# Cities OPT in while nations COP out: Reflections on COP18

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As a follower of and participant in the annual United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change's (UNFCCC) negotiating process, I am mildly amused by the increasingly fanciful names we seem to assign to the rather inglorious outcomes of the December negotiating sessions, colloquially known as COPs (actually COP-CMPs). COP in no way refers to the blue light brigade (the negotiating process has none of that speed!), but is rather a reference to a Conference of the Parties to the Convention – in other words, a meeting of all the nation states (or parties) who have signed and ratified the UNFCCC – which also serves as a meeting of the parties to the associated Kyoto Protocol (the CMP part). Dilettantish names for the outcomes of recent COPs include: the Bali Road Map (a road to nowhere perhaps?), the Copenhagen Accord (more aptly termed the Copenhagen Discord), the Cancún Agreements (agreeing to disagree?), the Durban Platform for Enhanced Action (the train had unfortunately left the station) and, after 2 weeks spent at COP18 in Qatar in 2012, the desultory Doha Climate Gateway (more of a mirage in the desert than a gateway).

Unfortunately these tributes to the creative writing of the United Nations system and the obligatory sea of acronyms, do nothing to disguise the fact that the international climate change negotiations are not delivering the urgent and ambitious mitigation and adaptation action that is required to address the greatest threat facing our species: human-induced climate change. During the 9 years that I have been involved in the climate change field, the international debates have shifted from the proposal first introduced and championed by the European Union – the need to limit global mean temperature increase to 2 °C (relative to pre-industrial levels) in order to prevent 'dangerous' climate change – to an increasingly alarming scientific debate which suggests that futures with increases of 4 °C or even 6 °C are now possible[1] given current levels of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.

Unfortunately for those of us who live in Africa, the climate change pain will not be borne equitably. Africa is widely acknowledged to be one of the continents most vulnerable to climate change (if not the most vulnerable) and yet it is only responsible for producing an insignificant 2–3% of global GHG emissions. Even if we were able to achieve the increasingly unlikely target of limiting global temperature change to 2 °C, what is safe for the world is certainly not safe for Africa. We already know that southern Africa is warming at twice the global rate. So, 2 °C for the world means 4 °C for Africa, 4 °C means 8 °C for Africa, and so on.

The situation is made even more dire by the fact that notable scientists such as James Hansen of the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies in New York (famous for his 1988 testimony on climate change to congressional committees in the USA which helped raise the first widespread awareness of global warming) argue that 2 °C is too high a target if the aim is to keep the planet safe for our species. According to their research, securing a safe world for *Homo sapiens* requires that we avoid an ice-free planet. The palaeoclimatic data suggest that this scenario is possible only if we limit the temperature increase to 1.7 °C or lower relative to pre-industrial times.[2] Given that the pledges made under the Doha Climate Gateway and the previous rounds of climate negotiations leave us on track for a global increase of at least 3.3 °C, we can see how much work still needs to be done.

## The importance of cities

The average temperature of the world is not the only thing that is changing. When I was born in the 1960s, only a billion people lived in cities. Now over half the world's population – a staggering 3.6 billion people – live in cities. We have effectively become an urban species and the 21st century has undoubtedly become the century of the city.

Cities are also central to the climate change debate. They are the location of the majority of the world's assets, infrastructure and economic activities[3] and as such are the key drivers of global consumption and production. They are therefore also responsible for a high proportion of global GHG emissions and waste production. The ecological footprints of cities affect the whole planet, despite the fact that cities occupy only between 0.2% and 2.4% of the global land surface.[4] Their importance is also likely to continue increasing as current projections indicate that the majority of global population growth over the next several decades will occur in urban areas – most notably the urban areas of the global south.[5] It is anticipated that urban populations will double from 3.6 billion to 6.3 billion by 2050,[5] driving a related increase in capital formation, economic activity and infrastructure development. These increases will in turn increase GHG emissions and the loss of life-sustaining biodiversity and ecosystem services.[6]

The high concentration of people and assets in cities also means that they are the location of a large proportion of the population and economic activities most at risk from climate change. As such, they currently bear the brunt of global climate change adaptation needs and will continue to do so. The World Bank[7] recently reported that global adaptation costs will likely escalate to $70–100 billion per annum between 2010 and 2050 and that 80% of these costs will have to be borne by cities in the global south.

Given the critical role they have to play in mitigating and adapting to the impacts of climate change, it is clear that the global climate change battle will ultimately be won or lost in the world's cities.

