

Edinburgh Science Festival 2010
“Responding to Copenhagen”
A global ethical approach

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The relevance of COP 15 in Copenhagen

The Conference of Parties (COP) 15 of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) took place in Copenhagen, December 7-18, 2009. Many headlines in newspapers, TV news and media in general referred to this COP in different ways.

The relevance of this COP was that it should reach an agreement after the first commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol (KP) which comes to an end in 2012. The Kyoto Protocol, the binding instrument that applies to the UNFCCC, had agreed on emission reduction targets for this period. The meeting in Copenhagen was supposed to agree on what would be the commitments of the industrialized countries (Annex I countries of the KP), who are compelled to reduce their emissions.

A big question was what would happen in Copenhagen with “emerging developing countries” like China, India and Brazil, which are not part of the Annex I but whose CO₂ emissions at the national level are extremely important. Another expectation was in relation to the USA (who quit the Kyoto Protocol during George W. Bush time) under the new Obama administration and his proposal to cut US emissions by 17% for 2020 (compared to 2005 levels).

The broad civil society movement was advocating for a “fair, ambitious and binding” deal in Copenhagen, as expressed, for instance by the Global Campaign on Climate Action, (tckctck campaign).

The Copenhagen Accord

What were the results of Copenhagen? A “Copenhagen accord”, negotiated mainly by five countries (USA, China, India, Brazil and South Africa) and then opened to signatures. The accord is not a binding document and called for voluntary reductions. After COP 15, UN Secretary General, Ban-ki Moon, called all countries to sign the accord towards a legally binding treaty in 2010.

Most civil society organizations and many states, especially the poorest and most vulnerable, strongly criticized the accord. Why? In few words, because it is not fair, it is not ambitious, and it is not binding. In Copenhagen already, the representative

of Tuvalu at the plenary said it was like being given 30 coins of silver to betray its people and that Tuvalu would not sign it.

The Copenhagen Accord, is far less from what the civil society and the most vulnerable states expected. Furthermore, the negotiation between the powerful nations, not only in the North but also in the South, jeopardized the multilateral negotiations of the UN. Some countries and analysts have blamed China for not being able to reach a binding agreement. I think this is to use China as scapegoat. Of course China has its own responsibility but this is the case also for the US, Denmark (as host country and president of the COP) and others. The negotiations by China, India, South Africa and Brazil also created tensions and divisions in their respective regions and with groupings such as the G77.

Positive outcomes

At the same time Copenhagen also had some positive outcomes: the mobilization of the civil society reached incredible numbers all over the world. For instance: the 350.org campaign in previous months, and especially the October 24th demonstration in various parts of the world; other demonstrations in many cities, with the 100,000 people demonstration in Copenhagen on December 12 and a strong awareness raising of peoples and governments in the global South, especially, should be seen as positive signs.

The increasing involvement of churches, the ecumenical movement and religions at large, was impressive. It included creative activities like the Countdown to Copenhagen Campaign and the handover of half a million signatures by Archbishop Tutu to Ivo de Boer, the head of the UNFCCC Secretariat. The ecumenical celebration in Copenhagen Cathedral was transmitted live by Danish local television and had the Archbishop of Canterbury as preacher. Perhaps one of the most well known activities was the 350 bellringing campaign, with thousands of churches all over the world ringing their bells and organizing prayers and vigils for care for creation (see e.g. WCC feature stories of COP 15 at: <http://www.oikoumene.org/?id=1750>). More interfaith activities were organized at COP 15 (e.g. the side event of Caritas and WCC on Climate Justice was also sponsored by the Asian Muslim Action Network) and interfaith declarations were released (see e.g. <http://www.interfaithdeclaration.org>)

At the government level, having the US on board again should be seen as a good sign despite the weak commitment for the time being. China commitments to cut emissions as presented at COP15 are also a step forward. The presence of 110 heads of state showed the relevance governments are giving to climate change, though the outcome was quite deceiving.

What to do now?

Global ethical principles

From a global perspective it is important to remember that the Principles of the UNFCCC (Art. 3) offered already some relevant ethical insights. Let me remind you and highlight some of them.

“ 1. The Parties should protect the climate system for the benefit of **present and future generations** of humankind, **on the basis of equity** and in accordance with their **common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities**. Accordingly, the **developed country Parties should take the lead in combating climate change** and the adverse effects thereof.

Principle 1 refers to critical points: the concern for present and future generations; Equity as a basis for climate measures; the “common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities”; the lead developed countries should have in combating climate change.

“2. The **specific needs and special circumstances of developing country Parties**, especially those that are particularly **vulnerable** to the adverse effects of climate change, and of those Parties, especially developing country Parties, that would have to bear a disproportionate or abnormal burden under the Convention, should be given full consideration.”

