



Same Procedure as Last Year? Same Procedure as Every Year

The Doha Climate Conference Once Again Saves the UN Climate Process While Real Climate Action Is Once Again Shelved for Later

A first assessment of the climate conference in Doha by Wolfgang Sterk, Christof Arens, Nicolas Kreibich, Florian Mersmann and Timon Wehnert

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The UN climate process has once again been saved. In an unprecedented manoeuvre, the conference's president rush-gavelled through the key decisions of the "Doha Climate Gateway" and overruled Russia's procedural objection.

However, once again saving the process came at the expense of actually achieving substantive results. The outcome was always going to be modest, a new comprehensive climate agreement is scheduled only for 2015. But in the end it was even more modest than would arguably have been necessary. Some of the key outcomes are as follows.

- A second commitment period (CP2) under the Kyoto Protocol with commitments that are by far too weak to actually achieve the target of keeping global temperature increase below 2°C. For instance, the EU, which likes to portray itself as frontrunner, has committed to reducing its emissions by 20% by 2020 while domestic emissions in 2011 were already at -17.6%. Taking into account the credits from the flexible Kyoto mechanisms that were surrendered in the EU emission trading system in 2011, the EU has already reduced emissions by 20.7%.¹ Globally, according to the latest edition of the annual "Emissions Gap Report" by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the gap between where global emissions need to go by 2020 and where they are actually going has in fact increased rather than decreased over the last year.²

¹ Sandbag: Two more nails in the 20% coffin, <http://www.sandbag.org.uk/blog/2012/nov/1/two-more-nails-20-coffin/>, accessed 13 December 2012.

² The Emissions Gap Report, <http://www.unep.org/publications/ebooks/emissionsgapreport/>, accessed 13 December 2012.

- Doha did not even result in technical comparability of efforts between the Kyoto countries and those, most notably the US, that have only made voluntary emission reduction pledges. As in the past, the US strongly resisted all calls for “common accounting”, meaning to bring the emission accounting rules under the Convention in line with those under the Kyoto Protocol.
- The first Kyoto Period will probably accumulate about 13 gigatonnes of surplus emission allowances and Doha decided that these may be fully carried over to CP2. This surplus has mostly not been accumulated through successful emission reduction policies but because the Kyoto targets of the former Eastern bloc countries were set well above their projected business-as-usual emission levels. It is therefore usually referred to as “hot air”. For example, the target for Russia was to stabilise emissions at 1990 levels while current emissions are ca. 1/3 below 1990 levels. However, Doha did agree some restrictions on using these surplus units in CP2: They may only be used for complying with the CP2 targets if emissions in a country go above the target and buyers may only purchase these units up to a maximum of 2% of their CP1 targets. In addition, all potential buyers submitted political declarations saying that they were not going to buy CP1 surplus units.
- There continues to be no clarity on how financial support for developing countries will be scaled up to the USD 100 billion that were promised in Copenhagen and Cancún. Instead, the decision calls for finance at comparable levels of the average fast start contributions. Developing countries had demanded a clear roadmap with mid-term targets, but with the exception of some European countries most industrialised countries refused to clarify how much finance they were going to provide over the next years.
- The Durban conference last year decided that a new comprehensive climate agreement is to be negotiated by 2015 and start being implemented in 2020. In addition, a second work stream under the so-called “Durban Platform” is to negotiate ways for scaling up mitigation ambition for the period up to 2020. The task for Doha was to agree on the work programme for the next years and in the end it turned out much less specific than many had hoped. Instead of a series of workshops with clear thematic focus as proposed for example by the small island states, the content of the next sessions was largely left open and will be left to the chairs of the working groups to determine in detail. As it is, what was agreed is more a series of events rather than a work programme.
- One of the few positive results was that at least there will be no new “hot air” during CP2. Belarus, Kazakhstan and the Ukraine had again submitted targets well above their current and projected emission levels. For example, in the Ukraine emissions are currently 60% below 1990 levels while the target it has submitted is only a reduction of 20%. However, Doha decided that all CP2 units above the average level of emissions in 2008-10 will automatically be cancelled.
- Important progress was also achieved in the negotiations on how to deal with loss and damage associated with climate change impacts that cannot be addressed through

adaptation measures, such as extreme weather events or sea level rise. Despite resistance from industrialised countries and in particular the USA, Parties laid the foundation for institutional arrangements, such as an international mechanism, which, once established, could channel funds to developing countries suffering from the consequences of climate change. While this decision represents a pivotal step forward, key questions including the sources of funding and how funds will be disbursed remain unanswered and will have to be discussed at next year's COP in Warsaw.

