



Climate Change Negotiations: Deal or No Deal?

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Introduction

In December 2009, 40'000 people gathered in the Danish capital for the United Nations Conference on Climate Change. Over 110 Heads of State or Government attended the Summit organized during the last three days of the conference. This unprecedented number of participants and world leaders reflected the importance of the challenges to be met and the high expectations people had. The 15th Conference of the Parties (COP15) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which also served as the meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol, was supposed to decide on a new deal to be implemented after the first commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol expires in 2012. Expected as an achievement, the outcome of the Conference was finally described as a "new start" and engendered frustration and discontents. In addition to a tense atmosphere and organizational issues, the Conference was considered as a failure because of its outcome: a weak political Accord, with no binding emission reduction targets. Moreover, the Conference simply "took note" of the Accord, because of the rejection of the text by several countries, which considered the process as undemocratic. Countries had until the end of January 2010 to announce their emission reduction targets, which came with no surprise, countries having stuck to their position. Several climate politics observers had forecasted the end of the UN multilateralism and the reliance on national and regional initiatives. But the recent Cancun conference (COP16) has put the international negotiations back on track, even though progress still needs to be done.

Historical background

Research on the greenhouse effect and on climate change goes back to the 19th Century. During the 1820s, Joseph Fourier conducted research on heat and on the role played by the atmosphere's gases, leading to the analogy with a "greenhouse". John Tyndall observed in the 1860s that water vapour and carbon dioxide absorbed heat radiation, while Svante Arrhenius, with the assistance of the geologist Arvid Gustaf Högbom,



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showed in 1896 that the variation in the carbon dioxide contained in the atmosphere could affect the climate. This result was confirmed by Thomas Chrowder Chamberlin, who conducted further research on the role played by carbon dioxide, and who is considered since then as one of the fathers of the global carbon cycle model. Some uncertainties remained, though, notably concerning the regulatory role played by oceans, and no further major research was conducted on this subject until the 1930s, when Guy Stewart Callendar suggested that the observed increase in global temperature at the surface of the Earth was due to the human production of carbon dioxide. Progress in technologies during the 1950s led to further research, with Roger Revelle and Hans Suess showing that oceans returned more carbon dioxide than predicted. This finding led to the establishment by Charles David Keeling of a carbon dioxide monitoring station in Hawaii (at the top of Mauna Loa), which demonstrated over the years a rapid increase in the concentration of carbon dioxide (famously known as the "Keeling curve"). This trend has been confirmed by measurements made at other stations (there are currently about 100 monitoring sites around the world). However, the effects on climate of an increase in carbon dioxide remained unclear, with a global annual mean temperature that even seemed to decrease from the 1940s until the mid-1970s. From the 1980s, a clear increase in the global temperatures, combined with scientific progress (extraction of ice cores, climate modelling), have led to a global consensus on the role played by an increase in greenhouse gases (GHGs) on global warming, and to action at the international level. The integration of climate change into the global political agenda in the late 1980s can be explained by three factors: less scientific uncertainties; the occurrence of other environmental problems of human origins (depletion of the ozone layer, Chernobyl accident, Exxon Valdez oil spill, etc.); and the rise of environmentalist movements.

Several events are pointed out as significant in the rise of environmentalism, including the release of influential books such as Thomas Malthus's *Theory of Population* (1798), Rachel Carlson's *Silent Spring* (1962), Garrett Hardin's *Tragedy of the Commons* and the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth* (1972). At the international level, the first major event was the organization of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, which took place in Stockholm in 1972. The Stockholm Conference put the environmental issue on the international agenda and confirmed the link between environmental degradation and economic development. It also emphasized the split between the industrialized and the developing world, opposing two conflicting ideas: that the exploitation of natural resources by the North degraded the environment and contributed to the unequal distribution of wealth versus that poverty was responsible for environmental degradation. It created the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), which mandate is to coordinate environmental efforts at the international level. However, climate was not in decision makers' mind at that time and we had to wait until 1979 to see the organization of the first World Climate Conference by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO). It was more a scientific conference than a political one, which led to the establishment by the WMO and UNEP of the International



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Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 1988. The IPCC released its first synthesis report in 1990, pointing out that there was a real risk that human activities could affect the Earth's environment to a potentially very serious extent. Climate change was thus an issue people had in mind during the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio. Optimism prevailed during the Rio Earth Summit, which can in part be explained by the economic and political context of the time, namely the end of the economic recession of the 1980s and the end of the Cold War, with the prospect of a reduction of military spending in favour of "soft" issues. The Conference saw many achievements with the creation of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development, the adoption of the Rio Declaration and the Agenda 21, as well as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) as the basis of a global response to climate change.

