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Improving carbon control

The U.N. climate change conference that concluded recently in Bangkok has made it clear that market-oriented arrangements such as the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) and emission trading ushered in by Kyoto protocol will continue beyond 2012. The announcement comes at a time when some scientists have challenged the effectiveness of these measures and the emission estimates that have been put forth. The point of contention is that U.N. policies have overlooked the supply side of energy in developing countries, especially India and China. It is argued that developed countries like the United States (not a Kyoto protocol signatory) have done a lot to cut energy intensity (ratio between a unit of production and the amount of energy used to produce it) while China and India have not done enough and they must be brought on board and their emission limits capped. Alongside, demands are made for a policy that will increase investment in R&D, impose penalties such as carbon tax, and delink poverty reduction from the issue of controlling carbon emissions.

The European Union's experience in carbon markets has highlighted the need for improving the mechanism. Investment in clean technologies in a big way is undoubtedly a necessity. However, attempts to deflect attention from inequalities are to be seen as attempts to shift the debate in favour of developed countries. The huge difference between the developed and the developing countries in emission levels stares us in the face. Consider, for instance, the data given by the U.S. and India to the UNFCCC in their reports pertaining to 2007 and 2004 respectively. If the U.S. estimated the CO₂ emission due to power generation at 2,381,200 Gigagram (Gg) and that due to end-use consumption at 5,751,200 Gg, the corresponding figures for India were as low as 353,518 Gg and 293,989 Gg. Studies also show that basic energy appliances in urban and rural India are present at a bare minimum level. For example, only 5.67 per cent of the rural population use liquefied petroleum gas for cooking and 44.5 per cent electricity for lighting. With geopolitical controls on alternative fuels, developing countries are compelled to meet their energy needs from their own resources including coal. Given this situation, how can policies be conceived as a simple matter of technology? Developing countries are actively embracing clean technologies. As of March 2008, about 950 CDM projects from 49 developing countries are registered with UNFCCC and another 2000 are in the pipeline. The Kyoto protocol of course needs to be improved but a wholesale debunking will mean another long process and further delay.