

Climate Change, Rising Levels of Greenhouse Gas Emissions and Global Warming

Protest at Warsaw Summit

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This article first published in December 2013, documents the failure of the Climate Change COP19 Conference in Warsaw. What prospects for Paris COP21?

The sharply increasing scientific indicators of impending disastrous global climate change have failed to motivate the principal developed countries, led by the U.S., to accelerate the lackluster pace of their efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

This was the principal conclusion of several key environmental groups attending the United Nations Climate Change Conference (UNCCC) Nov. 11-23 in Warsaw, Poland. The meeting lasted a day and a half longer than scheduled to resolve a dispute about new greenhouse emission targets. About 10,000 people attended the 19th annual meeting of the so-called Conference of Parties (COP19) that drew nearly all the UN's 193 member states.



Environmental organizations walk out of UN meeting to protest lack of progress.

About 800 attendees associated with environmental groups walked out of the conference Nov. 21, protesting the lack of progress. In a joint statement on the day of the walkout, the World Wildlife Federation, Oxfam, Friends of the Earth, Action Aid and the International Trade Union Federation declared:

“Organizations and movements representing people from every corner of the Earth have decided that the best use of our time is to voluntarily withdraw from the Warsaw climate talks. The conference, which should have been an important step in the just transition to a sustainable future, is on track to deliver virtually nothing.”

According to Professor Nicholas Stern of the London School of Economics and a leading British expert on climate change:

“The actions that have been agreed are simply inadequate when compared with the scale and urgency of the risks that the world faces from rising levels of greenhouse gases.”

There were also street protests and marches in Warsaw composed largely of younger conference attendees and local youth. One slogan, referring to climate disasters, was

“The Philippines, Pakistan, New Orleans: Change the System, not the climate.”

On Nov. 18, delegates from 133 developing countries — under the umbrella of the G77 group plus China — walked out temporarily “because we do not see a clear-cut commitment by developed countries to reach an agreement” to financially help poor countries suffering the effects of climate change for which they are not responsible. The U.S., for instance, was reluctant to help developing countries adapt to sea level rise, droughts, powerful storms and other adverse impacts, even though it is historically the greatest emitter of greenhouse gases.

By the end of the conference, perhaps encouraged by the walkout, the world body agreed to set up a “Loss and Damage” process for “the most vulnerable countries” experiencing losses from global warming. The details remain vague.

A distressing aspect of the conference came when four major developed countries took actions in contradiction to fighting global warming.

- Japan — the fifth largest carbon polluter — announced it was breaking its pledge to reduce greenhouse gases by 25% of 1990 levels by the year 2020, blaming the Fukushima nuclear power plant disaster.
- Canada and Australia recently declared they would not support the Green Climate Fund — the UNCCC program to transfer money from the developed to the developing countries to assist them in dealing with climate change.
- Conference host Poland, a major coal producer, worked with the World Coal Association to simultaneously host the International Coal and Climate Summit in Warsaw. (Greenpeace and others protested outside the coal meeting.)

COP19 was permeated with corporate lobbyists from “fossil fuels, big business groups, carbon market and financial players, agribusiness and agrofuels, as well as some of the big polluting industries,” according to the oppositional “COP19 Guide to Corporate Lobbying.” Corporations appeared at previous COP meetings but witnesses say never in such large number.

Obviously, one of the most important issues confronting the world community is reducing greenhouse carbon emissions to impede global warming. This is a perennial UNCCC goal but hardly sufficient so far to prevent substantial increases in carbon dioxide levels in the Earth's atmosphere, now exceeding 400 parts per million (ppm) for the first time in at least 3 million years since the Pliocene era.

Greenhouse reductions hark back to the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, which obligated developed countries to specific — and in the main incongruously low — emissions reduction targets while developing countries were encouraged to reduce emissions without a binding requirement. Since 1997, despite Kyoto, emissions have increased substantially. According to a new report from research teams coordinated by the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis, “The gap between where emissions are and where emissions would need to be in order to keep climate targets within reach is getting bigger and bigger.”

Kyoto, which the U.S. refused to join because of its so-called “bias” toward developing countries, has in effect been extended from 2013 to 2020 when new emissions targets will go into effect. Unless these new targets are far greater than the old, CO2 ppm will jump much higher.

