(Earth Talk) Setting the record straight on what came out of "COP 15"

Written by EarthTalk® | From the Editors of E/The Environmental Magazine Thursday, 06 May 2010 00:20



Dear EarthTalk: There have been many contradictory reports ("it was good; it was bad") about what came out of "COP 15," the December 2009 international Climate Change Conference held in Copenhagen. Can you set the record straight? -- Jay Killian, Brookline, MA

Indeed hopes were high that international negotiators in Copenhagen last December at the 15th Annual Conference of Parties (COP15) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) would be able to hammer out a strong agreement to once and for all take the climate beast by the horns and begin to reign in carbon emissions worldwide. But a new binding formal agreement was not to be, mostly because of conflicting priorities among participating countries.

Even a weaker 11th hour voluntary "framework" put forth by the U.S., China, India, Brazil and South Africa failed to win consensus support among the 119 attending heads of state. However, the resulting Copenhagen Accord—which aims to keep global temperatures from reaching any more than 2°C (3.6°F) above pre-industrial times—did leave the door open for a stronger agreement later, with developing countries pledging a total of \$30 billion in the short term and \$100 billion a year by 2020, mostly to help less developed nations adopt policies and technologies to keep carbon footprints small moving forward.

"This accord cannot be everything that everyone hoped for, but it is an essential beginning," reports UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. "The bad news is that the Accord is not legally binding and provides no plan of how to limit emissions," says climatologist Mark Maslin of the University College of London's (UCL) Environment Institute, pointing out that the original text leading up to the meeting called for a global cut in emissions of 50 percent by 2050, including an 80 percent cut by all developed countries.

The lack of detail in the resulting Accord regarding specific emissions reductions targets means cooperation is completely voluntary, which is not what environmentalists want to hear. "The Accord should be seen as simply a face-saving agreement," comments Maslin. "The politics are clear: Some developed and the richer developing countries resisted the call for legal limits to emissions."

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The failure of COP15 to generate a binding agreement means that international policymaking will likely take a back seat in the effort to wean ourselves off of fossil fuels and profligate carbon emissions. Chris Flavin of the U.S.-based Worldwatch Institute believes that future progress on climate "will be driven more by domestic economics and politics rather than the international negotiating process."

Flavin goes on to say that climate change mitigation will depend on the ability of individual nations "to persuade domestic constituents that they will benefit economically as well as environmentally from an energy transition." He adds that future UN climate talks should focus not on overarching agreements but on practical goals like providing funding for poor countries to mitigate and adapt to climate change, accelerating international cooperation on technology, and coordinating a global effort to protect the world's remaining forests given their capacity to store large amounts of carbon. "Efforts over the next few years will determine whether Copenhagen was a fatal setback for efforts to combat climate change, or just a painful mid-course correction," concludes Flavin.

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