THE ARGENTINA INDEPENDENT

Climate Discord: An Analysis of Copenhagen

22nd January 2010 Sanra Ritten 1

The recent UN Climate Change Conference held in Copenhagen, Denmark was of historic proportions, delegates from over 190 countries and tens of thousands of activists, environmentalists and journalists attended.

But the 12-page accord, pushed by US president Barack Obama, fell short of living up to its potential. The vague language and lack of concrete commitment reflected the failure of the negotiations to create obligatory goals to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

The accord seeks to limit global warming to a maximum of a two degree Celsius rise in temperature. It also states that countries will be responsible for reducing their greenhouse gas emissions but makes no specific targets, dismissing the scientific evidence that says the principal emitters should reduce their carbon emissions current levels by 30-40%. The agreement also makes vague references to a financial aid package that will be given to developing countries, but it is unclear how this money will be distributed and where exactly it will come from.

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Official White House Photo by Pete Souza

Delegates listen as President Barack Obama delivers remarks during a morning plenary session of the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, Denmark, December 18, 2009.

Jorge Taiana, leader of the Argentine delegation at the summit, explained in an interview to Página 12, that the two main problems with this outcome were the content of the accord, which fell short of expectations in regard to concrete definitions about percentages of actual emission reductions and funds for poorer countries; and the process by which the accord was created, as it was not democratic or transparent and lacked the participation of all delegates.

The agreement was arranged in closed-door meetings between the US, China, India, South Africa and Brazil. The rest of the world's leaders half-heartedly agreed to consider – but not endorse – the agreement. Later this year a more rigorous and legally binding agreement is supposed to be made in Mexico.

Ricardo Lagos, former president of Chile and the Special Envoy on Climate Change for the UN, said that he hopes Latin America will support Mexico in its large responsibility. "It presents us, Latin America with an opportunity to be a leader in the next negotiations facing the reality that in the 21st century countries can and should only develop in a truly sustainable way."

Rich-poor divide

Photos by Claudio Sepúlveda Geoffro
Dry cracked earth in Chile

Throughout the summit the growing divide between developed and developing nations became clear. It is hard to argue the fact that developed nations have contributed the most to climate change but the countries that are already suffering the effects are developing countries.

The Maldives, an island country in the Indian Ocean, faces being wiped off the map, 80% of the country lies a mere metre or less above sea level. Many African countries also say that even a 2% increase in temperature is suicide for them.

The summit provided a forum for many of these issues to be addressed on an international scale. Developing countries are demanding climate debt payment in the form of monetary compensation and the patents to technology to develop in a sustainable way.

The UN's International Panel of Climate Change chair Rajendra Pachauri said during the conference: "The countries that can really make a difference have not really got sensitive enough to the plight of the poorest of the poor."

Latin American leadership

Photos by Claudio Sepúlveda Geoffro
Cordillera of the Andes in Chile with very little snow pack in March 2009, unusual for the time of year and a clear sign of climate change.

One of the countries spearheading the call for just climate reparations at the summit was Bolivia. Bolivia's chief climate negotiator, Angelica Navarro explained to Democracy Now: "Developed countries have over-consumed common atmospheric space. Twenty percent of the population has actually emitted more than two-thirds of the emissions, and as a result, they have caused more than 90% of the increase in temperatures. As a result, developing countries, we are suffering. Bolivia's glaciers are melting between 40-55%. We have extended droughts. We have in the lowlands more flooding. And we are losing between four to 17% of our GDP in the worst years. That is climate debt.

"And what we are asking is repayment. We are not asking for aid. We are not asking – we are not begging for aid. We want developed countries to comply with their

obligation and pay their debt.”

Ivonne Yanez, an environmental activist from Ecuador, one of the larger oil producing countries in Latin America, voiced a similar opinion. “Ecological debt is the responsibility that industrialised countries have with Southern countries, because of historical damages, the plundering of our resources, contamination of our lands, historically and into the present. And if we continue with this system, we’ll be also in the future increasing and increasing this ecological debt.”

Yanez also is leader of the environmental campaign Keep the Oil in the Soil. It is believed that under the Yasuni National Park, one of the most biodiverse places on the planet, in the Ecuadorian Amazon, lays an oil reserve of hundreds of millions of barrels. The campaign asks the international community to compensate the country for keeping the oil in the soil for the benefit of all humanity. But Yanez is careful to not confuse this campaign with carbon trading, which she does not support, but describes this as a “solidarity fund with the industrialised countries”.

Cap and Trade

Photos by jesus martinez

Factory spewing chemical exhaust into the air

Counter playing against the climate justice and climate debt arguments at the summit stood cap and trade concepts.

Cap and Trade, or emissions trading, provides economic incentives for reducing pollutants and it also provides bodies to trade credits with those who pollute less in order to pollute more.

“Cap-and-trade-with-offsets is analogous to the Kyoto Protocol, which was disastrous. Before the Kyoto Protocol, global emissions of carbon dioxide were going up one-and-a-half percent per year. After the accord, they went up three percent per year. That approach simply won’t work,” said leading climate scientist and activist James Hansen in an interview with Democracy Now.

Annie Leonard, of The Story of Stuff fame, holds a similar critical opinion, as seen in her new narrated animation, The Story of Cap and Trade.

Miguel Lovera, the chief negotiator for Paraguay, is also strongly opposed to cap and trade and does not want the fight to save the rainforests in his country to get mistaken for carbon trading. “We don’t want to submit our forests to a mechanism that will transform them into mere carbon stocks,” he explained to Democracy Now.

“Our forests are much more, are a guarantee to life on earth. They’re the greatest terrestrial reservoirs of carbon. But they’re also home to more than 90% of the species that live on earth, on terrestrial systems. They are home to indigenous peoples. They are sources of water or fresh water. And if they are reduced to just carbon, well, you lose all that perspective, as well. Monetary terms are just incapable of engulfing all those values.”

Sanra Ritten is co-founder of Ambientate, a non-profit aimed at increasing environmental awareness among the general public in Argentina. Ambientate’s first campaign will begin in March.

Environment

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