

CLIMATE CHANGE – REFLECTION ON POZNAN

An Agreement Will Come...
But Will It Be (Soon) Enough?

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As a long-time follower but first-time observer of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) negotiating process, I came to Poznan excited about promoting my organization's work and meeting thousands of other 'climate nerds', but also aware that a number of factors would likely slow to a crawl 'measurable, reportable, and verifiable' progress on a future agreement.

During my first few days in Poznan the more pessimistic side of my brain was clearly winning. As expected, there was a lot of discussion about the global financial crisis.

'If the US Congress (and other western countries) can mobilize US\$700 billion overnight to bailout the banking industry, why does it take them two years to pass climate legislation, and why does the Adaptation Fund have only US\$100 *million*?!' was the exasperated cry from many Association of Small Island States (AOSIS) and other Least Developed Countries (LDCs). It seemed hard not to agree with them, but equally difficult to find signs that their message was being heard.

Although work plans were agreed upon and assembly documents of proposals were put forward, it is hard to find optimism in the progress on the Bali building blocks. There were still substantial gaps between developed and developing countries in all four areas, including interim targets, the framework for technology transfer and financing, and the nature of measurable, reportable, and verifiable commitments from developing countries. It seemed hard to believe that some developing countries were asking that they only be required to measurably, reportably, and verifiably spend all the money they are given. Thankfully more reasonable proposals such as a registry of national mitigation actions seemed to gain consensus.

Another expected stumbling block was the 'lame-duck' role of the US negotiators. Many observers had correctly recognized, however, that the change in administration on January 20th is far less important than gauging the mood in the US Senate (and House). Several congressmen and staffers were in attendance and presented at side events on the status of legislation. It should be a promising sign that these were among the most well attended events in Poznan, but many observers walked away disappointed that very, very few specific details were given about what to expect over the coming year.

The staffers worked hard to temper sky-high expectations under the Obama administration, arguing that an agreement in Copenhagen could be reached even without a comprehensive climate bill passing before December, which seems unlikely. The tricky point here is that action in Congress will be proceeding along two interconnected fronts: a domestic cap-and-trade and renewable energy plan, and the ratification of the international treaty that binds the US to its commitments in Copenhagen.

The former will be relatively easy to come by, as it will be framed in terms of reducing dependence on foreign oil and include a number of goodies such as tax breaks and subsidies for burgeoning green industries. In addition, most of the key committees in congress for climate legislation will be taken over by 'climate hands' in the new administration. On the other side, staffers in Poznan pointed out that the treaty ratification will require convincing 67 of 100 Senators across party lines (it's often extremely difficult to secure the 60 required for most legislation) that China and India are doing their fair share as well. The failure of Bill Clinton to secure this support before signing Kyoto was cited as a mistake that cannot be repeated.



This led me to ask the (seemingly very important) question 'What specific type of commitments are most Senators looking for from developing countries?' Although Chatham House rules prevent me from publishing their responses, they reminded me of the cryptic line from the US film 'Field of Dreams': '*if you build it [China and India], they will come [the US]*'. While this may work in Hollywood, it will be a hard sell in Copenhagen. The message that I took away is that instead of a bold resolution from China or the US cementing the deal, it will be a tense back-and-forth, give-and-take negotiating process that will likely have the world on its toes right up to December 18th next year.

My final note of pessimism came from the lack of connection between rhetoric and reality in the area of science. Although it was being repeated often in the corridors (including an inspiring event and publication by the Tallberg Foundation) the message that science has become even more serious than the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Fourth Assessment Report was not getting reflected in the text, aside from some promising discussion of new insurance and risk management mechanisms. I was disappointed by the lack of connection with or even mention of science (aside from dismissing its impracticality for governments) in several high-level reports. Although there are no easy answers, giving the 'Voice of the Planet' a stronger place at the negotiating table will be imperative going forward.

Despite these challenges, I couldn't help but leave Poznan with a vague sense of optimism that is hard to pinpoint or define. Perhaps it was the frequent battle cry of 'We must view the financial crisis as an opportunity, a chance to think even bigger, and not a setback!' that finally seemed to be gaining some traction among several countries (including my own). In addition, there was the ever-present, highly energized, and inspiring youth delegations. In Poznan I moved somewhat awkwardly between the more activist youth organizations (where I fit in terms of age) and the academic circles (where I fit in terms of experience). With the rapidly growing and highly credible international youth movement on climate and sustainability issues, the only question seems to be, will they (we) grow up and take power soon enough to solve this crisis?

Finally, having lived in China for the past 15 months, I (as well as many other delegates) couldn't help but feel a sea change in the attitude of the Chinese government and negotiators, although it was not fully reflected in their official statements or positions. Through their presence at certain events and the seemingly increased freedom for Chinese academics to present innovative proposals, they seemed to be preparing to take on a stronger role in negotiations and actions (as they are with many international issues). The challenges will be to communicate with the rest of the world the significant steps China is already taking, and, through the international agreement, support their committed goals for energy efficiency and sustainable development.



Andrew Stevenson is a Fulbright Scholar who spent his time at Civic Exchange and worked on climate change related research, including two major publications in 2007 and 2008.

Reference:

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