



COP 17: What Role for South Africa as an Agent of Change?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The South African government is hosting the 2011 annual UN-led international climate change talks – negotiations that seek to shape the future architecture of the global climate change regime. This is one of the most politically divisive and complex areas currently under discussion within the multilateral context. South Africa has an important task in moving the discussions forward. Reconciling its domestic climate agenda with that of the region, while simultaneously pushing an ambitious international climate agenda, will be challenging. However, good preparation and communication, focus on an inclusive, transparent and multilateral process, and an emphasis on substance will assist South Africa in working towards a successful outcome for the climate summit.

INTRODUCTION

South Africa, in partnership with the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), will play a key role in managing the 17th session of the Conference of Parties (COP 17) intergovernmental negotiations from 28 November to 5 December 2011. Besides co-hosting a successful mega-event, its primary aim is to establish legal guidelines to regulate the reduction of carbon emissions in the coming years. Realistically, this will only be a step towards a new global regime on climate change, rather than the conclusion of a comprehensive agreement. The geopolitical landscape in which South Africa will be operating is highly complicated, exacerbated by entrenched and varying national interests. South Africa ultimately aims to uphold the integrity of the multilateral process by making progress on the unresolved issues agreed to in Bali, in 2007, especially towards a post-2012 global climate change regime, while also ensuring the implementation of the 2010

RECOMMENDATIONS

- South Africa should use its leadership position as incoming president and chair of COP 17 to the UNFCCC to champion countries to support African agency, keeping vulnerable people and development concerns at the centre of the debate.
- The South African COP presidency should learn from previous climate meetings in terms of process and preparation. Upholding the principles of multilateralism, transparency and the inclusion of non-governmental actors in the discussions are central to the overall success and legitimacy of COP 17.
- South Africa needs to consolidate its own competing national priorities and interests with others in the region, for example the African OPEC members, SIDS, densely forested states and those reliant on agriculture, and work alongside African Union member states in strengthening their common voice.
- South Africa should lead by example and illustrate concrete mitigation progress at national level. Clarity is needed on South Africa's renewable energy feed-in tariff regulation, its IRP II and the proposed design of a carbon tax. South Africa needs to focus on awareness raising and education, so that projects exist beyond the Durban meeting.

Cancun agreements. The South African government alone is not responsible for the outcome of COP 17. To ensure that Durban ushers in a more viable, long-term climate change architecture, South Africa needs the co-operation of all stakeholders outside of government, as well as the assistance of the global community.

Negotiations on the legal form of a future climate change agreement have reached a stalemate. On the one side, developing countries are in favour of a second commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol (KP). The KP is viewed as the only mechanism for providing legally binding verification and sanction tools, without which developed countries cannot be held accountable for their emissions reductions. On the other side, Canada, Japan and Russia have indicated that without the US, they are opposed to the continuation of the KP. The US has emphasised that it will not take on binding emissions targets unless emerging economies such as China are also obliged to take them on. The political context in the US offers little hope of making significant commitments on climate change (at least until the end of Obama's first term of office in 2012). The global financial crisis, deepened by debt problems in the Eurozone and the loss of the US AAA credit rating, compounds the problem. Unfortunately, there is still a widely held perception that a reduction in emissions negatively alters economic growth prospects – especially for economies dependent on fossil fuels.

South African diplomats will try their utmost to move beyond these North–South divisions, re-focusing the debate on substantive issues and promoting an equitable sharing of effort by countries, albeit differentiated according to capacity and capabilities. Through serious preparation and strategy-building, South Africa has the ability to shape the course of the negotiations. It has already engaged in a series of informal consultations at ministerial, negotiator and stakeholder levels in an attempt to forge political consensus and facilitate a credible and balanced outcome.

South Africa, through its experience as a conflict mediator in other multilateral discussions, has developed a positive reputation for its use of negotiating tactics and bridge-building skills. South Africa has years of experience in understanding the

UNFCCC's working methods and participating in complex discussions. It also has a well-respected and professionally diverse negotiating team, fostering the trust of the international community in the ability and integrity of its leadership. Maite Nkoana-Mashabane, Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, will chair the meeting, while Edna Molewa, Minister of Water and Environmental Affairs, will lead the national delegation. South Africa's choice of COP president indicates an emphasis on climate-change diplomacy.

FINDING A COMMON VOICE WITH AFRICA

South Africa's negotiating stance is informed by numerous national and regional considerations. Its key objective is to encompass the continent and draw those most vulnerable into the centre of the debate. This event, coined 'the African COP', represents an opportune moment for the continent to heighten its presence in the multilateral system. To do this, South Africa needs to consolidate its own competing national priorities and interests with that of its region and work alongside African Union (AU) members in strengthening their common voice.

In 2009 the Africa Group began to use its collective bargaining weight to influence these international processes. The 54-member bloc, with 36% of UN membership, has made attempts to harmonise its position in the negotiations and to turn numbers into real political clout. However, the Africa Group remains divided by varying national priorities, defined by members' respective population sizes; geography; composition of their economies; and the make-up of their emissions profiles. Climate change challenges are felt locally and countries respond according to their national circumstances. For example, Algeria, Angola, Libya and Nigeria, members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, focus primarily on response measures, concerned that a decrease in the use of petroleum products and increased investment in renewable energies will have a negative impact on oil exporting countries. Small island developing states (SIDS) are experiencing climate impacts now and seek urgent and more

ambitious solutions to adaptation and disaster risk management. Nigeria and South Africa are Africa's largest carbon emitters. Both countries face pressure to overhaul their industrial-energy sectors in an attempt to move away from their dependency on fossil fuels. The discussions on REDD+, agriculture and market-based mechanisms are central to the negotiating positions of Central Africa. The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), in particular, has high levels of emissions attributed to the rapid deforestation of the Congo Basin.

