FEEEP and the Future of Ecotech 9.10.97

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In This Issue
Heading for the Doldrums? APEC and the Environment
FEEEP and the Future of Ecotech
Youth, Business and APEC
ISO 14,000 in Asia-Pacific
Upcoming Events
Recent Publications

FEEEP and the Future of Ecotech
Jason Hunter

As Canada's year as chair of APEC lurches towards its November climax, many APEC observers are wondering if this will be yet another year when environmental and development cooperation at APEC fails to reach lift-off. A quick assessment, however, shows that despite the great expectations of Canadian leadership, the "ecotech agenda," APEC's non-trade and investment agenda, has had no major breakthroughs.

The blame, however, cannot be laid entirely at Canada's

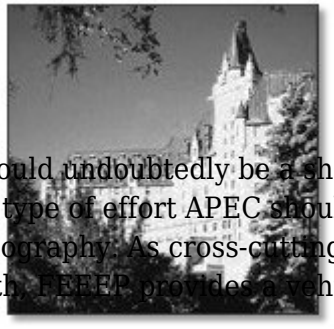
Delta Bessborough Hotel, Saskatoon -- Site of the FEEEP Symposium

feet. APEC's ecotech agenda is crippled by unrealistic, short-term expectations, grandiose and largely un-funded, agendas and little political will or leadership to implement them. This is a reflection of both APEC's peculiar non-binding, consensus-driven structure, and the differences in priorities of APEC's more and less powerful members.

Despite the current malaise, the opportunities for Canada to help lead APEC's ecotech agenda are not completely lost. On the cusp of Canada's preparations for the Leaders' Summit and as APEC heads into 1998 with development-minded Malaysia at the helm, Canada is in the final stages of presenting a framework for action on the "Food, Energy, Environment, Economic Development, and Population (FEEEP) initiative. Although wrought with the trappings of APEC's problems, the initiative, as one analyst characterizes it, is trying to do everything but is focusing on nothing; FEEEP is also a reflection of how APEC can most effectively address the region's environmental and developmental challenges. If FEEEP can heed the lessons of APEC's short history, and develop clear goals, an iterated agenda that can span successive chairs, via succinct, appropriate steps, the FEEEP agenda has the potential to lead APEC into a new phase of regional cooperation. If it does not make the most of FEEEP, ecotech will likely remain mired in the doldrums.

FEEEP

On the whole, ecotech is primarily composed of discreet, short-lived projects carried out at the working group level. However, nested within the agenda are two broad-reaching, "big-bang" agendas: the sustainable development agenda - see Lyuba Zarsky's piece in this issue - and the cross-cutting FEEEP initiative. FEEEP spurred from the 1995 Leaders' Declaration for Action, which called on APEC to place the five issues "on [APEC's] long-term agenda and consult further on ways to initiate joint action so as to ensure the region's economic prosperity is sustainable." The Economic Committee, as the only APEC institution tasked with cross-cutting issues, was called on to develop a framework to address the five point agenda. The Economic Committee, currently chaired by Canada, will convene a symposium this September and submit its framework for action to the Leader's in November.



WHY FEEEP?

To miss the opportunities of FEEEP would undoubtedly be a shame. Although over-reaching and grandiose, the initiative embodies the type of effort APEC should be focusing on: interrelated issues of economy, ecology, energy, and demography. As cross-cutting issues, ultimately impacting APEC's primary raison d'être, economic growth, FEEEP provides a vehicle to best capitalize on the benefits of regional cooperation.

Having worked on these cross-cutting issues for five years, APEC should now be poised to implement

so-called 'win-win' economic/environmental strategies. Working in concert with other APEC fora, the type of work necessary to take advantage of such an opportunity could be provided by FEEEP. However, one must take heed and realize that these results will not come about solely by opening markets but through study, coordination, and good governance -- issues that FEEEP can support.

Furthermore, APEC's focus on economic development has fostered important discussions on capacity building, technology transfer, and regulatory reform that are necessary to work realistically towards sustainable development, but which have been shirked in other fora. It can even be argued that APEC, in structure if not in practice, is a regime which embodies elements of the lost Rio Bargain: addressing Northern interests of trade and environmental issues (often defined in terms of market access or protection of species) and the development oriented environmental issues (technology transfer, infrastructure, capacity building) of developing countries. To date, however, the two agendas have been polarized into separate initiatives - sustainable development, and the broader ecotech agenda - proving to be more divisive than complimentary. However, the FEEEP process, by addressing these issues by the Northern and Southern talisman, economic growth, could provide the vehicle and political space to overcome this divide.

