

Nairobi's missed chance

By Ian Bray,
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The tropical heat of Nairobi meant that here were few stunts or circus-style acts and no people dressed up as polar bears among the 6,000 delegates from 180 countries at the United Nations climate-change conferences [1] on 6-17 November 2006.

In this respect at least, the combined event - the twelfth conference of the parties (COP) to the Framework Convention on Climate Change, and the second meeting of the parties (MOP) to the Kyoto Protocol - displayed a sobriety that is arguably appropriate to the seriousness of the issue. More to the point, no one felt the need to don fancy dress to highlight the fact that climate change was happening and it will have dire consequences for everyone on the planet unless urgent remedial action is taken.

Indeed, the view that man-made climate change isn't happening is now becoming consigned to the fringes of these conferences. The scientific and moral cases seem to have been won. The publication on 30 October of Nicholas Stern's report, *The Economics of Climate Change* [2] - which called for action on climate change sooner or greater financial pain later - demonstrates that the economic case has also been won. The impasse now is clearly political.

There were big political shifts happening, though not at the conference. A day after the conference opened, the results of the United States mid-term elections [3] came in with the Democrats taking both the Senate and the House of Representatives. This didn't itself signal a breakthrough but gave a fillip to those who are hoping for more positive change in two or three years' time.

The climate-change debate has moved on from diminishing icecaps and the fate of rare butterflies to people's lives. A COP being held in Africa served to underscore this. With northern Kenya [4] going through a debilitating drought and ominous warnings about the fate of the region's pastoralists' way of life, climate change was seen as no longer restricted to the environment but central to development.

To emphasise this UN secretary-general Kofi Annan, in his opening speech to the conference, said: "Climate change is not just an environmental issue, as too many people still believe. It is an all-encompassing threat."

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Also in openDemocracy on the politics of global climate change [6]:

Tom Burke, "Climate change: time to get real [7]" (29 September 2006)

Simon Zadek, "Accountability: the other climate change [8]" (31 October 2006)

Andrew Simms, "[The climate-change choice](#) [9]" (1 November 2006)

John Elkington, "[After Stern: fixing the climate machine](#) [10]" (2 November 2006)

Saleemul Huq & Camilla Toulmin, "[Climate change: from science and economics to human rights](#) [11]" (7 November 2006)

Simon Retallack, "[Climate change: the global test](#) [12]" (10 November 2006)

Adam Poole, "[Nairobi fallout: the climate-change future](#) [13]" (22 November 2006)

Between rhetoric and action...

But if anyone expected this conference would come up with concrete proposals to reduce that threat they were going to be very disappointed. With speeches by 100-odd environment ministers this event was rhetoric-heavy but action-light.

The conference agreed that there shouldn't be a gap between the end of the [Kyoto Protocol's](#) [14] first commitment period through to 2012 and the start of a second commitment phase. However it failed to agree what a negotiating timetable would be for a second phase. The glacial speed of negotiations makes any delay far from helpful.

A post-2012 agreement will have to have ambitious emissions targets well beyond Kyoto. India pointed out that even though Kyoto targets were modest, industrialised countries have failed to meet their commitments. The former Indian ambassador to China and the European Union, [Chandrashekar Dasgupta](#) [15], pointed out that on current trends, the only countries destined to meet their emission are Britain, Germany, Sweden and the countries of east-central Europe. He also noted that the marginal decline in European Union emissions was due mainly to changes in agricultural practice rather than specific climate-change policies.

So instead of pushing for action on [greenhouse-gas emissions](#) [16] the COP proclaimed: "Let there be adaptation".

There is no doubt that countries need to adapt to climate change. In its third assessment report in 2001, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change ([IPCC](#) [17]) showed that even if no more greenhouse gases were emitted, the level of harmful gases in the atmosphere was already great enough to have a negative impact on the lives of poor people for the next one or two decades.

This time, the COP decided to move on an already existing commitment to set up an "adaptation fund" to help developing countries, particularly those in [Africa](#) [18], adapt their economies. What are its prospects? Look at the figures:

- current cash in the fund: \$3 million
- current World Bank estimate of what is needed: \$10 billion-\$30 billion a year.

You don't have to be [Nicholas Stern](#) [19] to realise that, at the moment, the sums don't add up.

Not to worry though, as the fund will grow (but by how much?) and after a year of deliberation the next COP should have a proposal in front of it to consider which international agency should

administer it and how money will be allocated.

The "adaptation fund" will be funded in a very novel way - by the carbon market. It will receive a 2% levy on proceeds of carbon sales from Clean Development Mechanism (CDM [20]) projects, once administration costs have been deducted.

CDM projects generate funds through the sale of certified emission reductions (CERs). In theory the adaptation fund [21] could grow significantly as the carbon market expands. But the size of the fund will ultimately depend on how sharp are the emissions-reductions commitments in the Kyoto Protocol's second (post-2012) commitment phase.

Predicting what a carbon market will look like and predicting how much will be transferred to the developing world is more in the realm of crystal-ball gazing than exact science.

Yvo de Boer, executive secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change [22], said that carbon financial flows to the developing world could grow to \$100bn a year. But this depends on three other things happening:

- that industrialised countries commit to reducing emissions by 60%-80% by 2050 (currently there is no indication they will, though Britain says it will reduce to 60% by 2050)
- that industrialised countries buy carbon credits from the developing world for half this amount (meaning that they won't reach their emissions targets domestically but buy carbon credits to cover the shortfall)
- that the price of carbon will be at least \$10 a tonne.

The design of a carbon market has yet to be agreed. But it will be the power within that market that will determine who will benefit.

Stern's warning that climate change is "the greatest and widest-ranging market failure ever seen" makes it either poetic irony or sheer folly to rely on the market to sort it all out.

African NGOs [23] at the conference were highly sceptical, pointing out that markets will not work for Africa, calling for a special "Africa fund" and appealing to African governments to give climate change the same priority as HIV/Aids.

The developing world has been hoodwinked in the past on promises that global negotiations of markets will benefit poorer countries. The Doha development round of the World Trade Organisation is a classic example: it is now floundering on rich-world intransigence around its massive agricultural subsidies while poor farmers go to the wall because they cannot compete.

...falls the shadow

But there's another, extremely pressing, downside.

Even if the carbon market makes the proclamation "let there be adaptation" a reality, where will that leave small-island states in the Pacific [24] and elsewhere? No amount of financial transfers will help - beyond a ticket off the island - if rising sea levels swamp their land.

The scientific, economic and moral arguments tell us that we are increasingly closer to the day when we will have to act decisively. Whether our current crop of politicians is capable of coming up with a just and lasting solution to climate change is hard to gauge. But on their current

showing it is unlikely that they will act before a massive calamity forces them.

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