

Echoes from Durban

United Nations Conference on Climate Change, 28 November-9 December 2011

Wednesday, 30 November 2011

Durban: last chance to revive the climate regime?

Urgent cure needed!

Newsflash: the temperature is rising!

This year's Conference of Parties comes in the wake of floods in Thailand, landslides in Brazil, drought in Somalia and other weather-related occurrences elsewhere. Faced with these events, scientists agree that climate change is responsible for the increasing incidence and intensification of natural disasters around the world. And the most recent report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)¹ confirms that every country around the globe is increasingly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.



So what is to be done? The scientific response is quite clear: we need modes of development that strengthen territorial and human resilience on the one hand; and on the other, we need to prevent extreme events by limiting global warming. Unfortunately governments do not seem to be passionate supporters of the precautionary principle. The Convention on Climate Change is now nearly 20 years old, but greenhouse gas emissions have continued to rise over the last two decades. On top of that, according to the World Meteorological Organization, 2011 has been one of the ten hottest years on record. Worse still, the possibility of keeping global warming below 2°C between now and 2100 (objective set in

¹ IPCC's special report on *Managing the risks of extreme events and disasters to advance climatic change adaptation*, November 2011 : http://ipcc-wg2.gov/SREX/images/uploads/SREX-SPM_Approved-HiRes_opt.pdf

Cancun in 2010) seems to be receding. Yet despite all the warning signs, government commitment has never been so weak. Apart from the European Union and a few other countries, industrialised nations are refusing to sign up to a second commitment to the Kyoto Protocol. And Canada has even announced that it hopes to withdraw from the Protocol, which it adopted but has not observed.

In short, the gap between scientific findings and countries' commitments has never been so wide. Will negotiators be overtaken by a collective convulsion? Have widespread refusal to confront the facts and lack of leadership become contagious?

“Working together to save tomorrow today”

In order to temper this bleak diagnosis, we invoke the words of great men. It would be good to see evidence of political courage at this 17th Conference of Parties (COP) in South Africa, where the voice of Nelson Mandela still resonates: *“It always seems impossible until it's done”*.

If this is not forthcoming, then the best we can hope for is a good dose of pragmatism and firm confidence that we can indeed *“work together to save tomorrow today”*. This is how Maite Nkoana-Mashabane, the South African Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, and Chair of the 17th Conference of Parties (COP) summarised what is at stake for the international climate community gathered here in Durban. The Secretary General of the Climate Convention, Christiana Figueres set out two key stages in addressing this challenge. First, implementing the mechanisms and institutions created in Cancun for adaptation, technology transfers and finance. Second, addressing political questions that were not resolved at Cancun: defining a second commitment period under Kyoto Protocol, and establishing a legally binding agreement in

the framework of the Convention that includes all countries, especially large emerging countries and the United States; finally, securing long-term sources of funding. It is here that the plot thickens ... Let's hope that the discussions do not descend into conflict. The issues involved in this negotiation are complex, and its outcome is far from certain, but there is still some hope that it may be one can dare to hope that it will be positive.



Consolidate and amplify the Cancun achievements

Funding and adaptation

If the Cancun Conference may have proved disappointing, it had the merit of providing a bit of respite for multilateralism, with the adoption of decisions creating new mechanisms and institutions to support adaptation and technology transfers. The COP in Cancun also led to the creation of a Green Climate Fund, whose rules of governance and institutional arrangements were to be defined in 2011 by a Transitional Committee. Finally, it provided an official framework for the mechanism for Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+).

The twelve country groups that are involved in the negotiations, from the G77+China to the Alliance of Small Island

States (AOSIS), and including the Environmental Integrity Group (EIG),² have confirmed the need to consolidate these achievements. Particular emphasis has been placed on the urgent need to get the Adaptation Committee up and running, and to agree on the rules of governance for the Green Climate Fund in order to finance actions in developing countries as soon as possible.

Yes to more ambitious reductions in greenhouse gas emissions - but how?

These country groups broadly agree on the need for more ambitious reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, but have very divergent views on how these objectives can be achieved. Developing countries in the Group of 77 and China (G77+China) believe that Durban should lead to the adoption of a second commitment period under the Kyoto Protocol and a legally binding global agreement under the Convention, and that all such decisions should be based on principles of equity and shared but differentiated responsibilities.

In the opposite corner we have countries in the Umbrella Group,³ that wish to move on from the Kyoto Protocol and focus on constructing a climate regime that includes all countries. The Umbrella Group argues that the future climate regime must take into account the considerable changes in the context that have occurred since 1992. While the industrialisation of emerging countries has enabled millions of people to escape from poverty, it has also amplified and reconfigured the climate challenge. The Umbrella Group takes a different view of the principle of shared but differentiated responsibilities.

The European Union stands somewhere between these two positions. It is willing

to envisage a second commitment period under the Kyoto Protocol, but first wants to adopt a 'roadmap' that will pave the way for future global agreement that includes binding commitments for every country. This agreement would need to be validated in 2015 to come into force by 2020 at the latest, to tie in with the second commitment period for the Kyoto Protocol.

Can Africa be a driving force for renewed ambitions?

Africa is representative of the diverse symptoms of climate geopolitics, not least because it includes the countries that are the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. The Vice-President of Angola and President of Chad, who respectively represent SADEC⁴ and ECCAS,⁵ have expressed particular concern about the loss of soil fertility, lack of arable land, droughts and floods that are exacerbating food insecurity and social conflicts across the continent.



Africa is rich in natural resources and home to one of the planet's green lungs. African leaders play an active role in the negotiations on reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD+). However, the picture would not be complete without members of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), whose economic

² South Korea, Lichtenstein, Mexico, Monaco and Switzerland.

³ Australia, Canada, Japan, Kazakhstan, New Zealand, Norway, Russia and Ukraine.

⁴ Southern African Development Community.

⁵ Economic Community of Central African States.

interests have certainly curbed climatic ambitions. It should also be noted that South Africa, which is hosting this conference, is a key player on the current and future international economic stage along with its emerging partners China, India and Brazil.

Africa has become more organised and increasingly made its presence felt as a major group within the G77 since the Conference in Copenhagen in 2009. Supporting the overall position of the G77+China on 'political' issues, the African Group is expecting progress on adaptation and funding for adaptation initiatives when the Green Fund becomes operational (including the initial capitalisation of the fund to start the first projects).

As a victim but also an actor in the fight against climate change, can Africa draw strength from its diversity and be a future driving force in this domain? The answer to this question may be in the hands of our host country. The fact that it is a member of both the African Group and the Basic coalition of emerging countries could enable it to bridge the North-South gap and raise the bar for more ambitious action against climate change.

Editors: Marie Chéron – 4D, Anne Chetaille – Gret, Olivier Lefebvre – Initiative Développement, Katia Roesch- AVSF

Proofreaders: Célia Gautier – Gret, Laurent Levard – Gret

Layout: Hélène Gay – Gret

Photos: Katia Roesch – AVSF; UNClimateChange (Flickr)