

COP 15 and CLIMATE JUSTICE: Collapse, Greenwash or New Impetus for the Future?

A Multi-stakeholder Discussion Co-sponsored by the United Nations Non-Governmental Liaison Service, Realizing Rights: The Ethical Globalization Initiative and the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation

25 January 2010, UNHQ, New York
Conference Room 1, Old Conference Building

Background Note

"We have the foundation for the first truly global agreement that will limit and reduce greenhouse gas emissions, support adaptation for the most vulnerable and launch a new era of green growth. The Copenhagen Accord may not be everything that everyone hoped for, but this decision of the Conference of Parties is a beginning, an essential beginning."

- UN Secretary-General Ban-ki Moon following the conclusion of COP-15 in Copenhagen, 19 December 2009

After a two year build-up, the Fifteenth Conference of the Parties (COP 15) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) concluded with Member States "taking note" of the Copenhagen Accord, a three-page document that has come to represent both how far the world has come in agreeing on how to address climate change, and how far it still has to go.

Opinions on the outcome vary widely, between and within governments. Some have championed its adoption while others refuse to even 'take note'. Civil society organizations were generally very disappointed in the outcome – the 'fair, ambitious and binding' deal that the Global Campaign for Climate Action called for did not materialize, and its Chair Kumi Naidoo said, "Leaders of the world's most powerful countries have betrayed future and current generations. Averting climate chaos just got a whole lot harder."

The UN and governments are still formulating their strategies for 2010. The BASIC countries (Brazil, South Africa, India and China) are meeting in India this week. And the UNFCCC Secretariat has just announced that the 31 January deadline for governments to formally associate themselves with the Copenhagen Accord, and submit accompanying targets and actions, will not be met.

But while opinions vary widely on the Copenhagen Accord, and how the Accord will be immediately implemented remains unclear, there is broad agreement that the year 2010 is critical in aggressively addressing the threat of climate change. There is also a growing awareness that addressing climate change is closely linked with wider political, economic

and development debates. These include this year's effort within the United States to pass domestic legislation (a problem cited by most observers as an impediment to a comprehensive global deal), the UN's ten-year review of progress on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and the search for opportunities to 'green economies' as part of the solution to the global economic slump. The outcomes of COP 16 in Mexico at the end of the year will be influenced by these and other processes.

Bearing in mind the importance of 2010, the United Nations Non-Governmental Liaison Service (UN-NGLS), Realizing Rights: The Ethical Globalization Initiative and the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation have invited collaboration with governments and civil society representatives in using January 25th as an opportunity to share perspectives on the outcomes of COP 15 and to identify elements that will enable more progress in 2010.

It is the hope of the organizers that this meeting can contribute to a greater understanding of the implications of the Copenhagen Accord, highlight emerging opportunities, approaches and strategies for achieving greater success at COP 16, and ensure that the issue of climate change is given sufficient attention in wider debates on development.

The organizers believe that the concept of climate justice is a useful framing for such a discussion. Rarely heard before 2009, the notion of 'climate justice' became widely used last year and was taken up most prominently by countries and civil society groups who are, or whose focus is, countries or communities particularly at risk from the effects of climate change.

The concept of climate justice builds on the UNFCCC's concepts of equity and common but differentiated responsibilities. It begins with the acknowledgement that because the world's richest countries have contributed most to the problem, they have a greater obligation to take action and to do so more quickly. Climate justice requires analysis and action that builds on the differential impacts on specific groups, including women and indigenous peoples. It reinforces the need for governments and others to act in an accountable and transparent manner that respects the human rights and dignity of all people - reducing risks to vulnerable populations to a minimum, and allowing no one to fall below a minimum threshold because of climate change impacts. It reinforces the importance of identifying and giving attention to the perspectives and voices of those who are most vulnerable, both between and within national borders. It underscores the importance of multilateralism and giving a strong voice to those countries who will suffer most.

The idea of climate justice may seem a challenging starting point. But an early recognition of the ethical dimension to the problem of climate change may underpin a more fruitful discussion amongst governments and the public that, in the end, builds recognition of shared responsibility for the planet and the well-being of its people – a recognition that is a stronger basis upon which to negotiate.