

NO DEAL AT COPENHAGEN

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Note:

Jessica Wilson is the co-author with Stephen Law of *A brief guide to Global Warming - A straightforward guide to the most important issue of our age*. London: Robinson; 2007.

The lead-up to the climate change negotiations in Copenhagen in December 2009 was phenomenal. Governments were outdoing each other to announce their commitments to national action, trying to make them sound genuine and ambitious; the Maldives held a cabinet meeting underwater to highlight the plight of island states due to rising sea-levels, civil society launched impressive campaigns and stunts, and tens of thousands of women, men and children were drawn in from the general public through a range of electronic campaigns and encouraged to think about what climate change means and to make their voices heard. Desmond Tutu, Mary Robinson and Gabriel Garcia Bernal were just some of the eminent people who added their weight to the call for fair, ambitious binding targets. No one was in doubt that this meeting was important.

And it was, for two reasons. Firstly, no emission reduction targets have been set for after 2012, and secondly, large sums of money and resources currently need to be committed to address climate change. However, despite hyped expectations, the meeting was a resounding failure. No unilateral agreement was reached. No commitments were made by any country, either on the financial front, or on emission reductions. Essentially, nothing happened that would make the citizens of the world believe that their governments took climate change seriously. There was no deal.

What did emerge, though, was a 3-page ‘Copenhagen Accord’ with ‘sign-up’ tables for developed and developing countries to volunteer their mitigation ‘targets’ and ‘actions’ respectively (http://unfccc.int/files/meetings/cop_15/application/pdf/cop15_cph_auv.pdf). The accord was drawn up in secret by 29 countries (including America and China) and presented at the final plenary session. It was not unanimously accepted and so was not adopted by the Conference of Parties (COP), which comprises the signatories to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Nevertheless, the accord provides some interesting insights into the state-of-play of the negotiations and the kind of international response that might yet emerge.

Two working groups were mandated to continue negotiating with the hope of reaching agreement by the COP 16 in Mexico City in December 2010 – one on the Kyoto Protocol, tasked with negotiating targets for a second commitment period, and the other on long-term cooperative action, tasked with negotiating for the full, effective and sustained implementation of the convention. (See http://unfccc.int/meetings/cop_15/items/5257.php for details of all decisions adopted at COP 15).

In Copenhagen, South Africa performed its usual balancing act, given that its own interests straddle both the developing and developed worlds. In ‘climate-speak’, this results in South Africa’s need to pay attention to both adaptation and mitigation, and thus forge alliances that would serve both of those interests. Although it was involved in the inner-circle which developed the accord, South Africa announced, in a press release dated 20 December 2009, that it was ‘extremely disappointed with the outcome’.

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Source: Photograph taken by Jessica Wilson
Tens of thousands took to the freezing Copenhagen streets to demand action

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Source: Photograph taken by Jessica Wilson

Demonstrators in Copenhagen call for political action on climate change

Countries were quick to blame one other for the failure to reach an agreement. For example, the Danes were blamed for running a poor process, the Americans for wanting everything their way, and the Chinese for their own unmoveable positions. No one has been prepared to accept much responsibility themselves. The reaction of civilian analysts ranged from outrage and despair, to an attitude of 'well-what-did-you-expect?' So, what did we expect? What were the real deal breakers? What actually happened? And, more importantly, does the future herald any hope for change?

Firstly, however, it is important to set the scene. The site for the formal government negotiations was the Bella Centre, located on the outskirts of Copenhagen, serviced by the metro-line with a single windmill contributing power. To attend the conference, one needed sufficient funds to travel to Copenhagen and secure accommodation in the city for its duration, as well as the relevant accreditation required to obtain entrance to the Centre. The Danish government had the foresight and generosity to provide each accredited delegate (government and NGO alike) with a free travel pass for their public transport system, which, by South African standards, is superb. Additional, dedicated buses were in operation and the food inside the Bella Centre was heavily subsidised. The touches provided more than a symbolic gesture to foster equal participation of delegates from around the world.

