Copenhagen Climate Change Conference: Negative Reviews for a Weak Post-2012 Agreement

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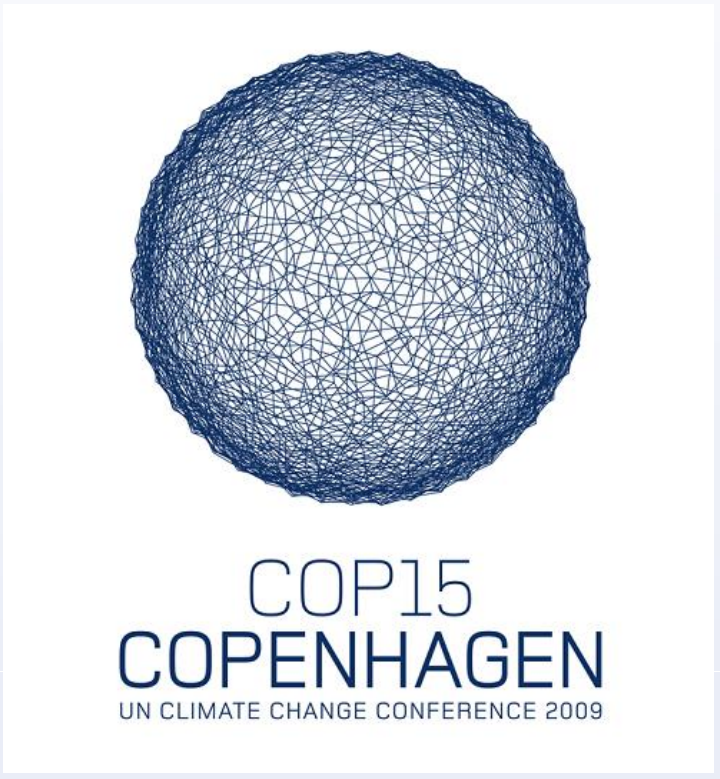
Copenhagen Climate Change Conference: Negative Reviews for a Weak Post-2012 Agreement

In December 2009, the United Nations hosted the 15th Climate Change Conference (COP15) in Copenhagen, Denmark. After much controversy and disagreement, the summit concluded on December 18th. This conference was to lay the foundation for a new international climate treaty with binding pledges to lessen greenhouse gases, which was to be signed at the 2010 climate conference in Mexico.



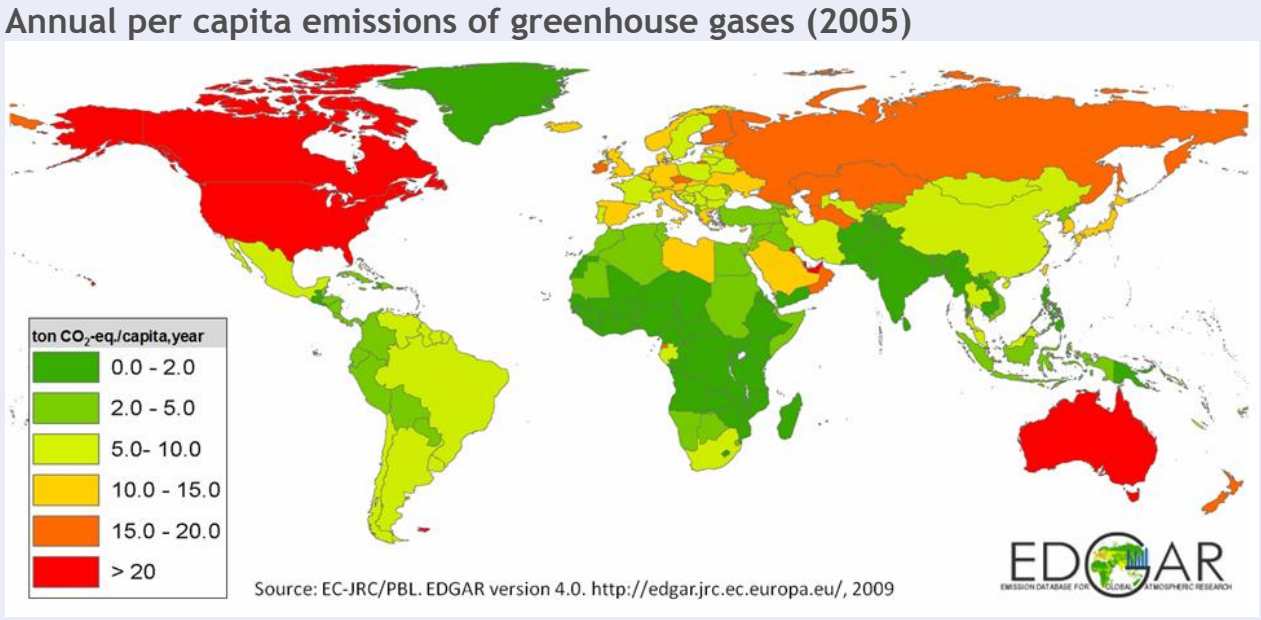
Despite these aspirations, the final accord was a 12-paragraph document that served more as an intention to take action to combat global warming, rather than a binding pledge among the parties. Furthermore, the agreement did not include a mandate to sign a legally-binding agreement at a specific point in the future.[1]

