

Durban's COP17 Success or failure?

At the end of 2011, Durban hosted the UN's 17th Conference of the Parties (COP17).

The agenda: to agree how to manage our warming biosphere.

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While South Africa, by all accounts, did a good job hosting the world's nations, the negotiations included the usual dramatics, including dug-in heels, threatened walk-outs, missed deadlines, reluctant compromises and a call for a 'public huddle' at 3 am for selected parties to resolve their differences. Two hours later on Sunday morning, nearly 48 hours overdue, the talks concluded with all 194 countries agreeing the 'Durban platform for enhanced action'.

Was COP17 a success? This depends on who is asked. Many politicians and UN representatives labelled it a "breakthrough" and "huge step forward". Leading civil society organisations were angered because the watered-down agreement "had become almost meaningless" and worsened "climate apartheid".

This represents a wide spectrum of opinions! So let us explore the key issues negotiated:

► **Mitigation:** All nations, including major emitters such as the US, China and India, have finally committed to work towards an "agreed outcome

with legal force" (a key outcome of the huddle) to reduce emissions; a major concession by developing nations who have contributed much less to emissions. These five, not-very-specific words – vague enough to keep the US included, just specific enough to appease most other nations – were deemed part of the breakthrough. Worse is that the agreement deadline has been deferred until 2015 and implementation until 2020. Until then we only have in place voluntary, mostly unambitious, commitments made by some 80 nations.

- **Kyoto Protocol:** The protocol will be extended by several years until a global mitigation agreement is reached. This allows the continued functioning of the UN-backed carbon credit trading market, the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) and existing mechanisms to monitor the national voluntary emission reductions. The US, however, is not part of the Protocol, which has been further weakened because a number of larger nations have withdrawn or are likely to withdraw.
- **Green Climate Fund:** It has been agreed that a fund is to be launched to support poorer nations adapt to our changing climate, to mitigate emissions and to reduce deforestation. The

intention is to provide US\$100 billion a year from 2020 onwards. But significant concerns remain around funding sources and mechanisms, as well as the monitoring of how funds are spent.

- **Reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD):** Deforestation-related emissions contribute about 20% of global emissions. Negotiations are ongoing and an agreement is likely to include mechanisms for remunerating developing countries for halting deforestation.
- **Maritime and aviation:** An agreement on managing emissions from these two sectors is expected at the end of this year at COP18 in Qatar. The EU, though, is pushing ahead with its introduction of an aviation fuel tax.

So, while there has undoubtedly been some progress, the acid test must be to ask whether the COP17 outcome will prevent dangerous climate change? If current voluntary mitigation commitments are tallied up, we are heading for an estimated 3.5°C increase by 2100 – significantly beyond the 2°C danger point.

In this light, COP17 and the COP process must be considered a shocking failure. The best that can be said, is that negotiations have been kept alive.



“This is probably the largest, the most deeply rooted, revolution that mankind has ever seen... it will revolutionise the way you and I interact with each another, the way we travel, the way we consume, the way we produce; everything. There is not one aspect of our human life that will not be touched by this... our lives will be very, very, very, different.”

These are the words of Christiana Figueres at COP17, head of the UN climate secretariat. Watch the interview: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1qRT7Hl7rpY>

As one participant put it: “All countries together have now, after all these years, agreed to not save our society”. The Durban platform agreement does in fact note the mitigation gap and is committed to exploring the financial, legal and technical options for “enhancing mitigation ambition”. This is of course essential since we cannot negotiate with our biosphere: we either get it right or we get it wrong. What is worse, some leading climate scientists warn that the 2°C limit should no longer be considered ‘safe’ and advocate a maximum warming target of just 1.5°C. This all highlights that while time to react has almost run out, the issues to be negotiated are too complex and conflicted for the current UN process to resolve in the time we have.

But, thankfully, not all is lost: Despite the slow global negotiations, society’s super tanker has in fact started turning. Selected nations and US states, and numerous cities and private enterprises are rising to the challenge. Particularly inspiring are the multi-nationals that have set ambitious mitigation targets (see article pg 46). Also, Australia recently agreed a carbon tax, California is putting in place a carbon trading system and South Africa is increasing its ambitions and commitments as part of its Climate Change Response Strategy. China, too often criticised for its dirty industry, despite having a significantly lower per capita emissions profile than many other nations, seems to be developing a reputation for doing more than promised. They are

fast becoming the global green leader and recently announced their intention to invest upwards of US\$1 trillion over the coming five years in renewable energy, energy efficiency, green transport and other related sectors.

So while the COP process continues to disappoint, the building of a low-impact society has in fact begun. One hopes though that the UN process will eventually achieve its real ‘breakthrough’, as a global policy regime is essential to accelerate current efforts.

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