Paris climate agreement good for more than the environment

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The adoption of the final agreement at the World Climate Change Conference last Saturday is also a breakthrough for multilateralism. The global community can now move forward to tackle environment issues.

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For The Straits Times

The Paris climate agreement, signed last Saturday, is a breakthrough for multilateralism, not just for the environment.

Multilateralism is international governance of the many and, until now, has not been able to deliver effective agreements based on inclusiveness, equity and transparency — essential elements for an implementable climate agreement.

The Paris climate agreement is a culmination of years of negotiation effort. These efforts began with the signing of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in 1992, when nations first agreed to work together to mitigate and adapt to climate change based on the principle of common but differentiated responsibility (CBDR).

But this principle of CBDR has caused a schism between developed and developing nations.

This issue was emphasised at the Committee of Parties Session in the final moments of the negotiation process by Singapore’s Minister for Foreign Affairs Vivian Balakrishnan, when he explained to the room of delegates that “the key hurdle has always been differentiation. The challenge has always been how to create a fair system — a fair system that recognises the inequalities of the past, the diversity of the present, and the uncertainties of the future”.

CBDR is important to nations like Singapore because it codified into international law that the historical emitters of greenhouse gases — the developed nations — need to take action first, before emerging economies and developing states would need to act. This has been a stumbling block for developed nations ever since because their domestic populations worry about unfair economic advantages being made for economic powerhouses like China and India.

Nonetheless, the agreement that has just been signed in Paris over the weekend satisfactorily addresses contentious perspectives on several important issues, including temperatures goal of 1.5-2°C, finance, differentiation, emissions objectives, burden sharing, review mechanisms and climate damage.

It has taken a colossal feat of human ingenuity to create the agreement, let alone what will be required to implement it.

Is the agreement perfect? No.

Does that matter? No.

The Paris climate agreement is important because it finally puts all the nations of the world on the same page — they agree on what they agree on. That alone is a big deal. Negotiators and diplomats have spent decades trying to figure out what they can agree on, rather than acting on climate mitigation and adaptation.

This document has put the most vulnerable countries in real danger, and it has wasted the opportunity to properly fund green growth around the world in a timely fashion. Mostly, this is an expensive wasted process time.

The global community is finally in agreement and we can now focus on action at the global governance level. This is why so many environmentally-minded experts are excited about the outcome agreement, despite its shortfalls in effectively addressing greenhouse gas emission levels. Not because it will adequately address all the problems associated with climate change, but because having a legally binding agreement is a necessary condition for moving forward.

This point was also made by Dr Balakrishnan at the negotiations when he said “we do not have a perfect agreement but we have a good and necessary agreement”.

There are many different actors and legal processes making up the regime complex of climate change. Regime complex is the phrase used by scholars Robert O. Keohane and David L. Victor to describe the loosely coupled set of specific regimes on climate change, and the lack of an integrated system of management.

In addition to countries, there are cities, special UN agencies, non-governmental organisations, financial market regulations, bilateral initiatives, trade organisations and banks working on climate change, but, without the UN legal regime on climate governance in place, these other entities find it hard to act.

Here is why. Countries and large international corporations need signals that their actions are worthwhile and that the rules of the game are set. Without this, there can be unfair advantages in the economic market and the political markets for those willing to pursue economic gain at the expense of the environment. Further, it is easier for developed countries to exploit developing nations for their natural resources, exacerbating inequality, if they do not formalise their commitments to the environment and take action in line with the COP11 principle.

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created appropriate incentives for all actors to move forward without feeling as though others are taking advantage. And this is good for all issues of transboundary nature, not just climate change.

The Paris climate agreement has strengthened multilateralism and, if implemented, could lead to significant benefits such as reducing poverty and alleviating the impacts of climate change, in addition to providing a framework for future negotiations.

The Paris climate agreement process has helped countries create norms of behaviour at the international level, which will create signals for what is expected by developing nations in other arenas.

The Paris climate agreement is a success for Singapore, a success for the global governance system of multilateralism, and a success for the planet. But now, we move from agreeing on the rules to implementing them. We will need all the goodwill we can muster to tackle the challenge of climate change. The good news is, we no longer have the excuse of not having rules in place when action counts.

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