

Fr. Sean McDonagh reports from the climate change conference in Mexico

Sean McDonagh | Dec. 8, 2010 Eco Catholic

Columban Fr. Sean McDonagh is an ecologist, theologian and author. He writes and lectures on the relationship between faith, justice and ecology. He became involved in tackling global poverty and environmental degradation during his missionary years in the Philippines. He reports from the U. N. Climate Change Conference in Mexico.

In racing terms we have rounded the last bend and are on to the home straight. On some courses, I am told, the final furlong or two involves climbing a steep incline, so a lot more will happen here between now and Friday, Dec. 10, when COP 16 ends. In this report I will try and give a flavor of what has taken place here since Nov. 29.

Inclusiveness, transparency and balance

Three words dominated the first week of negotiations – inclusiveness, transparency and balance. The first two were balm to many of the participants from developing countries because, from a procedural perspective, Copenhagen was a painful failure. At the outset, expectations for success were unrealistically high, given the way the negotiations had been taking place throughout most of 2009. The Danish Presidency should have spotted that before the Copenhagen conference and dampened down expectations.

In fact, it did the opposite. On many billboards around the city the name Copenhagen was changed to Hopenhagen. The wags were calling it BrokenHagen before the end of the first week. Furthermore, flying in 155 heads of state to save the planet wasn't a bright idea, especially since they had to go home almost empty handed. Politicians do not relish that kind of failure.

In addition, many participants from developing countries were annoyed at the fact that the Danes initiated 'parallel negotiations' with carefully chosen countries. When a 'hidden text' appeared from this group at the end of the first week, many participants were furious. They also claimed that the face-saving Cancun Accord itself hijacked the UNFCCC multilateral negotiation process.

The result was that many participants left Copenhagen with a strong feeling that trust had completely broken down. Finally, the logistics at Copenhagen were also terrible. Professor John Sweeney of NUI Maynooth spent 8 hours standing in the freezing cold waiting to register. It took him 10 minutes to do the same here at Cancun. The CSO community was also furious because they were effectively banned from the conference centre during the last three days of negotiations. Some of these people had spent huge amounts of money getting to Copenhagen.

Since Copenhagen the Mexican President Felipe Calderon and, especially the COP President and Mexican Foreign Minister, Patricia Espinosa has worked tirelessly to rebuild trust. They have stated publicly on many occasions that there will be no 'parallel negotiations' or 'hidden texts' in Cancun, a clear reference to Copenhagen. Judged by the many compliments she received during the informal stocktaking on Saturday, Dec. 4, she seems to have re-established trust and achieved that goal.

Two key words were used again and again by the Mexican presidency – transparency and inclusion. This even applied to the members of Civil Society Organisations (CSO). The Mexicans appear to be looking for new opportunities to engage as wide a constituency as possible in seeking solutions to climate change. This could provide new openings for CSO and religious groups to share their insights and wisdom with the other participants with a view to forging viable solutions to climate change. Such new opportunities opens up possibility for including ethical language in the final documents.

Balance and Flexibility

The two other key words which keep cropping up in the negotiations are balance and flexibility. Balance, of course, means different things to different people. As I explained in an earlier article, there are two negotiating processes taking place simultaneously here at Cancun. One is the meeting of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). All the countries here at Cancun are members of the UNFCCC, but there are no binding commitments. The second track is the meeting of the Parties of the Kyoto Protocol (KP). These are rich countries, in the jargon of the conference, Annex 1 countries. These countries have signed up to binding commitments to reduce GHG emissions by 5.2 percent to 7 percent below 1990 levels by 2012. The Kyoto Protocol did not set any binding limits for non-Annex I countries – because, in what is called ‘common but differentiated responsibilities,’ the drafters recognised that poor countries will have to fossil fuel to develop and overcome the poverty of many of its citizens.

Emissions are still rising

Neither the U.S. nor Australia has signed the Kyoto Protocol. For over a decade The EU was an enthusiastic promoter of the Kyoto Protocol. This diminished somewhat at the Poznans COP in 2008. The fact that Poland, which has a huge coal industry, held the presidency during COP 14 probably contributed to this change. There are also heavy industries and utilities in other EU countries such as Germany which have also gone lukewarm on the Kyoto Protocol. Here at Cancun the EU believes that, ‘a balanced and comprehensive package on the Kyoto Protocol and the Convention, is within reach.’