## The importance of local government

One might think, given the critical role of cities in driving global environmental change and their equally critical role in providing solutions to those challenges, that local governments would be a key player in the UNFCCC negotiating process. Unfortunately this is far from the case. The United Nations system does not even recognise local government as a sphere of government. Since the first United Nations Conference on Environment and

Development – the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 – local government has been included as one of the major groups in the United Nations COPs alongside business and industry, children and youth, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the scientific and technological community, farmers, indigenous people, women, and workers and trade unions. While we, as local governments, have nothing against our friends and colleagues in these groups (some of my fondest memories are of standing in the registration queues at the COPs alongside heavily feathered indigenous Indians from the Amazon Basin), we believe we are not appropriately labelled as an NGO. Local government is, after all, the level of government closest to the people, and the level at which the impacts of climate change and climate variability are being most sharply felt. There was no starker reminder of this fact than the deaths of at least seven people in an extreme storm that occurred the night before COP17 opened in Durban in 2011. People do not phone the President of the country when their houses are flooded or there is no water to drink – they phone their Mayor. The local level also offers significant mitigation opportunities through the development of green infrastructure and the growth of a green economy. There is some hope that the position and recognition of local government's critical role might be revisited and acknowledged given that the Cancún agreements (at COP16) referred for the first time to local governments as 'governmental stakeholders' – but I am not holding my breath.

## So where did the Doha Climate Gateway leave us?

The Doha Climate Gateway to my mind is an 'Alice in Wonderland'-like experience – a portal through which we fall to an unknown destination with unpredictable consequences. Doha was always going to be an anticlimactic transitional meeting because of the nature of the agreements reached at COP17 in Durban in 2011. At COP17, the world agreed on the need to launch a new round of negotiations – known as the Durban Platform track (or ADP) – which is scheduled to culminate in 2015 with the development of a 'protocol, another legal instrument or an agreed outcome with legal force under the Convention applicable to all Parties'[8]. As a result, the world is now waiting for COP21 in 2015.

Doha did, however, see progress in three areas. Firstly, it witnessed the conclusion of both the Long-term Cooperative Action and Kyoto negotiating tracks – facilitating a single focus on the Durban Platform from 2013 which is intended to deliver the new inclusive legally binding agreement covering all major emitters by 2015 for implementation in 2020. Secondly, the rules for the second commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol were agreed upon. However, the continued shortsighted lack of ambition shown by parties means that the Protocol (still the only legally binding, quantified, international climate treaty) is a largely toothless instrument in terms of emissions reductions. The second commitment period of 8 years (2013–2020) will cover just 15% of global emissions, with the 2020 target of the largest party (the EU) already effectively met. Thirdly, while the Durban Platform discussions in Doha were unsurprisingly broad and inconclusive – as it is still too early in the game for parties to reveal their hand – it was agreed that negotiating text will be ready for consideration in 2014. In my opinion, this deadline rules out any global agreement being reached in 2015, given the glacial rate (despite all the hot air) of the negotiations.

On the adaptation front, the Doha decision to establish 'institutional arrangements' for some kind of 'loss and damage' mechanism at COP19 in Warsaw, Poland in 2013 is seen as a major victory for developing countries, particularly those that are most vulnerable to the extreme and long-term impacts of climate change. South Africa played a key role in this outcome as our Minister of Environmental Affairs (Minister Molewa) facilitated the political level negotiations which culminated in this agreement. Loss and damage refers to the entire range of damage and permanent loss 'associated with climate change impacts in developing countries that are particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change'[9] that can no longer be avoided through mitigation, nor can be avoided through adaptation. Future negotiations on this issue will, however, be difficult as developed countries, notably the USA, remain extremely concerned about such a mechanism and any hint that it may institutionalise historical responsibility or legal liability for future climate impacts.

On the issue of financing – an essential requirement for both adaptation and mitigation action – the debate at Doha focused on whether developed countries would commit to new financing commitments for the 2013–2020 period, following up on the $30 billion of 'fast-start finance' theoretically delivered between 2010 and 2012 (as per the agreements reached at the infamous COP15 in Copenhagen in 2009). There are, however, questions being raised about whether the funding received during 2010–2012 was in fact 'new and additional' or whether a significant proportion was recycled overseas development assistance.[10] In the end, developed countries refused to commit to a new cycle of funding and the Doha decision simply 'urges', 'invites' and 'encourages' these parties to scale up their financial support and provide further information on their plans to mobilise $100 billion per year of climate finance for developing countries from 2020 (also part of the Copenhagen agreements).

All in all, the lack of real progress at COP18 means that the chances of reaching a global binding agreement by 2015 are increasingly remote, and we might find ourselves calling the outcome of COP19 the 'Warsaw Washout'...