The UNFCCC sets non binding limits on greenhouse gases emission. It is a "framework" convention, which means that it does not represent the final word and can be expanded over time. This is what happened in 1997 with the adoption of the Kyoto Protocol, which includes binding targets for how much industrialised countries must reduce their emissions by 2012. Industrialized and developing countries have different obligations under the Kyoto Protocol, which constitutes a crucial element that is nowadays widely questioned and debated. The issue of the post-2012 regime dominated the 2007 Bali Conference (COP13), which decided on a road map towards the adoption of a binding agreement in Copenhagen in 2009 (COP15).

From the Copenhagen Accord to the Cancun Agreements

The Copenhagen Conference engendered a lot of frustration and disappointment. It ended with discussions among a limited number of countries and resulted in a weak political Accord drawn by the United States (US) and the so-called BASIC countries (Brazil, South Africa, India, and China). The Copenhagen Accord does not mention any emission reduction targets and does not set any deadline for a legally binding agreement. It mentions the need to provide resources and technology to support the implementation of adaptation strategies in developing countries but remains vague on the financing mechanism. At the end, many organizations pleaded for no agreement rather than a weak one. Newspapers' headlines are revealing: "Copenhagen closes with weak deal that poor threaten to reject" (guardian.co.uk), "Low targets, goals dropped: Copenhagen ends in failure" (guardian.co.uk), "Climate summit ends in chaos and 'toothless' deal" (Telegraph.co.uk), "At Copenhagen, between shame and disappointment" (lemonde.fr), "12 days to pass from hope to disillusionment" (lemonde.fr), "A cold shower" (liberation.fr), "The summit gave birth to a mouse" (elpais.com). Initially announced as the last chance, the Conference was described as a "new start" (Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Yang Jiechi), as an "essential beginning" (UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon) and as a "vital first step" (British Prime Minister Gordon Brown).



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In the aftermath of Copenhagen, observers tried to explain the failure of the conference and to predict the future of climate negotiations. The "North-South" divide, i.e. the conflicting interests and positions between industrialised and developing countries, has been a privileged explanation. The organization of the discussions reflected this opposition, with two lines of negotiations being discussed at the same time. The first one (the Kyoto Protocol track) consisted in maintaining and amending the Kyoto Protocol (notably supported by the G77, China and other developing countries). The other one (the Long-term Cooperative Action track) consisted in negotiating a new deal (supported by industrialized countries). The two options were discussed at the same time, which made the discussions a bit chaotic and further highlighted the scission between these two groups. In addition, the COP15 President, Connie Hedegaard, who called for transparency during the opening ceremony, was highly criticized by developing countries for what was perceived as a pro-North position. A very tense climate prevailed during the whole conference, with several meetings having to be suspended. From the point of view of several experienced negotiators accustomed to the COPs, "we had never seen something like that before". In addition to the United States, China has been particularly criticized for its lack of cooperation. It has now overtaken the US as the world's largest producer of CO₂, so emission reduction efforts are expected from it. It announced that it would cut its emissions of CO₂ per unit of GDP by 40 to 45 percent by 2020 from 2005 levels ("carbon intensity"), which, in other words, means that it has decided to slow down emissions growth. China argues that it is not responsible for past emissions, that it is not a big GHGs emitter on a per capita basis and that its developing country status should be taken into consideration. Considered as a big economic power by the US, China advances that a large part of its population is still very poor. It is both a recipient and a provider of official development assistance.

With such a poor outcome and deadlocks in negotiations, the prospect of making progress through the UN multilateralism seemed very low. However, trust has been restored throughout the 2010 climate talks, and the Cancun Conference has been declared a success. It adopted the Cancun Agreements, which include decisions on the two lines of negotiations (the Kyoto Protocol and the Long-term Cooperative Action tracks), and made progress on the reduction of emissions from deforestation and forest degradation and on carbon stock (REDD+), as well as on the monitoring, reporting and verification of emission reduction (MRV) and the financing mechanism (Green Climate Fund).

