DFID/DSA Policy Forum, Monday 2 June 2008

Discussion Group 7 Summary Report:

Development Futures in the light of climate change: creating new insights into past, present and global futures

Nick Brooks and Natasha Grist
Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research

Session Report: Frances Hawkes and Natasha Grist
Session contact: Natasha Grist n.grist@uea.ac.uk

Many thanks to all participants.

Introduction

Each session began with a brief introduction from paper authors Nick Brooks and Natasha Grist.

We seem to have lost a long term historical perspective on climate change. Massive climatic upheaval around 5000 years ago was responsible for landscape changes, such as the desertification of previously productive land, which perhaps suggests the origin of civilisation to be a response to scarcity of resources, rather than an abundant and benign environment. A misreading of societal development in the deep past has therefore engendered ideological values of progress which could be a barrier to global climatic adaptations.

The development community is largely unaware of potential social challenges of the future, such as nanotechnology, "transhumanism" and biotechnology, which compound the uncertain, though well known, predictions of climate change, such as water scarcity. Although mitigation and adaptation funding is available for climate screening mechanisms, policy tends to focus on the more manageable aspects of climate change; development practitioners need to explore the options and opportunities of long term futures scenarios, whilst questioning how to define and integrate globally coherent low carbon development pathways into all development.

The session attendees then broke off into three groups to address the discussion questions raised in the paper, before reporting their key points to the rest of the group.

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Question 1: Radical shift: Does climate change mean we need a radical shift in the way we think the theory and practice of development?

Comments and ongoing questions:

1. Growth versus redistribution: how do we reform growth for the developing world whilst avoiding '8 planet' living? This refers to Andrew Simms' presentation in the morning that showed evidence that consumption levels enjoyed by developed country nations, if expanded to the whole human population, would require 8 planets' worth of natural resources to sustain them.
2. Democracy and economic growth are at the heart of how we think about development. Cuba broadly achieves one planet living undemocratically – so in order to get the changes we need as swiftly as we need them, will we have to give up political freedom?
3. The issue of limiting human population, whilst controversial, needs revisiting.
4. Does the theory of development need a radical shift? If development is about well-being, then perhaps not. Others argued that the current theory of development is producing the next generation of consumers, and so needs to be changed.
5. The concept of sustainability (and sustainable economic growth) appears to have been dropped from currently prevailing ideas of economic growth. This is an essential component of low carbon development.
6. International development practice may need a more radical shift away from carbon-intensive macro-projects than national development strategies might; the general practice of development requires a huge shift in implementation towards lower carbon approaches.
7. Local, small scale, and project-based efforts towards low-carbon are starting to be funded, and positive examples reported. However, big questions remain about how this can be scaled up to national and supra-national scale given the more fundamental restructuring to economy and society that are required.
8. Will low carbon development generate a modest reversal in rural-urban migration and a return to flexible subsistence? One participant suggested that food price rises and other shocks to the economy may encourage people to refocus on subsistence agriculture.
9. There is a need to manage the economy in a way which reflects socio-environmental value more accurately, particularly with regards to geographic externalities and transboundary issues. This is in conjunction to a suite of alternatives to economic indicators more widely employed.
10. How do we incorporate global justice and equity into the low carbon development discourse?

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Question 2: Viable low carbon? What do policy makers and practitioners consider to be a viable low carbon future in terms of global development? Can we generate increased consumption and material well-being along with carbon reductions?

Comments and ongoing questions:

1. 'Viable' and 'visionary' are different perspectives to analyse the potential for low carbon economy. The idealistic perspective of the more visionary low carbon futures is almost impossible for policy makers to work into existing policy frameworks; viable low carbon futures will perhaps be more modest and incremental. It is essential to understand closely how policy makers work best and work with their systems of information and response. There are low hanging, tiny fruit to be gathered on the low carbon economy at the immediate level. But the idealistic approach is only being taken forward at the voluntary level.
2. Viable low carbon economies will have very different structures and processes to reach them in rich, emerging and low income countries. There need to be agreements across all groups and focus on these different structures and processes is required. The North needs to lead a major shift in investment in renewables and low carbon consumption. It is more important to achieve a shift in the industrialised and emerging economies.
3. Successful low carbon living will require a huge shift in the expectations of consumption. Differences of opinion were expressed over whether it is possible to use better technology alone to meet low carbon targets; the evidence is that this is not going to be quick enough or effective enough to do so. The possibilities of a hydrogen-based economy were stressed by one participant.
4. Carbon pricing (and related taxes) is considered to be one of the strongest potential tools in low carbon development futures.
5. Is it possible to configure low carbon development in a way that neither increases inequality nor requires self-sacrifice? This is an ongoing question.
6. Restructuring of societal organisation could be one consequence of a low carbon future.
7. Should the North (wealthy nations) be driving the development of emerging and developing economies at all? And, more to the point, there is decreasing economic and political ability to influence the larger developing economies.
8. Current UK government attempts to drive low carbon development is largely voluntary despite policy rhetoric (e.g. DEFRA voluntary codes of practice in industry); views were expressed that the food industry wants regulation and a long term policy steer which is not happening. Instead of halving the domestic subsidy for solar power, as the UK government has recently done, we should have doubled it. Government signals are going against this shift. We assume that there is lack of political will, but has any government actually tried to make this shift easier to see what the results are? Huge public reactions respond negatively e.g. the fuel price

rise, but this is because it was ill planned, penalising the poorest and sectors of the economy. There are fundamental big decisions which could lead this change from other sectors of the economy – Gordon Brown could release £15bn from not renewing Trident for example.

Question 3: Shocks: What are the (un)foreseen and (un)expected changes that may affect our ability to meet low carbon futures?

Comments and ongoing questions

1. Human social responses to stress are collaboration or conflict/confrontation. What are the resource thresholds that cannot accommodate collaboration?
2. Cultural homogenisation can perhaps make disseminating and implementing behavioural changes more effective.
3. The future is fraught with uncertainties of climate change as well as many social unknowns; it is difficult to work towards sustainability of a system in such flux.
4. Low carbon futures provide an opportunity to work social equality into development practice.
5. Resilience is a way of thinking about climatic adaptations for households and communities but resilience building can also be viewed as an essential aspect of development in general (e.g. socio-cultural resilience). To build resilience we need to: monitor trends, build stores (food, water etc), and create conditions for change and innovation.
6. Major investment in renewable energies is politically unpopular; we need to increase responsible political time frames to respond to these questions.
7. Growth requires efficiency. However low carbon futures may require resilient and predictable systems. Current policies such as the Common Agricultural Policy do not currently facilitate resilience or predictability. If the economic and political system does not embrace resilience and disaster planning currently (e.g. effects of volcanic eruptions on food supply), how can we achieve these in the future with even greater challenges ahead? We could put aside grain every year to gradually build global food supplies for example instead of leaving it to the precariousness of the global food market. Those with buying power will be unaware of the implications. High levels of inequality continue and will exacerbate this problem.
8. In a situation of sufficient global resources, trading is a possibility as currently being explored. On this basis, political capital is essential, as is being built through current international dialogues. There is inspiration to be drawn from the unilateral global table of climate change discussion; this offers potential future opportunities and reasons for optimism about countries' ability to cooperate and negotiate for positive change.
9. However, in a situation of insufficient resources there may be system collapse, leading to a (Jared Diamond style) collapse and individualistic ethos. Drastic behavioural change may be required such as population control.