Principle 2 pays special attention to the needs and circumstances of developing and vulnerable countries. These deserve particular consideration.

“3. The Parties should take **precautionary measures to anticipate, prevent or minimize the causes of climate change and mitigate its adverse effects**. Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing such measures, taking into account that policies and measures to deal with climate change should be cost-effective so as to ensure global benefits at the lowest possible cost. To achieve this, such policies and measures should take into account different socio-economic contexts, be comprehensive, cover all relevant sources, sinks and reservoirs of greenhouse gases and adaptation, and comprise all economic sectors. Efforts to address climate change may be carried out cooperatively by interested Parties.”

The so called precautionary principle is addressed here, stressing the importance of anticipating, preventing or minimizing the causes and mitigating its effects.

Interestingly, the principle already responds to climate skeptics, affirming that “the lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing such measures”.

“4. The Parties have a **right to, and should, promote sustainable development**. Policies and measures to protect the climate system against human-induced change should be appropriate for the specific conditions of each Party and should be integrated with national development programmes, taking into account that economic development is essential for adopting measures to address climate change.”

The right to development, specifically sustainable development, is addressed in this principle.

“5. The Parties should cooperate to promote a **supportive and open international economic system that would lead to sustainable economic growth and development in all Parties, particularly developing country Parties**, thus enabling them better to address the problems of climate change. Measures taken to combat climate change, including unilateral ones, should not constitute a means of arbitrary or unjustifiable discrimination or a disguised restriction on international trade.”

Links between climate change and economics are highlighted in this principle, reminding how intertwined they are.

Based on these principles, the ecumenical movement has focused on climate justice as a core component of the advocacy work at the global level.

The **commitment for justice**, together with the **wholeness of creation**, have been two biblical **insights which have guided the ecumenical concern on climate change**.

The WCC Executive Committee September 2007 Statement on the Tenth Anniversary of the Kyoto Protocol stressed that “the Bible teaches the wholeness of creation: Life is created, sustained and made whole by the power of God’s Holy Spirit (Genesis 1; Romans 8). God creates human beings out of the dust of the earth (Genesis 2). Sin breaks relationships among humankind and with the created order (Genesis 3 and 4; Jeremiah 14, Hosea 4:1-3). Bearing the marks of human sin, 'creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God' (Romans 8:19). God provided all creatures with the conditions to live life as it is meant to be, in a specific relation towards one another. When creation is threatened by climate change we are called to speak out and act as an expression of our commitment to life, justice and love”.

Indeed, **justice is at the core of the biblical message**. The God of the Hebrew Bible is a God of Justice. The Torah, the Law, makes explicit and translates in practical terms what it means to act justly.

“He (God) secures justice for widows and orphans,
and loves the alien who lives among you,

giving him food and clothing” (Deut 10: 18 – 19)

God is a God who does justice, who cares, gives security to the poor and responds to their basic needs.

As we can see from this quotation from Deuteronomy, **the quest for justice in the Bible is intimately related to the rights of the oppressed and the vulnerable ones.** The prophets, react to a literal interpretation of the Law and restore the original meaning of acting justly with the protection of the vulnerable:

“Cease to do evil and learn to do right

Pursue justice and champion the oppressed

Give the orphan his rights, plead the widow’s case” (Is 1: 17)

The triad “widows, orphans and strangers” expresses the vulnerable which are especially loved by God.

“The Lord loves the righteous

and watches over the stranger

the lord gives heart to the orphan and widow

but turns the course of the wicked to their ruin” (Ps 146: 8-9)

Jesus himself through his life expressed his care for the poor, the excluded, the most vulnerable. This is expressed, for instance, in the Beatitudes at the beginning of the Sermon of the Mount, what can be considered the programmatic discourse of Jesus: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” and some verses below “Blessed those who are hungry and thirsty of justice” (cf. Luke 6:20ff and Matthew 5: 3ff). The parable of the final judgment reflects this love for the poor and vulnerable (Matthew 25: 31 – 46).

As the ecumenical movement strengthened its commitment for climate justice, a particular consideration on how climate change is affecting the poor, the most vulnerable communities, the victims of climate change should guide its policies and actions.

Responding to Copenhagen implies, in my view, to keep this ethical principles alive. From an ethical point of view climate change continues to pose dramatic challenges at the individual, community, national and international levels. The most vulnerable communities and groups continue to suffer the effects of climate change. Increased efforts are needed to make justice prevail. The most vulnerable, the earth, the creation as a whole need a need a fair, ambitious and binding treaty to adequately respond to the challenges posed by climate change. We have the responsibility to build on the momentum created in the civil society at large. We need to overcome the frustration of thousands of activists who did a great job towards COP 15. We need to keep the commitment of churches and communities who have engaged in various activities regarding climate change. It is not an easy task, of course, but who told us it would be easy?