



The diplomats fiddle while Africa burns

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Once again the governments of the world have met to decide what they can do – if anything – to address the fact that our economies and lifestyles are heating up the planet at an alarming rate. And once again, they have fallen short of what is needed. Human-induced ‘global warming’ which drives climate change and rising sea level, is already having devastating impacts on vulnerable people and countries, yet the world’s ‘leaders’ seem unable or unwilling to commit the world to a different path.

Known as the 17th Conference of Parties, or COP17, this was the seventeenth meeting of the governments that have signed the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), this time in Durban – the first time in Africa. After extending negotiations by a day-and-a-half, they finally agreed, at 05:00 on Sunday 11 December 2011, to the Durban Platform for Enhanced Action, which puts the climate change talks back on track, saves the Kyoto Protocol, establishes the Green Climate Fund and agrees to work towards a legal framework for all parties by 2015, to take effect by 2020. This agreement might represent a diplomatic victory, but it does little to ensure that global warming stays within 2 °C, a target that governments themselves have set, and which is probably too high to avert catastrophe in some regions.

The UNFCCC was one of five key agreements emerging from the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. It is a ‘framework’ convention, without targets or timeframes and establishes the COP to give effect to the convention and to respond to climate change as the science unfolds. Two key elements are the convention’s ultimate objective of

stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system ... within a time frame sufficient to allow ecosystems to adapt naturally to climate change, to ensure that food production is not threatened and to enable economic development to proceed in a sustainable manner

and the principle of ‘common but differentiated responsibility’.¹ The convention listed (in Annex 1) the countries that have historically contributed the most to climate change; these countries are primarily in the industrialised world. Known as the Annex 1 countries, it was agreed that these countries would take the lead on reducing greenhouse gas emissions. China, which has recently overtaken the USA as the world’s largest greenhouse gas emitter, is not listed in Annex 1.

The Kyoto Protocol, which falls under the UNFCCC, was negotiated by the COP in 1997, but came into effect only in 2005. It established legally binding emissions targets for Annex 1 countries to emit on average 5.4% less than they did in 1990 during the first commitment period, which ends in 2012. Targets for second and third commitment periods were to be negotiated and agreed timeously. The USA, at the time the world’s largest greenhouse gas emitter, never ratified the Kyoto Protocol, so has never been bound by it. Canada signed it, committing to reduce emissions by 6%, but by 2007 had *increased* emissions by 26%. Controversially, the protocol also established several market mechanisms and ‘carbon sinks’, which means that signatories don’t actually have to reduce emissions, but can buy ‘carbon credits’ from other countries. Unambitious and problematic as it is, the Kyoto Protocol remains the only international legal instrument with quantified emission reduction targets. There has been great pressure to ‘kill it’. The fact that it has hobbled out of Durban with agreement to a second commitment period is perhaps worthy of a small celebration. The problem is that there are currently no targets for the second commitment period, which is due to start in 2013. Secondly, Canada, Russia and Japan have withdrawn, and the USA never signed on in the first place. Those countries that have agreed to do something contribute less than 20% of global emissions, based on 2000 greenhouse gas emissions data.²

Worried about its competitiveness in the world economy, the USA won’t commit to anything unless China does. At least that is what they say. The USA has a history of holding talks to ransom, negotiating the lowest common denominator and then not signing anyway. China seems to be playing a more positive role. During the second week of COP17, they called the USA’s



bluff by indicating a willingness to make legally binding commitments. The result is a COP draft decision to 'launch a process to develop a protocol, another legal instrument or an agreed outcome with legal force ... applicable to all Parties'.³ The words 'legally binding' have been carefully avoided, as have any emission reduction commitments until 2020, almost 30 years after the UNFCCC was signed. By applying to 'all', the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities is potentially weakened. It is difficult to see the difference between this COP17 decision and a similar one taken 4 years ago at COP13 in Bali.

All this cloak-and-dagger politics in the corridors of power would be bearable if the negotiations were even close to mirroring what is needed to respond to climate change. With current commitments, we are headed for a 3.5 °C rise in temperature by the end of the 21st century, and a risk that it could be higher.^{4,5} The United Nations Environment Programme has identified a 6 to 12 billion tonne gap between pledged emission reductions of carbon dioxide equivalent and what is needed to meet the 2 °C target.⁶ Built into the UNFCCC process is an agreement to review the adequacy of this target, with both African countries and the Association of Small Island States arguing for it to be 1.5 °C. With this tighter target, the gigatonne gap becomes even larger.

Market mechanisms and the commodification of natural resources such as forests and soil into the 'carbon economy' further threaten the livelihoods of billions of people and make a mockery of the UNFCCC objective to '... allow ecosystems to adapt naturally to climate change, to ensure that food production is not threatened ...'.⁷ Most vulnerable are countries in Africa and the small island states because climate change will hit these regions hardest and because their social vulnerability is high. Temperatures in southern Africa are predicted to rise more rapidly than the global average, and even a 2 °C increase may result in lengthy heat waves, reduced crop yields and water scarcity.⁸ Rising sea levels threaten to submerge small islands and low-lying deltas; with temperature increases of 3 °C – 4 °C, there is a risk that the ice sheets of the West Antarctic and Greenland will melt, resulting in rises in sea level of 3 m and 5 m, respectively.⁹

COP 17 agreed on the establishment of the Green Climate Fund to assist with adaptation and mitigation in countries most affected. But the fund is empty and disagreements continue over whether the \$100 billion promised in Copenhagen and reiterated in Cancun will come primarily from private or public sector funds. Civil society groups have proposed a 'Robin Hood' tax on financial transactions to slow down speculation, a fuel tax on aviation and shipping and a subsidy shift away from fossil fuels, which would go some way to filling the coffers, while contributing to mitigation and stabilising the economy. But these have not been embraced by the COP.

Whether captured by vested interests, or intrinsic inertia, the COP process is neither ambitious nor fast enough. While

it is critical that pressure remains on national governments to negotiate a fair, ambitious and binding agreement, it is also necessary to look outside of the official processes, where there are a myriad of alternatives. At the heart of each is the critical importance of shifting away from a fossil fuel economy, exposing false solutions, and preparing for both the impacts of a changed climate and the impacts of a transition to a low-carbon economy. This shift means no more coal-fired power stations, no more tar-sands mining, and no more fracking. It also means orienting our economies away from needless consumption and towards meeting human needs and confronting the accumulation of wealth head-on. The million climate jobs campaign outlines how jobs can be created through mitigation and adaptation. The 'rights of mother earth' provides a compelling framework for living within the earth's natural boundaries; some cities are taking strides to reduce their carbon footprints and farmer-to-farmer exchanges provide inspiration for food-growers to learn from each other as climate variability increases. Adaptation is unlikely to work through top-down grandiose policies and carbon markets, but needs to be driven through supporting people's own initiatives and experience.

As COP17 drew to a close in the early hours on Sunday 11 December 2011, starkly different reactions were reported by the media. Images of Maite Nkoana-Mashabane (South Africa's Minister of International Relations and Cooperation and COP17 president), receiving a standing ovation from her fellow negotiators for facilitating the Durban Platform, were juxtaposed with footage of activists burning an effigy of Africa, representing the consequences of the COP decisions for the people and ecosystems of Africa. Where does the truth lie? Ultimately, COP17 has ensured that the potential continues to exist for the world's leaders to agree on meaningful action to combat climate change – just not yet. The fear is that, if this potential is ever realised, the procrastination we witness at each of the COPs will come at a devastating cost.

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