



By Robert N. Stavins

Did the Durban Meeting Succeed?

The 17th Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change concluded in Durban, South Africa, in December, and in the process pulled a rabbit out of the hat at the last minute by saving the talks from complete collapse (which had appeared possible just a few days earlier). But was the outcome a success?

Three major elements emerged: some elaborations on various components of the Cancun Agreements that emerged from the 16th COP; a second five-year commitment period for the Kyoto Protocol; and a non-binding decision to reach an agreement by 2015 that will bring all countries under the same legal regime by 2020.

If by “success” in Durban, one means solving the climate problem, the answer is obviously “not close.” Indeed, if by “success” one means just putting the world on a path to solve the climate problem, the answer would still have to be “no.”

But, such definitions of success are fundamentally inappropriate for judging the international negotiations on the exceptionally challenging, long-term problem of global climate change. The key question is whether the Durban outcome has put the world in a place and on a trajectory whereby it is more likely than it was previously to establish a

sound foundation for meaningful long-term action.

My answer is that the talks advanced international discussions in a positive direction and have increased the likelihood of meaningful long-term action. Why do I say this?

Let’s look at the three major elements of the Durban outcome. First, the delegates agreed to a set of potentially important details on various components of the Cancun Agreements. This progress may turn out to be very important indeed, and helps advance — at least for the interim — a workable bottom-up, pledge-and-review approach to international climate cooperation.

Second, the delegates agreed to a second five-year commitment period for the Kyoto Protocol. Without this element, the talks would have collapsed, because the key emerging economies of China, India, Brazil, South Africa, Korea, and Mexico (not to mention the much larger number of truly poor developing countries) would have walked out.

Third, and most important, the delegates decided to reach an agreement by 2015 that will bring all countries under the same legal regime by 2020.

The anchor that has been preventing real progress in the international climate negotiations for the past fifteen years has been the Kyoto Protocol’s dichotomous distinction between Annex I countries with emission-reduction responsibilities and non-Annex I countries without any responsibilities.

With 50 non-Annex I countries now having greater per capita income than the poorest of the Annex I countries, it is clearly out of whack. But, much more than that, this dichotomous distinction means that the world’s largest emitter — China — is unconstrained. With half of global emissions soon to be from nations without constraints, it drives up costs to four times their best cost-effectiveness level, and it creates

a structure that makes change and progress virtually impossible.

For the first time, the Annex I/non-Annex I (or industrialized/developing country) distinction has been put aside. Instead, the focus is on the pledge to create a system of greenhouse gas reductions including all UNFCCC parties (that is, all key countries) by 2015 that will come into force (after ratification) by 2020.

Nowhere in the text of the decision will one find phrases such as “Annex I,” “common but differentiated responsibilities,” or “distributional equity,” which have — in recent years — become code words for targets for the richest countries and a blank check for all others.

We should not over-estimate the importance of a “non-binding agreement to reach a future agreement,” but this is a real departure from the past, and marks a significant advance along the treacherous, uphill path of climate negotiations. Prior to the Durban meetings, I thought that contentious

debates over a possible second commitment period for the Kyoto Protocol might disrupt the talks, divert them from making sound progress on the Cancun structure, and keep the

delegates from moving toward a sound foundation for meaningful long-term action.

This did not happen. Not only did Durban not undo the progress made in Cancun, it built upon it, and moved forward. This won’t satisfy the 350.org crowd, and it must greatly annoy the opponents of sensible climate policy, but in the real world of international negotiations on this exceptionally difficult global commons problem, this is what success looks like.

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