

India and Africa at COP 17 – The false dichotomy of 'survival vs. development'

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In Cancun, India was hailed for helping to bridge differences between rich and poor countries. But at COP 17, India's stance on not agreeing to a mandate for a new legally binding treaty to replace the Kyoto Protocol and the Bali Action Plan drew strong criticism, with some arguing that India's insistence on its 'right to development' was a betrayal of poorer countries and even a threat to their survival.

The common wisdom is that we've come here to save Africa. Africa, we hear every day, is a continent populated with poor people on the front lines of climate change, where immediate adaptation is a priority and climate delay means death. India, we hear, is the grim reaper. And the purpose of COP 17 is, in large part, to compel India to step back from the brink and help save Africa. India should stop being an obstructionist and come to the rescue of Africa.

Well...some comparisons are in order.

Africa is poor. Very poor. Seventeen Africans live on the income of one American. And India? Turns out the number of Indians who live on the income of one American is...16. Yes, India is a bit closer to Africa than it is to the United States on this score.

But, even though India's average income is just about the same as Africa's, India is still crawling with millionaires like Mukesh Ambani, right? Actually, 1.1 per cent of Africans have made it into the top global wealth decile, whereas 0.9 per cent of Indians have. Rather even, I'd say. And again, India stands a bit closer to Africa than to the US (with 21 per cent of Americans in the top global decile).

India's environment minister, Jayanthi Natarajan, was widely criticised for her tough stance.

But, anyway, Africa is a low emitter, which is suffering from the rest of the world's emissions, whereas India is on a planet-incinerating

coal binge, right? After all, an African's per capita greenhouse gas emissions are only one-sixth of an American's. And India? Well...only one-tenth of an American's, actually. And, if you don't like per capita comparisons (you don't think India should get a break for being populous?), India's total emissions are only two-thirds of Africa's.

As for vulnerability, where does India's water come from? From the Himalayan glaciers and from the monsoons. My guess is climate change will be no kinder to India than to Africa.

Of course, the point of this is not to compare Africa and India so we can figure out who is poorer, who is suffering more, and who is less responsible for climate change. The point is to ask, why have so many people got sucked into the India scapegoating, which is so obviously a diversion? The whole 'survival versus development' false dichotomy has always been dangerous, but never more so than when applied to Africa and India. It is no surprise India appears to some to have gone on the defensive, dug in its heels, and started looking for allies wherever it can possibly find them. Which, alas - but unsurprisingly - has led it to engage in some ham-handed diplomacy.

In these negotiations, we've got to turn our attention back to the Parties who are the real blockers...the greedy Parties that are demanding every loophole; the free-riders who are putting forward paltry pledges that are completely at odds with their capacity and responsibility; the tight-fisted countries that are still refusing to put real money on the table to help stop climate catastrophe, ostensibly because of their self-inflicted financial woes.

Shall we focus on the real problems and get back to work?