At issue during COP19 was a proposal by the EU, U.S. and a number of developed countries to eliminate Kyoto's nonbinding reductions for developing countries. Under this plan, each and all countries would set specific targets over next year. These targets would then be inspected by the other countries to assure they are adequate for the mission at hand. The final targets would be published in early 2015 and presumably approved by that year's COP, and implemented in five years.



Protest inside hall of climate meeting. An intense 36-hour struggle between a group of developing countries and most developed countries over this proposal went into an extra session lasting throughout Nov. 22 and into the early hours of the 23rd. Opposing removal of the distinction between developed and developing countries was a group called the “Like-Minded Developing Countries on Climate Change” (LMDC), including such countries as China, India, Venezuela, Bolivia, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Cuba, Nicaragua, Ecuador and Thailand.

According to an account in the mass circulation Indian newspaper The Hindu:

“India, China and other countries in the LMDC group take the position that the new climate agreement must not force developing countries to review their volunteered emission reduction targets. Setting themselves up in a direct confrontation with the developed countries, the LMDC opposes doing away with the current differentiation between developing and developed countries when it came to taking responsibility for climate action.”

In other words, the developing countries will do what they can to reduce emissions, but the principal task by far belongs to the developed countries. They argue that developed industrial countries have been spewing fossil fuel-created greenhouse gases into the atmosphere for 100 to 200 years or more, and most of these pollutants have yet to dissipate. The carbon dioxide already in the atmosphere could warm the planet for hundreds of years.

The richer countries reject this argument, pointing to the increasing industrialization taking place in the developing world. Writing in the Guardian Nov. 25, Graham Readfearn points out: "Rich countries are desperate to avoid taking the blame for the impacts of climate change.... The developed countries won't let any statements slip into any UN climate document that could be used against them in the future" in terms of financing mitigation, adaptation and compensation costs.

Most developing countries are very poor and have contributed miniscule emissions, but a few of them — China, India, and Brazil, among others — have become major industrialized powers in relatively recent years. China, now the largest annual contributor to global warming, has been seriously industrialized for less than 30 years and also functions as a global factory for many nations, including the U.S. These recently industrializing developing states, most of which are former exploited colonies of the rich countries, argue that the developed states became major powers based on burning fossil fuels and thus have the major responsibility to take the lead in reducing emissions.

China points out that while it has recently displaced the U.S. as leading producer of Greenhouse gas emissions, its population is three times greater. On a per capita basis, Beijing notes, the average American in 2011 produced 17.6 metric tons of carbon dioxide; the average Chinese, just 6.5 tons. (A metric ton is 205 pounds heavier than a 2,000 pound ton.) The U.S. rejects these arguments.

The developed-developing conflict over emissions was finally resolved when China and India withdrew demands for including Kyoto's exception for developing countries, in return for which "commitments" to a specific target were changed to "contributions." Clearly this is a vague stopgap measure that will eventually change. The important matter is the total of emissions reductions to be agreed upon in 2015.

The U.S., as the most influential developed country, has taken hardly any action at all to significantly reduce CO2 emissions when it was the number one emitter of carbon in the atmosphere or now when it is number two, tut-tutting about China's smokestacks while President Obama boasts about expanding drilling for oil and fracking for gas. Ironically, though China is a mass polluter today it is investing far more heavily than the U.S. in renewable resources such as solar and wind energy. This may eventually pay off, but not before an unacceptable level of CO2 continue.

Given the number of drastic reports about climate change from the scientific community in the last several months, the accomplishments at COP19 are useful but hugely disproportionate to what is needed. In addition to the agreement on contributions to lower greenhouse emissions this also happened: The countries agreed on a multi-billion dollar program to combat global deforestation. The Loss and Damage project was passed, and developed states were urged to increase levels of aid to poorer countries. A plan was hammered out to monitor emissions reductions.

A few of those recent drastic reports include these facts:

Greenhouse gas emissions are set to be 8-12 billion tons higher in 2020 than the level needed to keep global warming below 3.6 Fahrenheit, the UN Environment Program said. (Above 3.6 F, the world's people will begin to experience extreme effects)....

According to the American Meteorological Society, there is a 90% probability that global temperatures will rise 6.3 to 13.3 degrees Fahrenheit in less than 100 years....