The EU deserves a fair share of the blame for this weak outcome. Intransigence by the US and others can be taken for granted, so more progressive players need to figure out how to overcome this resistance beforehand. The success of a climate conference hinges on whether those who actually care about combating climate change are able to form coalitions and push those who do not against the wall. Just one year ago in Durban the EU provided a demonstration of how this can be done, coming with clear asks and clear offers, on the basis of which it was able to form an alliance with the small island states, least developed countries and others and thus isolate the naysayers.³ In Doha, the EU came bearing an emission reduction target it basically has already achieved, no joint financial commitment, and due to its internal differences on the issue it did not have any position on how to deal with the hot air issue until the pre-final night of the conference when it finally managed to pull together an internal compromise. All of these issues were key asks of developing countries, and thus the EU once again managed to turn itself into the bad guy, even though on substance it nevertheless had relatively speaking much more on offer than most other industrialised countries.

Many will probably once again blame the UN process for the weak outcome and suggest that climate change should be dealt with in other fora. However, the G20 and other fora have been dealing with climate change for years, and with the same lack of results.

The fundamental issue is that international politics do not happen in a vacuum. The positions countries take internationally are determined by their domestic political situations. International negotiations can therefore only take decisions that have previously been prepared nationally.

And the current situation is that in most key countries there is as yet no appetite to undergo the fundamental economic and ecologic transformation that is necessary. Energy provision and transport are dominated by strong incumbent industries whose business models rely on fossil fuels, and combating climate change basically requires to end these business models. The vast majority of the Earth's fossil fuel reserves needs to be left underground, two thirds of them according to the latest World Energy Outlook⁴ from the International Energy Agency or even four fifths according to other analysts.⁵ Incidentally, countries' positions on climate

³ W. Sterk, C. Arens, F. Mersmann, H. Wang-Helmreich, T. Wehnert (2011): On the Road Again. Progressive Countries Score a Realpolitik Victory in Durban While the Real Climate Continues to Heat Up, http://www.wupperinst.org/en/publications/entwd/index.html?beitrag_id=1864&bid=170, accessed 13 December 2012.

⁴ World Energy Outlook 2012, <http://www.worldenergyoutlook.org/publications/weo-2012/#d.en.26099>, accessed 13 December 2012.

⁵ Carbon Bubble | Carbon Tracker Initiative <http://www.carbontracker.org/carbonbubble>, accessed 13 December 2012.

change align rather neatly with the amounts of fossil fuel reserves they have on their territories.⁶

Given these domestic constraints, “At the end of the day, ministers were left with two unpalatable choices: accept an abysmally weak deal, or see the talks collapse in acrimony and despair – with no clear path forward”, as Alden Meyer from the Union of Concerned Scientists put it.⁷

Progress in the international climate negotiations will therefore only be possible if sufficiently large pro-climate advocacy coalitions can be brought together in the key countries. And while it is certainly not able to save climate on its own, the international climate process can serve as a key catalyst for the national discussions. While Copenhagen did not produce the hoped-for treaty, the deadline imposed by the Copenhagen conference injected a significant momentum into national discussions. One country after another elaborated domestic targets and actions, and presented them to the international audience. The run-up to Copenhagen hence resulted in a much better understanding of national mitigation potentials, available policy options and actions that countries are prepared to take. This momentum would hardly have materialised without the positive pressure exerted by the Copenhagen deadline. And in keeping this momentum, emission reduction actions are getting implemented around the world, even if far from the scale that is needed.⁸