Activities were not confined to the Bella Centre; the Klimaforum, or People's Climate Summit, was based near the main railway station, Hopenhagen Live hosted music, films and high-profile speakers at the City Hall square and the Climate Bottom Meeting was organised in Christiania (a traditionally 'free

town' established in the 1970s, after people had occupied the abandoned military base in the vicinity, in order to set up an alternative, collectivist community). All of these venues were open to organised groups as well as the casual passer-by. Their aim was to raise public awareness of climate change, including those complex issues that were ignored by the negotiators and mainstream media, and to develop innovative, 'people-driven' responses. The most high-profile external event was a long march from the Danish parliament to the Bella Centre on 12 December, which coincided with other international protests that called for a 'change the system not the climate' and demanded 'climate justice'.

The interior of the Bella Centre was a world in its own right, with numerous cafés and restaurants, Wi-Fi coverage through-out, two gigantic halls filled with computers, and a myriad of side-events, exhibition stands, negotiations, caucuses, flash-mobs, and a general milling around reminiscent of a central railway station. At times it seemed as if one was immersed within a virtual reality, with blackberries held close, permanent skype-chats between members of delegations scattered in different negotiation rooms, and people briefing themselves on live-feed monitors or from websites in the computer hall – such was the extent of electronic communication at the close of the 21st century's first decade. Confusion was a common experience, though, especially as the agenda started to slide and it became less and less clear who was allowed into which meeting. However, neither confusion nor information overload were the reasons for the failure of these talks; there were deeper and more fundamental problems at hand and, despite what media-hype might have suggested, scientific uncertainty was the least of them. The resistance seemed to lie in turning around the global economy and so the sticking points within the negotiations were the emissions reduction targets, money and whether or not to scrap the Kyoto Protocol.

Although the talks failed, certain issues were no longer contested. Firstly, that climate change is indeed real and is driven by fossil fuel emissions, feedback loops of trapped gasses, deforestation and other land-use changes, and industrial meat production, among other causes. Secondly, the timing of action is critical. Thirdly, we need to concentrate on, and adapt to, the climate changes that have already taken place, as well as that which will inevitably occur.

Nevertheless, the numbers are still contested. Will an average global warming of up to 2 °C avoid catastrophic climate change, or should we do everything we can to keep within the range advocated by many countries, that is 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels? Similarly, should we aim to limit the level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere to 350 ppm, or can we risk going higher? Indeed, what is the relationship between atmospheric concentration and temperature change and what do the targets for each of these mean in terms of 'available carbon space' (i.e. how much more can we still emit)?

It is this last question that was at the heart of most delegations' positions (the small island states notwithstanding). All wealthy economies are subject to high emissions levels, for these have, been generated by the very methods which ensured their wealth, methods to which developing countries similarly aspire in the hope of growing wealthy. This is why there is such a confused conflation between the science, the economics and the politics of climate change.

Analysts have told us there is very little room to manoeuvre in respect to carbon emissions (see <http://www.ipcc.ch/> and <http://gdrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/Principle-based-A1-targets-draft2-3.pdf>). Thus, to have a reasonable chance of keeping temperatures at less than 2 °C above pre-industrial levels, we can only emit 1 000 gigatonnes of carbon dioxide in the first half of this century; we have already emitted a third of this. Timing is also critical because the longer we wait

to cut emissions, the more expensive and difficult it becomes, and therefore emissions need to peak within the next one to three years.

Yet, when faced with making emission reduction pledges, denialism (aka vested interests) took precedence. It seemed the science was forgotten as countries outdid one another to obfuscate their offers and tactics such as changing the base-year, referring to carbon intensity, and including off-sets, were used to minimise the required domestic reductions. For example, Canada, which signed the Kyoto Protocol, and thus committed to reduce its 1990 emissions by 6%, had by 2007 increased emissions by 26%. It has now pledged to reduce emissions by 20% by 2020, using 2006 as a base year, effectively only bringing emissions back to 1990 levels, seemingly abandoning the cuts to which they had originally agreed.

