

Global Justice and Climate Change: Moving Forward From Copenhagen

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December's COP15 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen was the deadline for the global community to develop a climate agreement to reduce climate pollution post-2012 following the Kyoto Protocol. With all of civil society calling for a fair, ambitious, and binding agreement the stage was set and the pressure on. Unfortunately, the agreement that came out of climate summit, the Copenhagen Accord, contains no reference to climate pollution reduction targets or timelines.

The Accord, spearheaded by the United States, was opposed by many nations because it was drafted behind closed doors. Essentially, the Accord is a side-agreement that is not legally binding within the United Nations. By COP16 next December in Mexico City there is an enormous amount of work to pull together a fair, ambitious, and legally binding agreement.

On the heels of Copenhagen, the most important climate summit in history, it important for Canadians to understand what could a fair, ambitious, and binding treaty even mean for Canada from an international perspective. Currently, Canada is among the top 10 polluters in the world on a per capita, absolute and cumulative scale. But now, official attitudes are at their crossroads.

Fairness demands that developed countries support Indigenous peoples, developing countries, and impacted communities to adapt to the climate crisis. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, ratified by 192 countries to provide the framework that the UN climate negotiations are based upon, asserts "the largest share of historical and current global emissions of greenhouse gases has originated in developed countries." The Convention offers further guidance that actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions "should be made on the basis of equity and in accordance with common but differentiated responsibilities" of developed and developing nations.

According the World Bank, a conservative source, 75% of the historical emissions that created the climate crisis came from 20% of the world's population in developed countries. Meanwhile, 75% of the impacts of the climate crisis are experienced in the developing world. There is a direct inverse relationship between where the crisis was created and where the effects of the crisis are being felt.

This is not about charity; it's about taking responsibility for the problem developed countries caused. A team of UN scientists estimated what it would cost, not just to respond to the reality of climate change, but to bypass fossil fuels and adopt green technologies, at around 600 billion dollars a year. It sounds like a lot, however this is nowhere near the funding that the banks got in the recent bailout.

In Canada a contentious reality of taking responsibility for the climate crisis is absolute emissions reductions that are ambitious. Canada has increased emissions from 1990 levels by 26% mainly due to the expansion of tar sands extraction as a secure supply of oil for the United States. And under a business as usual scenario, the tar sands in Alberta, and the proposed tar sands in Saskatchewan, could account for 95% of the growth in Canada's industrial emissions between now and 2020.

To understand the importance of legally binding agreements, we need look no farther than Canada. After signing and ratifying the Kyoto Protocol, Canada is the only country in the world to openly announce no intention of achieving its targets. This reveals the imperative of legal accountability for commitments and economic and political consequences for not following through.

The United Nations Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change, consisting of the world's leading climate scientists, acknowledges the possibility of up to six degrees of global warming by the end of the century if we continue with business as usual emissions growth. Under this scenario food and water scarcity, malnutrition, the expansion of diseases such as malaria, and growing resource conflicts, compounded by flooding, unpredictable weather patterns, drought and accelerating desertification would irreversibly impact billions of people around the world.

Even though Copenhagen did not produce a fair, ambitious, and binding climate agreement, it was the largest convergence of a people's movement for climate justice in history. Evo Morales, the President of Bolivia, will be hosting an Alternative Climate Summit in April as a forum to build a movement for solutions to the climate crisis from the people, led by those who are being most impacted.