Given these divergent national interests, the group is not always co-ordinated in its approach – especially in pressurised circumstances, with different capabilities and negotiating skills. Plans to manage these factions and consolidate a common position towards Durban are led by the chair of the group, Tosi Mpanu-Mpanu from the DRC. An area of convergence for the whole of Africa is around adaptation. Being the most vulnerable to its impacts, Africa needs to push for outcomes that are more ambitious, respectable and fair to all, especially to the 34 least-developed countries that are situated on the African continent.

BALANCING ALLIANCES

In 2009 South Africa joined the Brazil, South Africa, India and China (BASIC) alliance. According to Alf Wills, South Africa's chief climate change negotiator, BASIC is not a negotiating bloc but rather an influential 'co-ordinating' group looking to share positions on key climate responses. BASIC members are the largest emitters of the developing world and are key participants of a low-carbon future. Although fragmented in their individual outlooks and with very different economic capabilities, these countries are increasingly important partners for South Africa, most notably for their common voice on the developmental impact of climate change. The South African government uses the BASIC alliance as an additional platform to further uphold and advance the interests of Africa, seeking to influence the process from within.

The country's role in burgeoning 'club diplomacy' groups raises interesting questions about how South Africa is perceived by its region and whether its diplomatic and political communities

are really promoting the idea of an 'African COP' that is fair and equitable for the continent and, more broadly, for the developing world at large. Critics have questioned the country's real priorities – especially given its already overburdened agenda and lack of resources to deliver on all its promises. South Africa needs to use its limited resources judiciously and strategically, prioritise carefully, consult widely to build trust, be open to suggestions, respond flexibly and to be firm in decision-making.

LEARNING FROM PAST COPS

South Africa has a lot to learn from the achievements and failures at both COP 15 (held in Copenhagen) and COP 16 (held in Cancun). The Danish presidency of 2009 aimed to achieve a new international treaty on climate change. The outcome fell far short of this aim (Copenhagen Accord) and received criticism for its non-binding nature. This was followed by widespread disappointment and a growing sense of mistrust in the multilateral system. As a result, expectations for COP 16 were downplayed and emphasis was placed on regaining trust, building momentum, and on an inclusive, transparent and democratic 'process'.

South Africa's approach is likely to be politically ambitious, adopting a top-down approach towards either salvaging the KP or maintaining some form of a legally binding agreement. South Africa will also attempt to look at intractable issues of aviation and maritime emissions, and how to manage carbon markets in developing markets. In some instances, however, South Africa is likely to use a bottom-up, incremental approach, building on the foundations and institutional groundwork laid in Cancun and attempting to make this emerging architecture operational by identifying lasting, reliable sources of financing.

Cancun focused on transparency and inclusiveness. Preceding COP 16, the Mexicans organised a series of preparatory meetings on various sticking points, ranging in formality, political level, composition and size, to best suit the issue at hand. During the negotiations they employed similarly inclusive tactics and strategies. South African negotiators are adopting many

of these tools, seeking political agreements on technical issues before Durban.

South Africa is aware of the necessity to further include civil society and business in its COP strategy. In 2009, 50 000 people protested on the outskirts of the Copenhagen conference, and the Danes were criticised for not being inclusive. In Cancun, civil society continued to mobilise but was less visible. As a result, the South African government has initiated public climate change outreach and mobilisation programmes, including youth development and extensive media training. South Africa has also included business in its 'greening framework', planning to use local initiatives to offset carbon emissions and create sustainable legacy projects in Durban. The participation of non-governmental actors is central to the legitimacy of COP 17.

GETTING ITS OWN HOUSE IN ORDER

COP 17 has put South Africa's own mitigation commitments in the spotlight. After all, it is the world's 13th highest greenhouse-gas emitter. As the host nation there is an expectation to guide by demonstration and illustrate climate leadership. This will require South Africa to complete several pending national policy processes, so that it has something solid to offer in Durban.

On 12 October 2011, cabinet approved South Africa's National Climate Change Response Policy. This White Paper sets out South Africa's mitigation and adaptation path towards achieving a socio-economic transition to a climate-resilient and low-carbon economy. It proposes the use of market mechanisms to promote mitigation action. Despite this, clarity is still needed on South Africa's renewable energy feed-in tariff regulation, its integrated resource plan (IRP) II and the proposed design of a carbon tax – policies that will further demonstrate the seriousness of its intent through practical action. It is also hoped that South

Africa's efforts will extend beyond showcasing its progress at COP, and be translated into real, long-term changes to the country's consumption and production patterns.

Government has renewed its voluntary commitment to reduce carbon emissions below a business-as-usual baseline by 34% by 2020 and 42% by 2025, subject to the availability of adequate financial and technical support. These commitments require political will at national level to encourage sufficient domestic action and long-term strategies that support South Africa's behaviour on the international scene. They are particularly challenging as the country's future development and growth plans seem to be coupled with increasing emissions and coal use. Its approach must balance a fair contribution to global efforts with climate-related investments that contribute to its economic competitiveness and growth.

CONCLUSION

Aware of past COP failures, South Africa's approach should highlight transparency, multilateral action and inclusiveness. South Africa will attempt to make progress towards implementing the Cancun climate architecture, ensuring coherence and good governance of the newly established systems. However, South Africa will also attempt to push the debate towards a new binding global framework for climate change. The legitimacy of COP 17 will be judged on its openness and the dialogue that the South African government conducts with all-important stakeholders, in particular with civil society and business. Its success depends on South Africa's ability to move the debate back to people and to dealing with environmental integrity.

ENDNOTE

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