Several elements can explain these achievements:

- After the Copenhagen failure, expectations were very low, and any single positive outcome could be considered as a success. In addition, delegates had no other choice but reaching an agreement. They could not take the risk of losing face and wanted to show they were able to make decisions. Moreover, another failure would have meant the end of multilateralism. While several observers pleaded in favour of regional



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agreements, they would not have been relevant to tackle a global problem requiring collective action. It is not sure, anyway, that any other strong initiative would have been taken. The two negotiation tracks were still discussed at the same time, but countries were more willing to make compromises under both of them. It was a question of balance between reassuring the Kyoto Protocol was still alive while also making progress under the Long-term Cooperative Action track, so as to please both developing and industrialised countries.

- The Mexican Presidency made the whole process more transparent and inclusive. In addition, the UNFCCC Executive Secretary Yvo de Boer was replaced by Christiana Figueres from Costa Rica. The appointment of someone from a small developing country (and not from one of the BASIC countries as it was also proposed) was praised by small island nations and by several NGOs. It is the first time someone from a developing country occupies this position, which contributed to restore trust throughout the preceding climate talks.
- By focusing on operational issues (such as financing mechanisms), delegates have avoided political conflicts and thus maximized their chances of reaching an agreement.

Now, is it all so bright? Is COP16 really a success?

- Despite progress made in a few domains, several uncertainties remain: Concerning the MRV mechanism, who will carry out the inspections? As to the Green Climate Fund, promises in terms of funding have been repeated but it is unclear how much money will be transferred, through what mechanism, what will be the obligations of industrialized countries and what will be the origin of the funds (public or private). Regarding emission reduction, the Cancun conference took note of the pledges announced by countries earlier this year, but it remains unclear how much they must reduce and by when.
- In addition, while climate scientists have recommended the world to cut its emissions by 80% by 2050 to limit global warming to a 2°C average rise, the targets announced so far are insufficient to achieve this objective.
- Even though a bit less visible, the North-South divide is still strong. The climate domain is characterized by inequalities between countries (in responsibility and in vulnerability), which makes a consensus on a legally binding agreement difficult to achieve. Political conflicts have not disappeared but have only been postponed to the next Conference of Parties in Durban next year. Japan and Russia have already announced that they would not support a second commitment period under the Kyoto Protocol without the assurance that China and the US would be legally bound to reduce their emissions too.

COP16 contributed to repair the damages made by the Copenhagen conference, to restore trust, and to put the negotiation process back on track. The future of the international climate politics remains unclear, though.



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The academic literature has identified two major climate change discourses: a managerial one, which is dominant, considers climate change as a purely technical problem (i.e. the increase in GHGs emissions) and privileges technical solutions (i.e. the reduction of GHGs emissions), and a profligacy one, which sees climate change as the result of a harmful economic system and advocates preventive actions and a new economic order. Different interpretations of climate change lead to different solutions. Climate change is part of a global ecological crisis, which seems difficult to address without a global rethinking of the production and consumption patterns:

"Whether the call is for reviving nuclear power, boosting the installation of wind turbines, using a variety of renewable energy sources, increasing the efficiency of fossil-fuel use, developing carbon-sequestering technologies, or placing mirrors in space to deflect the sun's rays, the narrow character of such proposals is evident: confront the problem of greenhouse gas emissions by technologically phasing them out, superseding them, capturing them, or mitigating their heating effects. [...] Furthermore, if greenhouse gases were restricted successfully by means of technological shifts and innovations, the root cause of the ecological crisis as a whole would remain unaddressed. The destructive patterns of production, trade, extraction, land-use, waste proliferation, and consumption, coupled with population growth, would go unchallenged, continuing to run down the integrity, beauty, and biological richness of the Earth." (Crist, 2007, pp. 33-34)

Dr Celine Germond-Duret attended the Copenhagen Conference on Climate Change as member of the Green Cross International delegation. She wrote a blog on the Conference, available

at:
http://www.uclan.ac.uk/schools/built_natural_environment/research/csd/copenhagensummit.php

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