The summit was resplendent with rich-poor disputes in which the less wealthy states grudgingly blamed the larger economies, namely the United States and China, for emitting the majority of the world's greenhouse gases and for failing to set concrete targets for curbing carbon emissions. There is certainly truth to that argument as the Obama administration itself called the climate deal meaningful although less than entirely satisfactory.

The lead-up to the Copenhagen Conference was less than enthusiastic, as most states were loath to believe that a substantive climate change agreement would be achieved, due to the variant national interests and the rich-poor divide. Nonetheless, late on Friday, December 18th, an agreement was struck under the leadership of President Obama in a final push to satisfy both developed and developing countries. The US President called on the world's community to recognize the severity of the issue at hand, "*For while the reality of climate change is not in doubt, our ability to take collective action hangs in the balance. I believe that we can act boldly, and decisively, in the face of this common threat.*"[2] The agreement has prompted a lukewarm response from the international community.

The US and China have been at the heart of the controversy as they represent the two largest emitters in the world. Canada and Australia are also among the worst emitters. (See map below)

Annual per capita emissions of greenhouse gases (2005)



Environmental Summitry: Kyoto to Copenhagen

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During the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was created to provide an effective arena for tackling the ever-present challenge of climate change. The Rio Earth Summit was a major achievement for climate change defenders and environmentalists as it sought to limit the destruction of irreplaceable natural resources. The scope of the conference was also unprecedented as thousands of people were incorporated into the Rio process. Public awareness grew exponentially.

The UNFCCC agreement came into force on March 21, 1994 and was ratified by all 192 members of the General Assembly.[3] The UNFCCC structures, available to the government signatories for addressing climate change, are substantial—swapping information for greenhouse gas emissions as well as helping countries adapt to climate impacts.[4] In addition, governments are able to consult with other governments on the best national policies and practices for combating global warming.

The UNFCCC's landmark achievement came in 1997 with the approval of the Kyoto Protocol, which was the first international treaty to set down legally-binding targets for cutting greenhouse gas emissions.[5] The benchmark provision of the protocol was the binding targets it set for 37 industrialized countries, in addition to the European community, to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by an average of five percent against 1990 levels over the period from 2008 to 2012. The Kyoto Protocol was most noteworthy as it provided a legal framework for binding the signatories to decrease emissions through an international law obligation.

The Protocol was put into effect on February 16, 2005 after being ratified by 183 countries and the European Community. It is important to note, however, that the United States has signed, but not ratified the Kyoto Protocol. This has been cause for alarm for the international community that has complained of the US' weak support for addressing climate change.

Although the Kyoto Protocol was a major accomplishment, the agreement's enforceable compliance mechanisms for cutting emissions are due to expire in 2012. Consequently, Copenhagen COP15 was expected to create the foundations of an agreement that would take the place of the Kyoto commitments at the start of 2013.

"A roadmap to Copenhagen" launched in 2007 put forth five core goals for the summit:[6]
1. Forging a "shared vision" for long-term cooperative action
2. Determining emission curbs by measurable and verifiable actions to cut carbon output
3. Assisting poor countries to cope with the impact of climate change
4. Encouraging the transfer of cleaner technology through financial incentives but also the removal of obstacles
5. Curbing emissions from deforestation, through policy and positive incentives in developing countries.