Furthermore, if FEEEP was to gain momentum, in September it could flourish next year under Malaysia's tutelage, one of ecotech's strongest supporters. For its part as a developed state, Canada should work to spur other Northern members to move past their current take on ecotech - as a sacred cow to developing members - and finally address ecotech, and specifically FEEEP, as an agenda which has wide-ranging benefits.

Lastly, FEEEP is on the right track in engaging civil society. The September symposium will be the first major APEC event which is actively seeking NGO participation. This is a major step towards making APEC more accountable, and moreover, the NGO, academic, and business sectors will undoubtedly provide valuable input, a low- cost resource which may break APEC's history of myopic agenda setting.

JUMP START OR FALSE START?

Unfortunately, FEEEP has started of on the wrong foot. In tasking the Economic Committee to address FEEEP, without providing adequate financial and logistical support, APEC is recreating a failure in US regulatory policy, the "un-funded mandate." If Leaders were truly serious in their call for APEC to address the issues covered in FEEEP, then funding should have been provided and guaranteed for years to come. This has crippled FEEEP's jump-start, and may threaten the initiative's future.

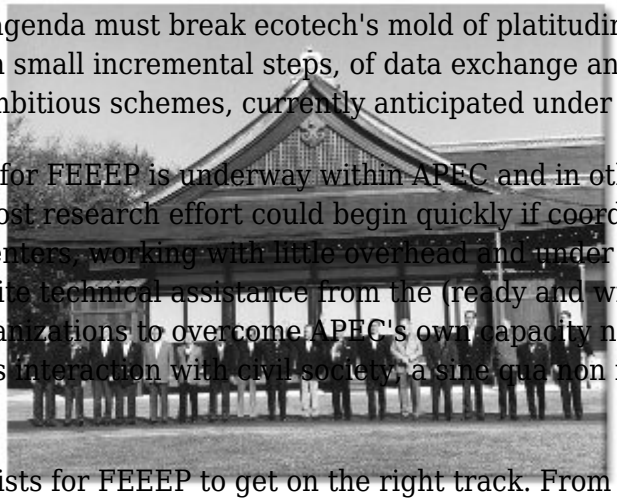
Leaders Summit, Osaka 1995

FEEEP's next challenge is to live up to its name. FEEEP has the over- ambitious task of addressing what are essentially the five pistons of modern society, and is doing so without any point of reference, plan of action, or institutional home. Without a significant scoping and research effort, the agenda is a non-starter. Simply stated, in terms of commitment to serious research and policy-oriented goals, FEEEP cannot be had on the cheap. To effectively address the complex array of issues at hand, APEC must make serious commitments to data collection, research, and hard-nosed diplomacy to spark cooperation in APEC's non-binding context. Presently, the agenda willfully bi-passes the serious research challenges ahead in pursuit of the same passive plan of action which has mothballed other promising APEC initiatives.

Without financial commitments, institutional structure, and a well defined work plan, whether it be formally within APEC or as an outside advisory body, the FEEEP agenda is likely to lose momentum quickly and fail. Past large scale ecotech initiatives are a testament to this. Without structure outside of the annual APEC cycle, the initiatives can only move via the path of least resistance, but quickly reach a dead-end as a lack of political will dries up funding, resources, and government and private sector attention.

At the end of the day, the ultimate indicator of FEEEP's success is its role in mitigating the impact of economic growth on energy, environment, food, and population, and vice-versa. An agenda seeking less should not waste member states' time, resources, and most of all, political will.

NOT TOO LATE FOR FEEEP



For FEEEP to succeed the agenda must break ecotech's mold of platitudinal, overreaching agenda setting and instead focus on small incremental steps, of data exchange and norm and capacity building before the more ambitious schemes, currently anticipated under FEEEP, can be addressed.

The necessary groundwork for FEEEP is underway within APEC and in other global, regional, and sub-regional levels. A low-cost research effort could begin quickly if coordinated by the APEC study center system. The study centers, working with little overhead and under APEC central funding, could coordinate the requisite technical assistance from the (ready and willing) academic community and non- governmental organizations to overcome APEC's own capacity needs as well as to serve as the first gateway for APEC's interaction with civil society, a sine qua non if APEC is to maintain legitimacy.

A window of opportunity exists for FEEEP to get on the right track. From the September Symposium until the November Leader's Summit, FEEEP must establish a realistic agenda, muster political,

develop capacity within FEEEP, take advantage of non-governmental players (namely the APEC study centers) and begin to bridge the gap between the needs of all APEC members. If not, FEEEP will join the other failed initiatives in the APEC dustbin.

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