According to the Associated Press, a leaked report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change means that "Many of the ills of the modern world — starvation, poverty, flooding, heat waves, droughts, war and disease — are likely to worsen as the world warms from man-made climate change"

The U.S. is likely to become the world's top producer of crude oil and natural gas by the end of 2013 due to increased oil drilling and fracking for gas....The U.S. is pumping 50% more methane into the atmosphere than the government has estimated, reports Science News....

In a new study, the team of researchers reports a global loss of 888,000 square miles of forest between 2000 and 2012 and a gain of only 309,000 square miles of new forest.

Summing up the Warsaw conference, an observer for Christian Aid, Mohamed Adow, declares: "In agreeing to establish a loss and damage mechanism, countries have accepted the reality that the world is already dealing with the extensive damage caused by climate impacts, and requires a formal process to assess and deal with it, but they seem unwilling to take concrete actions to reduce the severity of these impacts."

"We did not achieve a meaningful outcome," said Naderev Sano, the head of the Philippines delegation who had been fasting throughout the meeting in solidarity with the victims of Typhoon Haiyan.

Samantha Smith, representing the World Wildlife Fund at COP19 declared: "Negotiators in Warsaw should have used this meeting to take a big and critical step towards global, just action on climate change. That didn't happen. This has placed the negotiations towards a global agreement [on emissions] at risk."

The next major UNCCC conference, COP20, will take place in Lima, Peru, in December 2014. The extremely important 2015 meeting, when the countries will decide on new emissions targets, will be in Paris.



There is positive news as well as the negative.

- A majority of the American people now seek to limit global warming, according to a recent report from Grist Environmental News. Stanford University Professor Jon Krosnick led an analysis of more than a decade's worth of poll results for 46 states. The results show that the majority of residents of all of those states, whether red or blue, are united in their worries about the climate. At least three-quarters of residents are aware that the climate is changing. Two-thirds want the government to limit greenhouse gas emissions from businesses. At least 62% want regulations that cut carbon pollution from power plants. At least half want the U.S. to take action to fight climate change, even if other countries do not.
- The walkout by environmental NGOs is highly significant. They are clearly "mad as hell" and presumably are "not going to take this anymore!" to evoke the famous line from the film Network. Their unprecedented action in Warsaw undoubtedly reflects the views of millions of people back in the United States who have been following the scientific reports and want Washington to finally take dramatic action.
- At issue is mobilizing these people to take action in concert with others to force the political system to put climate sanity and ecological sustainability on the immediate national agenda. Two things are required. 1. A mass education program is called for because the broader and deeper implications of reforms must be understood and acted upon. 2. Unity in action is necessary to bring together many constituencies to fight for climate sanity and justice with a view toward protecting future generations from the excesses of the industrial era.
- There are up to a score of major environmental organizations in the U.S. Some, like Greenpeace and 350.org are willing to offer civil disobedience; some are important education and pressure groups; and some — far fewer — are too cautious and compromising, such as those advocating for nuclear power or natural gas. There must be many hundreds and more small and medium size environmental groups throughout our country, with anywhere from 5 to 50 or even 100 local followers. And then there are the numerous progressive and left organizations that basically agree with the environmental cause. None have to give up their individual identities, but they can come together around specific global warming and ecological issues and fight the power of the 1% to 5% who essentially rule America.
- The actions of the developing societies at COP19 were important, too, particularly their brief walkout. The majority of these countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America are not only vulnerable to the consequences of climate change but rarely possess the economic wherewithal to adequately survive. They will struggle for their demands in future global conferences.
- Despite the foot-dragging of many developed countries, all of them contain environmental and progressive/left organizations. They, too, are "mad as hell" and will grow stronger.
- Time may not be on sanity's side, but as the CO2 ppm rises and the hopes for significant reductions in greenhouse gases falls in the next few years, conditions will be ripe for a global climate justice uprising.

At this point it seems that only a mass mobilization of the U.S. and world's peoples will be able to provide the strength to stand up to the fossil fuel interests, the corporations, big business, banks, financiers and the weak or corrupt politicians who stand in the way of building an equal and ecologically sustainable society including rational conservation of resources and reduction of excess consumption.

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