “suicidal,” in the words of Lumumba Dia-pong of Sudan, the chair of the Group of 77 developing countries. Instead, they argued for a limit of 1.5°C. While an overwhelming number of countries found the Copenhagen Accord grossly imperfect, some countries preferred to adopt it anyway because, in the words of a Norwegian delegate, “one step forward is better than two steps backward.” Other countries, such as the tiny island state of Tuvalu, preferred to reject it altogether.

THE POLITICS OF NUMBERS
One word sums up what was expected to have come out of the Copenhagen meeting: numbers. Two kinds of numbers, to be precise: one in gigatonnes (or percentage of gigatonnes) of CO₂ emission reductions and another in dollars to be committed to assist developing countries in combating and adapting to climate change. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), in its Fourth Assessment Report, said that stabilizing atmospheric greenhouse gas concentrations at 450 parts per million will lead to a 50:50 probability of meeting the 2°C limit. But to achieve 450 ppm, developed countries would have to reduce their emissions by 25 percent by
2020 to 40 percent from 1990 levels. Also, the report said there would have to be a “substantial deviation” from business as usual for developing countries. A later study suggested that this change might amount to emission reductions for developing countries of 15 percent to 30 percent.

Against this backdrop, imagine a zero-sum game in Copenhagen between the world’s top two emitters, China and the US, who between them contribute about half of all CO₂ emissions. With a global cap, what is not reduced by the US will need to be reduced by China (and the rest of the world), and vice versa. US President Barack Obama’s target of a 17 percent reduction from 2005 levels by 2020 is a mere 4 percent below 1990 levels, far below the unilateral commitments made by other developed countries, or what the IPCC deemed adequate. This would leave the rest of the world, China included, to make up the difference. Given the level of existing unilateral commitments, China couldn’t be blamed for being nervous about the deal. Indeed, in the absence of low-emission technologies, China cannot give up its right to development — which will eventually lead to increased emissions. China might have taken a softer line if the US had been more ambitious in its reduction target. But the US target was final.

What was not easily admitted was that the fate of Copenhagen actually depended on Washington. Let us go back to Bali in 2007. Among the reasons why the so-called Bali Roadmap needed two years — instead of one — was that everybody was waiting until George W. Bush was no longer US president because nothing seemed achievable with him in power.

Enter Copenhagen 2009, with a Democrat as the new US president. Obama actually went to Copenhagen without a full mandate, because the US Senate did not pass key legislation in the second half of 2009 that governs domestic climate actions. Another round of deliberations on the legislation is expected to take place in the first half of 2010.

How did this ruin Copenhagen? Without a strong mandate, Obama couldn’t come to Copenhagen offering strong emission reduction...
commitments. His proposal was hardly serious. No wonder China — and the rest of the world, for that matter — didn’t like the numbers. They decided in the end that to come out of Copenhagen with no numbers for emission reductions was better than coming out with bad numbers. Now, we hope that the next meeting of the so-called Conference of Parties (COP) in Mexico in 2010 will deliver the numbers — better ones — that we expected to come out of Copenhagen.

All this was made worse by bad diplomacy on the side of the Danish host. First, by drafting — pretty much secretly — a concluding text, and then denying having done so. Second, by managing the high-level diplomacy badly — inviting a small group of heads of state to the table when many more were actually present. This so-called “Friends of the President” process, while not uncommon at meetings like this, can destroy trust when handled badly. Third, by not having a clear game plan, which was shown, for example, when conference chair Connie Hedegaard unexpectedly stepped down and was replaced by Prime Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen (which made Copenhagen the first COP chaired by a head of state). Fourth, by not understanding the procedures, which turned the last night of negotiations into a laughing stock. And finally, by lacking diplomatic sensitivity.

As a result, some blamed China, others blamed the US, and still others blamed the Danes for the “failure.” Indeed, the challenge in Copenhagen was to salvage what was left of the messy negotiations. It was increasingly obvious that key decisions would have to wait until the meeting in Mexico in late 2010. But with more than 100 heads of state present, including Obama, the meeting simply couldn’t be allowed to fail.

WHAT LIES AHEAD
Key decisions — real decisions — must be made in Mexico in December 2010. But a good decision in Mexico will depend on a good decision in Washington. In April, the Senate will resume deliberations on the crucial climate bill. The possibility of it passing is 50:50. If the bill passes, then US negotiators will have a stronger mandate to offer better numbers in Mexico. As such, the decisions in Mexico could be more acceptable to the rest of the world.

But if the bill is blocked, the Senate will not take it up again until much later, perhaps in 2012. If that is the case, the outcome in Mexico may be no different than Copenhagen, and a new strategy to buy time will be needed.

Agus P. Sari is Country Director of Ecossecurities, Indonesia. The opinions expressed here are entirely his own.