Frontrunners will be essential. One of the main reasons why progress is so slow is that many people are not convinced that it is actually possible to sharply reduce emissions without wrecking the economy. Pioneers showing that it is possible are hence critical. This could help creating a virtuous cycle where the international process serves to keep the climate issue on the agenda and at the same time catalyses bottom-up processes, which then in turn inject further momentum into the international process. Ambitious action by frontrunners also induces technological learning which makes it easier for others to follow. For example, the renewables feed-in tariffs in Germany and other countries have induced massive cost reductions. The most striking case is solar PV where for each doubling of globally installed capacity the costs have dropped by 22%. And these trends are set to continue so that according to some analysts solar PV may even become cheaper than coal within this very decade – even without a carbon price.⁹

The run-up to 2015 must hence be seized as catalyst to build national momentum. The opportunities will certainly be there, for instance the next assessment report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate change. And one of the few silver linings from Doha was the announcement by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon that he would convene a world

⁶ Revealed: How fossil fuel reserves match UN climate negotiating positions | Environment | guardian.co.uk <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/blog/2012/feb/16/fossil-fuel-reserves-un-climate-negotiating?intcmp=122>, accessed 13 December 2012.

⁷ Doha Gateway: The reaction - 09 Dec 2012 - Analysis from BusinessGreen <http://www.businessgreen.com/bg/analysis/2230663/doha-gateway-the-reaction>, accessed 13 December 2012.

⁸ Jake Schmidt: Countries Acting at Home to Address Global Warming: The Key Fight Ahead http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jake-schmidt/countries-acting-at-home_b_2261222.html, accessed 13 December 2012.

⁹ Solar PV rapidly becoming the cheapest option to generate electricity, <http://www.grist.org/solar-power/2011-10-11-solar-pv-rapidly-becoming-cheapest-option-generate-electricity>, accessed 13 December 2012.

leaders' summit on climate change in 2014. Such a summit is exactly what some analysts have called for:

“The decisions required in 2015 will be momentous: to raise collective global ambition for 2020–30 to meet the 2 °C pathway; to agree a new, legally binding framework; to identify the sources of finance that can meet the goal of providing US\$100 billion in climate assistance to the poorest countries by 2020; and to agree a new international collaboration on the development, demonstration and deployment of low-carbon technologies.

These decisions are not within the powers of environment ministers, and they will not happen of their own accord. They require the direct engagement of heads of government, under the full glare of a summit spotlight. And that summit requires the kind of pressure that only the coordinated mobilization of global civil society — including the scientific community, businesses, non-governmental organizations and youth movements — can achieve.”¹⁰

And the pressure that needs to be put on governments to get them moving seems to be enormous, given how little difference events like Sandy and the increasingly stark warnings even from normally staid institutions like the IEA and the World Bank, who in a recent report¹¹ warned of “cataclysmic changes”, have so far made. The below quote from a speech Churchill gave in Parliament in 1936 sounds as if it had been written for today's situation:

“So they [the Government] go on in strange paradox, decided only to be undecided, resolved to be irresolute, adamant for drift, solid for fluidity, all-powerful to be impotent.... Owing to past neglect, in the face of the plainest warnings, we have entered upon a period of danger.... The era of procrastination, of half measures, of soothing and baffling expedience of delays, is coming to its close. In its place we are entering a period of consequences.... We cannot avoid this period, we are in it now....”¹²

It seems as if it's up to each one individually to take up Churchill's mantle and start pushing their governments for action, given that there's no politician in sight who would fit the bill.

The Wuppertal Institute will shortly publish a more detailed analysis of the Doha conference.

¹⁰ Nature comment article 12 January 2012 - Michael Jacobs <http://www.michaeljacobs.org/nature-comment-article-12-january-2012.html>, accessed 13 December 2012.

¹¹ New Report Examines Risks of 4 Degree Hotter World by End of Century <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/2012/11/18/new-report-examines-risks-of-degree-hotter-world-by-end-of-century>, accessed 13 December 2012.

¹² 'The Locust Years', House of Commons, 12 November 1936, The Churchill Society London. Churchill's Speeches. <http://www.churchill-society-london.org.uk/Locusts.html>, accessed 13 December 2012.