

The View from Europe
By David Jessop

Agreement on climate change needed soon

A few days ago a state owned Russian vessel, a liquefied natural gas (LNG) carrier, the Ob River, completed a voyage from Norway to Japan by taking the Northern Sea Route across the Arctic Ocean. Crossing seas far to the north of Russia, and accompanied by an atomic powered icebreaker, its twenty eight day voyage marked a potential breakthrough in the transport of gas between northern Europe and Asia.

The fact that it was able to achieve this previously impossible feat because of changing climate conditions, is not good news for the Caribbean.

According to the scientific research body, the US National Snow and Ice Data Centre (NSIDC), Arctic ice levels have now fallen to their lowest level of summer coverage since satellite data collection began. This September, the time of year when ice coverage is lowest, sea ice cover fell to 1.32m square miles; a figure nearly 50 percent lower than the 1979 to 2000 average.

The change is occurring so rapidly that the body's recent climate models suggest that ice-free Arctic conditions for a part of the year may happen before 2050. NSIDC scientists said there has been a fundamental change in the nature of the Arctic's sea ice cover, which previously was dominated by ice that had survived for multiple numbers of years.

One consequence of the loss of the ice sheet and ocean warming, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA,) is a greater than 90 per cent chance that sea levels will rise significantly by 2100 by somewhere between eight inches at best and a maximum of 6.6 feet at worst.

Such projections are alarming. For the Caribbean, where 50 per cent of the population and the majority of the region's productive enterprise and infrastructure is within 1.2 miles of the sea, even the lower end of NOAA's forecasts would start to place almost every nation in the region at risk initially from sea surge, then from erosion, flooding and inundation.

Despite this the world is still a way away from reaching agreement on a new, mutually binding approach to climate change. Unfortunately for the region, the negotiations continue to respond to national and global political fault lines between developed and advanced developing nations, and the constraints of the global economic downturn.

Although the Kyoto protocol was signed in 1997 and entered into force in 2005, one signatory, the United States, did not ratify the protocol, and Canada subsequently withdrew. Agreement was reached in Durban last year to extend the protocol to 2017 with the intention to replace this with a new agreement negotiated in 2015 and in force by 2020, but achieving a consensus on a number of key elements is proving difficult.

As this is being written, the latest UN Climate Change conference is drawing to a close in Doha, Qatar, with the possibility that the talks will end in deadlock over some of the most important precursor steps on which agreement is required before any new protocol can be negotiated.

In particular there are significant divisions over the distribution of US\$100 billion in financial aid; the principles surrounding which countries should bear the burden of ending the present global reliance on fossil fuels; and an insurance fund for climate disasters. Ominously no texts outlining the nature of a final agreement have been produced, although at some previous meetings eleventh hour deals have emerged.

The Doha meeting was intended to have brought together these three elements in a manner that would enable the drafting of a new treaty. However, there remain divisions that reflect those that exist in other multilateral institutions like the World Trade Organisation that also require binding agreements. In particular, it is proving difficult to reach an agreement that satisfies developed nations and advanced developing economies such as China, Brazil and India. To provide a flavour of the debate, China, the second largest greenhouse gas emitter in the world is arguing that developed countries, since the mid nineteenth century, have been responsible for seventy per cent of all global emissions and the burden of any future agreement should therefore not fall on any developing country.

At the meeting Caribbean countries have been vocal, not least because they are able to demonstrate their vulnerability in the face of rising sea levels.

Barbados' Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade Minister, Maxine McClean, made clear to the conference that for small island developing states failure to reach an agreement will lead to serious consequences for the region. The time for incremental and piecemeal solutions is long past, she told the meeting. Jamaica's Minister of Water, Land, Environment and Climate Change, Robert Pickersgill said that since 2001, Jamaica had lost an annual average of two per cent of gross domestic product in damage and other losses associated with hurricanes, floods and drought. The cumulative cost of the damage and loss has been estimated at over US\$ 1billion, he told the meeting.

In Doha the Caribbean has been operating as a part of the umbrella group, the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), in an attempt to exert greater leverage. Formed in 1990, this informal coalition brings together forty four small-island and low-lying coastal countries that share similar development challenges and concerns about the environment.

The group have used this weight in Doha to call for more ambitious emission reduction commitments, greater clarity on financing, and an insurance mechanism to address loss and damage from climate change.

For small island states, climate change is like no other issue: it is existential. As the recent voyage of the Ob River through the Arctic proves, the sea ice is melting, sea levels and water temperatures are rising and by extension it will be some of the world's smallest nations that will suffer first.

Although there remains a popular global debate about the causes of climate change, there is global governmental agreement that it is due to greenhouse gas emissions, and an acceptance of the scientific evidence that as a consequence our climate and environment is changing.

Logic would therefore suggest that the Caribbean - a region of vulnerable, low or zero carbon emitting states - should be a significant early beneficiary of any rapid resource transfer and then, in the longer term, from the eventual global carbon trading scheme that is proposed.

This is not a case of special pleading or unsubstantiated entitlement: rather it reflects the need for action now if the region, its people and economy, is to prepare in good time with well thought through and delivered programmes if it is to have a viable future.

David Jessop is the Director of the Caribbean Council and can be contacted at david.jessop@caribbean-council.org

Previous columns can be found at www.caribbean-council.org

December 7th, 2012