Climate change: Dangers of a unilateral path

Opinion - Editorial
Written by Editor
MONDAY, 21 SEPTEMBER 2009 03:00

Guest Editorial:

World leaders will meet next week in New York to address the issue of climate change, invited by United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

The one-day meeting tomorrow is crucial, because it takes place only three months before the Copenhagen conference, which seeks to reach a global agreement to replace the 1997 Kyoto Protocol.

Why are these multilateral negotiations on global warming so important for the region? What is at stake for Latin America and the Caribbean?

It is no exaggeration to say that we are at a vital crossroads: We either put forth our best will and creativity to attain a balanced and fair multilateral agreement in Copenhagen, or we open the way for unilateral measures that will hamper the future development of our region.

We either continue on the path of multilateral negotiations based on shared values, agreed timetables and proportional efforts – according to the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and according to each country’s capabilities, or we embark on a path of unilateral national initiatives that do not distinguish between relative levels of development and only obey the rules of the market.

There is already strong evidence of how new "climatic-economic" standards tend to include unilateral trade regulations based on the carbon footprint of traded goods and services.

In June, the United States House of Representatives approved the "Clean Energy and Security Act", which seeks to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 17 per cent in 2020 with...
regard to 2005. To protect the US economy, this law – which is still pending approval in the Senate – establishes compensatory tariffs on carbon-intensive goods, such as steel, cement, paper and glass, imported from countries the US considers are not doing enough to reduce their emissions.

In France, the information on the carbon footprint of products and their packaging, as of 1 Jan., 2011, as part of the Grenelle II process.

In October 2008, the United Kingdom created the "Publicly Available Standard" (PAS 2050) to estimate greenhouse gas emissions (GGE) associated to the life cycle of products and services, and drafted the Code of Good Practices for the emission and reduction of GGE. These unilateral measures could mean that the efforts and responsibility for mitigating the effects of climate change may shift from north to south, and could turn into a new obstacle to the economic growth of developing countries.

In Latin America, awareness about the trade relevance of the carbon footprint is just now emerging. However, the region should take it very seriously in designing its public policies and long-term economic planning. If addressed in a timely and comprehensive manner, climate change may become a window of opportunity to begin decarbonising the energy matrix, renew infrastructure, improve productive processes and gradually move towards a development model with less carbon content.

These are the challenges ahead. What we expect from Copenhagen is a renewed global agreement, with clear, binding commitments from industrialised countries, with explicit intentions on the part of emerging nations and financial mechanisms and technologies to achieve the goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions between 20 to 40 per cent by 2020 with regard to 1990 levels.

This is why it is urgent to strengthen confidence among the different groups of countries and diminish the frictions we have been experiencing so far in the context of multilateral negotiations on climate change.

The meeting convened by the United Nations secretary-general in New York is an excellent opportunity to do this.

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