## So what role can cities play in the Doha Gateway?

COP18 in Doha very clearly illustrated that the international climate negotiating process is now being held hostage to the domestic ambitions of national governments. In a world beset by a major economic crisis there is no political appetite for anything that might impact negatively on the voters' mood at the polls. This situation is why progressive local governments are becoming increasingly more important in securing an effective new global treaty in 2015.

Local governments have long recognised that there is very little point in waiting for national governments to negotiate a grand climate deal, and that it is necessary for those working at the coal face in the world's cities to ensure that there is real progress in tackling the climate change challenge. Progress will have to be bottom-up not top-down – that is the reality of the 21st century. There is a certain undeniable logic to this approach, given that there is only one United Nations, 200 or so recognised countries, but over 1 million municipalities worldwide. Amongst these, megacities like Tokyo, São Paolo and Mumbai already have populations larger than those of 150 of the smaller United Nations states.[11]

Local governments and cities have already proven their credentials as doers rather than procrastinators. Eight months after the first Earth Summit in 1992, ICLEI–Local Governments for Sustainability (the Local Governments and Municipal Authorities constituency focal point to the UNFCCC) launched the Cities for Climate Protection Programme focusing on mitigation targets for cities. It took 13 years for nation states to agree to an equivalent national level commitment: the Kyoto Protocol. Local governments and cities have continued with this game changing approach to the climate change challenge. For example, at the World Mayors Summit on Climate in Mexico City in 2010 (just prior to COP16 in Cancún) two groundbreaking initiatives were launched: the Global Cities Covenant on Climate – 'the Mexico City Pact' (a predominantly mitigation focused commitment by local government) and the carbonn® Cities Climate Registry (cCCR)[12] which is the global mechanism for reporting local climate information so that the cumulative contributions of local government can be assessed. It has been reported by ICLEI that[13]:

> *As of March 2013, 302 cities from 42 countries, controlling a community GHG emissions of around 1.5 GtCO2e annually, reported 561 energy and climate commitments, 578 GHG inventories and 2471 mitigation/adaptation actions/action plans at the cCCR.*

While the majority of local government action to date has focused on climate change mitigation, this situation is beginning to change as scientific knowledge increases and as the impacts of rising temperatures, increased rainfall variability, melting ice sheets and rising sea levels threaten communities and their supporting ecosystems worldwide. As a result, the need for climate change adaptation is increasingly being prioritised by local governments,[14] particularly in the cities of the global south where adaptive capacity is already low because of multiple stressors such as poverty, underdevelopment and resource scarcity.

Durban, as the host city for COP17 in 2011, and working as part of a COP17 Local Government partnership which included the South African Local Government Association, the South African Cities Network, South African Departments of Environmental Affairs and Co-operative Governance and Traditional Affairs and ICLEI, organised and hosted the 'Durban Local Government Convention: Adapting to a changing climate – towards COP17/CMP7 and beyond'. The Durban Adaptation Charter was the key output of this Convention and was signed by 107 mayors and elected officials representing over 950 local governments globally. By signing the Charter, local governments pledged their political commitment to strengthening local level adaptive capacity to climate change, and undertook to become key drivers and champions of the local government adaptation agenda. The Durban Adaptation Charter is seen as the 'adaptation partner' to the Mexico City Pact and a way for local government to draw national governments' attention to the critical need for urgent global level adaptation action and associated funding. An Implementation Guidance Workshop was recently convened in Durban which drew together local government thought-leaders and experienced practitioners in the field of climate change adaptation from cities around the world in order to develop a work programme for the global roll-out of the Durban Adaptation Charter.

Work also continues internationally. ICLEI will meet with mayors, councillors and governors from around the world in Nantes, France in September 2013 in preparation for COP19 in Warsaw in 2013 and the World's Leaders Climate Summit in 2014 to be convened by the United Nations Secretary General. These discussions will focus on further consolidating local efforts, strengthening the work being done on both the Durban Adaptation Charter and the Mexico City Pact, and producing a strengthened and action-oriented global roadmap for local government's climate advocacy and networking efforts.

## Final thought

It is critical that cities and their local governments remain active and engaged players on the global climate stage. Their economic power, share of the population and ability to act decisively means that the rebirth of the era of city-states is not improbable. Cities are on the climate front line. They do not need to wait for permission or a mandate to act, and they can act at a scale no one else can. As noted by several prominent speakers at last year's Rio+20 Conference: 'The road to sustainability runs through the world's towns and cities. By building sustainable towns and cities, you will build global sustainability' (Ban Ki-moon Secretary General of the United Nations) and 'Sometimes it takes a city to lead a nation' (Mayor of Auckland).

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