Cutting emissions ultimately requires a collective response for there is a global limit to how much we can emit. However, at the back of every negotiator's mind is the pressing question of how much their country or company is going to have to cut, and, of course, how much it will cost them to do so. The dilemma is that each country is trying to minimise total global emissions, but maximise their own national (or company) emissions. Such self-interest is institutionalised within any form of international negotiation; the global system is not geared for cooperation, but for competition. Nevertheless, there is no other method that is more critical for combating climate change than a committed, collective response. Global democracy is weak and this makes the enforcement of agreements almost impossible, as illustrated by Canada's flagrant disregard for its commitments under the Kyoto Protocol.

Annex 1 countries have dual obligations: to cut their own emissions; and to pay for adaptation and mitigation in developing countries. Africa has demanded that they fulfil both and has taken a strong stance on the need to keep the Kyoto Protocol (which is not without irony, given that it was such a compromised agreement itself). The costs of adapting to climate change will be enormous, both in financial and human terms. For Africa, increased water insecurity due to salt water intrusion into coastal aquifers, falling lake and river levels and changing rainfall patterns, is already evident (http://www.dwaf.gov.za/dir_ws/2aww/default.asp). The continent is highly vulnerable to climate change. Yet, with the exception of South Africa, which is also a member of the BASIC Group of countries (Brazil, South Africa, India and China), Africa has almost no voice in international negotiations. However, the BASIC Group is critical to the negotiations, in part because the USA has insisted that any deal it signs must include mitigation commitments from these countries, which are present or future significant greenhouse gas emitters.

The much-needed funds, however, have not been forthcoming, even though the Copenhagen Accord suggested that an amount in the region of \$30 billion is what developed countries might be prepared to offer to cover the years 2010–2012, which would increase to \$100 billion per year after that, until 2020. This would have to come from developed countries, in order to address the needs of developing countries. These sums of money are almost impossibly large to imagine, but by comparison, the US signed a bail-out package worth \$700 billion to rescue their financial institutions last year. Nevertheless, the accord contains no detail with respect to individual country commitments, or, indeed, whether these commitments should comprise additional financing, or simply the diversion of funds from existing aid obligations. The accord also does not stipulate how much of this funding should comprise public funds and how much should be sourced from the private sector, or through carbon off-set mechanisms. Additionally, the totals the accord provides may be far short of what is needed. Indeed, Oxfam International has estimated these represent only half of what will be required for sustainability.

Given the bleak reality presented by the failure of the Copenhagen talks, we can only but ask: 'what happens next?' The United Nations Secretary General and others have urged countries to sign the Copenhagen Accord and to volunteer their commitments by the end of January 2010. However, even some of the accord's drafters are beginning to have doubts. The two working groups that were established are set to continue, with the hope of reaching sufficient consensus on the issues at hand. This will enable the adoption of a legally binding treaty at COP16 in Mexico at the end of this year. In the interim, there will be negotiations in Bonn in June. Ministers from the BASIC countries also met in India in the third week of January 2010, confirming their commitment to this process and calling on the COP President (Denmark) to ensure that the working groups meet at least five times before Mexico, starting in March 2010. If all of this fails, we can only but try again at COP17, which South Africa is to host at the end of 2011.

It is not possible to reverse climate change with voluntary actions. The offers on the table in the run-up to Copenhagen would have effectively allowed our planet to heat to 3.5 °C above pre-industrial levels by the end of the century (see for example <http://www.climateactiontracker.org/>), most likely triggering widespread drought, famine and loss of life. Over the past four years, the working groups' negotiators have made limited progress and it is unlikely that an extra year will make much difference.

The political commitments reflected in the Copenhagen Accord, fall far short of what is required. Governments worldwide appear unable to envisage and plan for a post-carbon economy and so retain an unshakeable belief in an energy-intensive free-market economy. Vested interests continue to drive the agenda. Inside the Bella Centre, there was little insight into the feasible emergence of a society that can live in balance with the world's natural systems. If something positive has emerged from Copenhagen, it is the clear understanding that existing political institutions do not have the vision, or, indeed, the will to respond to the complexity and urgency of the fight to halt global warming. ■