Still a huge gap

However, the most disheartening thing about the performance of Annex 1 countries, even under Kyoto Protocol, is that they have actually increased their GHG emissions, according to the National Greenhouse Gas inventory covering the period 1990 to 2007. Moreover as the United Nations Environment Programme’s document, The Emissions Gap Report: Are the Copenhagen Accord Pledges Sufficient to Limit Global Warming to 2 o C or 1.5 o C? points out, even with all the reduction pledges currently on the table there is, at least, a 5 to 9 gigaton gap between what has been promised and what the science is saying is necessary for keeping the rise in the average global temperature below 2 degrees Celsius. This is the minimum requirement for what is now being called ‘a safe future.’ The Mexican environment minister, Mr. Juan Rafael Elvira Quesada, is on record as saying that the gigaton gap must appear in the final text.

Balance?

The current phase of the Kyoto Protocol is due to run out in 2012. This is why developing countries want a second KY to be signed either here at Cancun or, more realistically, at Durban next year. For developing countries this is what they mean when they talk about a balanced outcome from Cancun. The Group of 77 and China have also made it clear that a second commitment period of the Koyto Protocol is indispensable and that this is what was agreed to in the Bali Road Map at COP13, in 2008.

For the U.S. however, a balanced outcome is where everyone begins to make voluntary, but measured and verifiable commitments to reduce GHGs. Unless this happens, the US has indicated that it might not be willing to push ahead with other items, such as the Climate Fund which has been designed to help developing countries reduce their dependence on fossil fuel energy as they develop their economies and overcome widespread

poverty. To developing countries this sounds like bullying.

Balance for the Kyoto Protocol countries would involve the U.S. assuming comparable commitment in reducing GHG as those undertaken by the KP countries. With these mitigation commitments in place, balance for developing countries would involve taking appropriate mitigation action nationally, with the expectation that adequate finance and technology will be made available to carry out this task.

Moving Forward

The Mexican presidency is attempting to nudge both groups to forward towards an agreement on a number of fronts. This will involve both sides compromising. But at least the process will be able to move forward politically. Mexico and others are rightly afraid that, if nothing is achieved at Cancun, the UN multilateral negotiating process will unravel and that action to deal with climate change will be placed in another forum, possibly even the G20. For all its weaknesses, the UN process promotes inclusion, transparency and impartial implementation and has a mechanism for implementing and monitoring decisions. Mexico is willing to accept what is being called a 'cheese' agreement, meaning that it might be full of holes and that all the lines are not crossed nor dotted but, at least, there will be some substance and, most of all, movement towards a more ambitious agreement next year.

It is important to say that some countries would not lose too much sleep if the UN multilateral process broke down. I believe that the U.S., Canada, Japan, Australia and Saudi Arabia and others are in that camp, but none of the above wish to be blamed for pulling the roof down on a negotiation process. Nevertheless, they would probably favour a more direct role for an organisation such as the G20 which, they would argue would be more efficient in achieving the task of reducing GHG. Of course, they would also have more control in such a forum. However, the G20, unlike the UN, has no readymade architecture to carry on this kind of discussion or even a secretariat to promote and monitor implementation and compliance. Even during the administration of Democrat Presidents, the U.S. has not been fully at home with multilateral processes. That is why it has not signed Law of the Sea, the UN Convention on Biodiversity, the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety and many others.

On Dec. 6, ministers from the various countries began arriving in Cancun. They will now take the lead in the negotiations which their officials have been pursuing on their behalf for the past week. These were welcomed by Minister Patricia Espinosa who asked them to help her in carrying out consultations in five crucial areas: shared vision, adaptation, mitigation, finance, technology and capacity building. She called on them to 'carry out consultations in order to help us identify the areas where solutions may lie, and thus lead to further progress.' She went on the record as saying that 'I believe we can complete the package, or at least make significant advances, before the opening of the high level segment on Tuesday afternoon.'

I think the Indian environment minister, Jairam Ramesh, captured the current mood of the Conference when he said that, 'there is more camaraderie here (Cancun), more dialogue, more intense engagement and less shadow boxing than in Copenhagen, because China has moved on the transparency issue.'

In fact, he has put forward a plan to bridge the gap between the United States and China on verification, by establishing a voluntary programme known as international consultation and analysis. Under the plan, called I.C.A., countries would declare their emissions reduction targets and provide regular reports on how they were meeting them and gauging their own progress.

In this report I have tried to avoid, as much as possible, acronyms such as - AWGLCA ? Ad-Hoc Working Group on Long-term Cooperative Action or GEG ? Least Developed Countries Expert Group or LULUCF ? Land-use, Land-use change and Forestry, or Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation - REDD ? because I know it would turn you off and send you back to your coffee. I am heading for the coffee bar myself where I hope to pick up some news about what is happening today.

-- Fr. Sean McDonagh

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