

SNAPSHOT

Roadmap for climate treaty

Nations of the world have carefully side-stepped serious decisions about the Kyoto Protocol for several years, but they could not avoid the issue at the seventeenth meeting of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in Durban, South Africa in December 2011. With the initial phase of emission reductions poised to expire at the end of 2012, the Kyoto Protocol was faced with an imminent slide into irrelevancy. Environmental activists — including those shown here — joined many developing countries in a fight to preserve and extend the protocol, the only legally binding framework for greenhouse-gas emissions. Europe agreed to a second round of commitments under the protocol, but used its leverage to press for a new round of negotiations over a subsequent treaty requiring action from everybody. The deal struck in Durban keeps the protocol alive until at least 2018.

Signed in 1997, the Kyoto Protocol requires emission reductions by industrialized countries, but does not cover the United States, which backed out of the agreement under former president George W. Bush. Nor does it require anything of developing countries, which are responsible for more than half of present-day global emissions and virtually all of the emissions growth going forward. The accord struck in Copenhagen in 2009 and affirmed in Cancún in 2010 created a system for registering commitments from all of the major emitting nations, but those

commitments are voluntary. The question in Durban was how to bring the United States and major emitters such as China and the other emerging economies into a new legally binding regulatory regime.

South Africa and Brazil joined Europe early in the talks, agreeing to take on binding emission reductions in a future treaty, and observers reported some movement from both China and the United States. India became the main hold out, and as of 3 am on Sunday 11 December — the Kyoto Protocol's fourteenth anniversary — there was still no deal in sight.

Indian Environment and Forests Minister Jayanthi Natarajan spoke of historical emissions and equity issues in arguing that rich countries were merely shifting the burden to poor nations that are still struggling to lift their people out of poverty. “Does climate change mean you give up equity?” Natarajan asked. But Connie Hedegaard, the European Union commissioner for climate change, refused to back down. “The European Union has shown patience for many years,” Hedegaard argued. “We don't think we ask too much of the world that after this second commitment period all will be equally bound.”

Faced with a complete meltdown, South Africa's Maite Nkoana-Mashabane forced negotiators into a series of huddles that took place in the middle of the plenary hall. After 45 minutes of scrums, the countries worked out a compromise that calls for negotiations towards “a protocol, another legal instrument or an agreed outcome with legal force”. Exactly what that means remains to

be seen, but India and the European Union consented to the language, paving the way for the so-called Durban Platform.

As it stands, the European Union and a handful of nations will register their existing commitments under the Kyoto Protocol; negotiators will decide next year whether the second commitment period will run to 2018 or 2020. The agreement also commits countries to negotiating the new treaty by 2015, with new commitments taking effect after the current commitments expire in 2020.

The Durban Platform also advances some details of the new Green Climate Fund established last year in Cancún, although countries made little progress in defining how industrialized countries will meet their commitments to allocate US\$100 billion annually by 2020 to help poor countries cope with global warming. The agreement settled some of the technical details for including carbon capture and sequestration projects in the Clean Development Mechanism, which allows industrialized countries to offset their emissions by paying for clean energy projects in developing countries.

Despite some last-minute hitches in the talks, negotiators in Durban also advanced a programme for reducing emissions from deforestation, settling some technical details about how nations will calculate their emissions and launching a process to explore the funding mechanism. In an effort that seeks to build on progress within the deforestation track, negotiators charged a technical committee with investigating ways to address agriculture as a separate sector within the United Nations climate regime. The committee will take up the issue over the coming year and report back by the next meeting in Doha, Qatar.

The latest analysis by the scientific consortium Climate Action Tracker suggests that the world is on a likely track to warming of 3.5 °C, compared with the stated 2 °C goal. Some countries are already laying plans to use a formal scientific review to push for additional emission cuts before that date, but the Durban agreement still had fairly broad support as a first step. “We need to start somewhere and then begin a process to ramp things up,” says Kevin Conrad, who represented Papua New Guinea.

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