

Climate Change revisited at the Conference in Cancun, Mexico

The UN Climate Change Conference ended on December 10th, with standing ovations and relief that the governments saved the negotiating process when they established a package of Cancun Agreements. To refresh our memories, a Conference of Governmental Parties gathered after the signing onto the United Nations Framework on the Convention of Climate Change (UNFCCC), and began a protracted negotiating process which continues today. The Cancun Conference was the 16th (Conference of Parties, 16th year); hence this one is known as COP16. Since the Kyoto Protocol was signed into force, in 2005, there is a parallel negotiating track called Conference of Parties 6 or COP6.

Meanwhile, weather variability increases, as the bureaucratic process grows more complex. Nevertheless, governments reaffirmed in Cancun that they would continue to work through UNFCCC to find them. Unfortunately, after this Conference, there is general recognition that even with implementation of all agreements, the temperature will still increase 3.6 to 4 degrees Celsius by 2020. This will create untold and unevenly distributed environmental disasters across the globe.

China, the United States and India...as the current biggest polluters, and the locus for two and one-half billion people...constitute special problems. Each of these countries made special public efforts to demonstrate their willingness to engage in solutions. China as the leader on wind production; the US as the greatest purveyor of information; and India as the most eager to address climate change; helped to set a positive tone to this year's negotiations. Lowered expectation, a warm climate, and a more supportive president--both in the Conference President, Patrice Espinoza of Mexico, and the Chief of the UNFCCC Christiana Figueres of Costa Rica-- set a different tone from the Copenhagen Conference of 2009.

NGO's are encouraged to note a growing awareness that market based solutions do not address the fundamental ideologies that have caused problems in the first place. Our Climate Change Working Group issued a Statement of Recommendations that described the need for us to become more earth centered* to be effective at making ethical decisions needed to reverse climate change. At the same time, we were gratified that a Green Fund was established for developing countries.

Further encouragement came from increased activism on the part of young people, including high school students from Minneapolis who were officially registered to participate. They seemed eager to learn more about the issue in all its complexity. Regional affiliations continue to proliferate especially around mutually shared water resources. Some countries such as those among the Alliance of Small Countries, Bolivia, and Ireland called for a recast of our assumptions toward more holistic understandings. Irish Head of Delegation Ciaran Cuffe, T.D., stated that it is time, “to move away from a narrow metric of GDP to another metric of prosperity that includes quality of life indicators”.

The US and Japan appeared defensive in their declarations. The US stated they would set aside 90 billion dollars for mitigation in our own country, and 1.9 billion dollars to alleviate the problems of others. Japan asserted determination to pull out of the Kyoto Protocol citing it as too burdensome when so few countries have signed on. Germany and other EU countries, on the other hand, affirmed that switching to green industry had improved their economies.

Substantive change requires persevering determination to set aside one’s old assumptions. Change occurs when trust is fostered and self-interest honestly exposed. We need to get behavioral, perceptual and institutional change to take place concurrently. Finger pointing and passivity will accomplish little now. All of us will have to do more than our fair share to make a difference both in adaptation and mitigation.

The work ahead is to continue to educate and model responsible behavior on both local and global levels. The core change will come when we see ourselves collectively as a part of nature not distinct from it. As the pace of climate change increases, we have the opportunity to mobilize collective cooperation on a governmental level especially, according to our differentiated capacities to assume responsibility for solutions. The next Conference will take place in Durban, South Africa (COP17) November 28 to December 9, 2011, hopefully with more governmental readiness and capacity to establish binding agreements.

For more information: check out www.unfccc.int

*For Statement of Recommendations issued by the NGO Committee on Sustainable Development/Working Group on Climate Change, go to:

www.nationalserviceaeu.org (From the UN)

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At a Plenary Session with Governments in Cancun, Mexico 2010

NGO Observers Celine, Ann and Martha prepare to listen to Ban ki Moon speak to NGO's in Cancun.