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Cover Story

What's Next to Fight Global Warming?

International climate negotiations continue as the Kyoto Protocol nears expiration - but the world still lacks a contingency plan.

by *Rob Bradley*

At least the venue was pretty. Among lush green and purple monkey-filled trees on comfortably breezy 80-degree days, nearly 6,000 delegates from around the world gathered at the United Nations Environment Program's campus outside of Nairobi, Kenya, for two weeks in November to try to conjure positive ways forward in the effort to slow global warming.

It would be nice to think that it was only these languid, soothing surroundings that accounted for the lack of a sense of urgency. True, the wet season was hitting unusually hard and early, but the air was warm, soft and heavy with the scent of plants. Whatever the reason, our governments seem curiously unhurried in their efforts to agree to emission cuts.

How different things are in the real world. Just weeks beforehand, a former chief economist of the World Bank issued a report estimating that global warming this century could cost as much as 5 to 20 percent of global gross domestic product, as well as untold human suffering. Within a few hundred miles of the conference, the signs of climate change were everywhere.

Meanwhile, the world's climate pact, the Kyoto Protocol, is barreling toward 2012, after which time no targets have been set—with no sign that governments are yet ready to negotiate the sequel.

Out of Africa

Ironically, holding the meeting in Kenya was supposed to put Africa's problems into the spotlight. The international meetings rotate each year among the major regions of the world, and this was Africa's turn; in fact, the first time ever for sub-Saharan



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Africa.

Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for less than 4 percent of global emissions of greenhouse gases (GHGs) such as carbon dioxide, so it contributes little to climate change. That, however, does not protect it from the consequences. Its people are heavily dependent on agriculture. As the center of the continent becomes more arid and weather patterns shift, it is their lives—not their lifestyles—that are threatened. Rising sea levels threaten vulnerable coastal populations; warmer temperatures mean that malaria-carrying mosquitoes can venture to higher-altitude towns that were previously free of the disease; and communities dependent on glacier melt for their water supplies are seeing those glaciers disappear.

These disappearing glaciers threaten the natural world, too. One of the most commonly used images to illustrate how Africa is warming is the famous snows of Kilimanjaro. Once a glistening white mane on the mountain, the last remnants of the snow now cling desperately.

Soon, they will be no more, and that may spell death for one of Africa's best-known natural parks. For ages, Amboseli has been home to vast herds of zebra, elephants, rhinos, giraffes, lions and countless other creatures, on a savannah watered by the regular flow of water from Kilimanjaro's snows. Now, most of its rivers run only during the rainy season, and the swamps in which elephants, hippos and buffalo wallow and feed are shrinking and drying up. Guides point to the remains of trees on what 25 years ago was a semi-forested savannah and is now a blasted near-desert. Other examples abound within a day's travel from the Nairobi conference. For one, Lake Nakuru, a few hours north of Nairobi, is drying up, and the millions of flamingos that visit the lake to eat its algae will have to soon go elsewhere. Similarly, Lake Chad has receded by 20 percent in the last three decades.

At the same time, if ways can be found to help Africa develop more cleanly, the benefits could be enormous. Even today, Nairobi is a solid traffic jam, its air thick with pollution. Cleaner transport systems would save lives today as well as protect the climate tomorrow. More than 85 percent of Kenyans lack access to electricity, but many of those who do enjoy it have one of the estimated 200,000 solar systems in the country to thank. Helping grow this market will bring the countless benefits of electricity to more people, while keeping emissions low.

Helping the Poorest People

Traditionally, the host country of the annual climate conference can't force other countries into action, but it can help set the meeting's agenda and cajole other countries toward an agreement. Unfortunately, the Kenyan government was not able to make much headway. There are three major priorities for most African countries in these ongoing negotiations.

First, and most importantly, they have an overriding interest in seeing a strong, effective climate regime that will actually reduce global warming. As countries facing the impacts of climate change with little control over its causes, they depend on international action to save them from more severe damage in coming decades.

Second, as the examples above illustrate, Africa is already feeling the effects of the changing climate. Help is needed for the most vulnerable populations to adapt to the worst of the impacts. This might include anything from providing crops better suited to arid conditions, to resettling whole communities from areas that are threatened by sea-level rise. The Kyoto Protocol includes some funds for this kind of help, but they have not yet been delivered.

Finally, Kyoto does provide for rich countries to support clean-energy projects in developing countries, through what is known as the Clean Development Mechanism. The problem, from Africa's point of view, is that these projects mostly go to China, India and Brazil, while Africa gets a mere 7 percent. In company with many smaller developing countries, African nations called for a more equal distribution of projects.

Thin results

The conference ended in an "agreement," as it does almost every year. But looking through the small print, little progress was made. True, operating rules for an Adaptation Fund were agreed upon, so that activities to adapt to climate change in developing countries can be supported when the fund holds any significant amount of money.

As for a greater share of clean-energy projects, countries promised to go away and consider how this might be managed. There may be some scope for pushing the World Bank or other government funds to try harder in Africa, but generally it is a matter of where private companies want to invest. For all the fine talk, this is unlikely to change much.

Perhaps most disturbing is the lack of urgency among governments to negotiate a new set of commitments after 2012; there is a need to tighten targets for rich countries while finding some way of limiting the rapidly rising emissions in countries such as China and India while fostering their ongoing development. Neither rich nor developing countries showed much sign of ambition. Developed countries pointed to the fact that China is expected to pass the United States as the world's largest emitter in 2009, while developing countries pointed to the lack of meaningful effort from richer nations, and to their own relative poverty. If we are ever to get a deal, countries need to move away from endlessly rehashing the same old pretexts for inaction.

Looking West

So where do we look for hope? One bright spot is the recent developments in the United States. While delegates sat in stalemate in Nairobi, congressional elections on the other side of the Atlantic produced a House of Representatives and Senate much more ready to take serious action on climate. For years, the biggest sticking point in global negotiations has been that the United States, the world's largest emitter and richest economy, has been unwilling to take the problem of climate change seriously. Not only is this a huge problem in itself—the United States belches out fully a quarter of the world's carbon dioxide—but it provides the perfect excuse for inaction among others. America will not rush back to the negotiating table, but even solid national policy to limit emissions will change the international dynamic.

For the next few years, what happens at the climate conferences will depend on what happens elsewhere—not the other way around.

*Rob Bradley is director of the international climate policy initiative at the World Resources Institute (www.wri.org). His latest book is called *Growing in the Greenhouse: Protecting the Climate by Putting Development First*.*

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