Varying Reactions to Copenhagen

The two-week summit in Copenhagen did not yield the updated protocol, complete with quantitative commitments to reduce carbon emissions. The agreement has been widely considered only a modest step toward dealing with the challenge of climate change. The central criticism of the pact was that it lacked both firm targets for mid and long-term reductions of greenhouse gas emissions and a deadline for concluding a binding treaty before January 2012.[7]

Both the non-governmental organization community as well as government officials were dissatisfied with the scope of the agreement. Kim Carstensen, leader of World Wildlife Federation's Global Climate Initiative stated in a press release, "*What we have after two years of negotiation is a half-baked text of unclear substance*."[8] Likewise, British climate minister Ed Miliband called Copenhagen. "*a chaotic process dogged by procedural games*."[9] Despite widespread dissatisfaction, a final agreement was drafted by the leaders of the United States, China, Brazil, India, and South Africa.

Several developing countries, including Bolivia, Cuba, Sudan, and Venezuela bitterly protested that the deal did not set specific targets for reducing carbon emissions. All parties seem to be discontented. The developing countries are dissatisfied that they did not receive the deep emissions cuts and aid that they wanted, while the developed countries are unhappy that the developing states did not commit to binding agreements or outside verification.[10] While most of the pressure has been understandably placed on the U.S. and China, the U.S. has been unable to pass its own cap-and-trade bill in the Congress. Passage of this bill has surely not been helped by the weak agreements coming out of Copenhagen on the international

level.

The table below summarizes the main components of the climate accord:[11]

Emissions	• Refers to pledges made before the conference; • Developed countries reduce their emissions individually or jointly
Monitoring	• Developing countries will monitor emissions domestically with international consultations Aid to poor countries • Developed countries set a goal to raise $100 billion annually by 2020 to contribute to poor countries to combat climate change; • $30 billion for the next three years
Forestry	• New funds will be paid to countries for conserving forests; • Reducing emissions from deforestation considered crucial
Temperature	• Increase in global temperature should be below two degrees Celsius
Legal Status	* NOT BINDING*

Hope for a Green-er Future with COP16 Mexico?

President Obama referred to three necessary elements to combating climate change in his Copenhagen address: mitigation, transparency, and financing. The logic inherent in his argument is clear, but the political will is missing. Mr. Obama envisioned an international accord that "*takes us further than we have ever gone before*."

The unfortunate reality, however, is that the Copenhagen accord is more disappointing than satisfying for developing and developed countries and the agreement has done little to set solid objectives. One journalist calls the agreement a "*watered-down political accord*."[12] The overwhelming response in the wake of the Copenhagen summit has been disappointment and frustration, although some have persuasively argued that a weak deal is better than no deal at all.

As the next UN Climate Change conference is set for 2010 in Mexico, some member states have raised concern over the UNFCCC procedures in addition to the substantive issues related to reaching an accord. Therefore, it is clear that the solving the climate challenge is undoubtedly a formidable one and is as controversial as it is difficult to address.

Can the international community broker a lasting agreement that will battle against the growing threat of climate change? The answer remains to be seen.

For further information, please consult:

- Official COP15 Copenhagen Site
- Background Information on the Rio Summit, the UNFCCC, and Kyoto Protocol
- Kyoto Protocol Articles
- The Road to Copenhagen
- The Science and Politics of Climate Change: from the NY Times
- Transcript of President Obama's Address at the Copenhagen Climate Talks
- "What Were We Expecting From Copenhagen?"- Joshua Keating
- "Better than Nothing" from The Economist

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1 Revkin, Andrew, and John Broder. "A Grudging Accord in Climate Talks." *The New York Times*. 19 December 2009.
2 President Obama's Address at Copenhagen.
3 Factfile on UNFCCC.
4 Ibid.
5 http://unfccc.int/kyoto_protocol/items/2830.php
6 Supra note 3.
7 Supra note 1.
8 Andersen, Morton. "NGOs and Scientists are Largely Shell-Shocked." 20 December 2009.
9 Bulow, Michael von. "Miliband: UN Conference 'a chaotic process.'" 21 December 2009.
10 Keating, Joshua. "What Were We Expecting From Copenhagen?" *Foreign Policy*. 18 December 2009.
11 See "Highlights of the Climate Accord." *The New York Times*. 19 December 2009.
12 Knott, Matthew. "Copenhagen Summit Ends with a Watered-Down Political Accord." 19 December 2009.

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