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POST DOHA: THE AFTERMATH OF COP18

There was a sense of lowered expectations and reduced optimism, when the 18th Conference of the Parties (COP18) to the United Nations Framework Convention for Climate Change (UNFCCC) met in Qatar in December 2012.

Perhaps there was a feeling among some observers that convening to negotiate an agreement to curb climate change in a country with the world's highest carbon emissions per capita, and which lacked clear goals to deal with this, was by definition a futile exercise.

In South Africa, it seemed as if the issue of climate change was off the table, since the COP17 circus had moved on to another continent, country and city. Aside from the expected reduction in coverage by local media, our cities seemed less willing to invest in initiatives which address issues of climate change or launch awareness and education campaigns, as they so boldly did just over a year ago.

While talks continued slowly inside the Qatar National Conventional Centre, Typhoon Bopha devastated the southernmost part of the Philippines, with over 1 000 lives lost. With such a great loss of life, and with hundreds of thousands now homeless, an emotional Philippine delegate pleaded for action.

But the follow up to COP17 in Durban - which many environmentalists considered to be disappointing in terms of making meaningful progress - concluded after midnight on 8 December 2012, with more disappointment.

THE KEY OUTCOMES REACHED:

- The extension of the Kyoto protocol, to cut fossil fuel emissions by industrialised nations, from 2013 to 2020, but it only includes countries responsible for 12% of the total emissions. The United States has never participated, while Canada and Japan have opted out of the second phase.
- An outline for the timetable for negotiating a new binding agreement by 2015.
- A promise by industrialised nations to commit US\$ 100 billion per year to a Green Climate Fund by 2020, to help poorer countries cope with climate change. A few European countries promised US\$ 6 billion in the interim period, but this is not binding.
- The commencement of talks next year to create a mechanism which assesses "loss and damage" suffered by countries due to climate change, which has raised concerns among developed countries with regards to issues of liability.

According to a recent report by the CBC News environmental unit, the end of the Kyoto Protocol's first stage left the world with "58% more greenhouse gases than in 1990, as opposed to the five percent

reduction its signatories sought."

Anna Leindreiter, a climate change policy officer for the World Futures Council, who was present in Doha during the negotiations, doesn't believe any major milestones were achieved. "Doha did nothing to cut emissions that are taking the world to four degrees and more of warming. It offers little in terms of finance to help poor countries cope with climate change."

GREEN CLIMATE FUND: IS THE POT LARGE ENOUGH?

It is unsurprising that, in the face of economic turmoil in Europe and the high levels of debt in the US, support for the Green Climate Fund agreed in 2009 in Copenhagen, was re-iterated without further talks. The funds, currently US\$ 100 billion per annum, are intended to be available by 2020, for use by poorer countries for adaptation and mitigation, due to climate change.

Resilience has been brought into sharp focus in the last few years due to the scale and number of environmental disasters. For the built environment in particular, the concern rests with the ability of cities, systems and infrastructure, to be designed such that it can deal with the stresses of a more volatile environment, and adapt successfully.

Developing country concerns are warranted when they question whether the current level of the Green Climate Fund, promised in eight years time, is sufficient. The regions affected by Hurricane Sandy, have only recently, after much struggle, benefited from US\$ 9.7 billion of a total of package of US\$ 60 billion requested of Congress by President Obama to allow the US National Flood Insurance Program to pay out flood claims.

The US\$ 100 billion fund then appears rather limited, especially for vulnerable and poorer developing countries with limited resources. In the scenario where a series of environmental disasters occur, some countries may only be able to access a largely depleted fund.

A LEADERSHIP CRISIS?

Writing in her personal capacity, Tasneem Essop, the World Wildlife Fund South Africa's international representative for climate change, believes that "none of the crop of the current political leaders feel the moral responsibility to provide leadership to deal with this crisis".

Essop's criticism was not only leveled at rich

and developed countries but pointed towards South Africa as well. “The government’s continued addiction to fossil fuel and nuclear as a basis for our energy system is short-sighted. As one of the top 20 global emitters, we too have a moral responsibility to take urgent action to shift our economy away from this dependence.”

But for the built environment, there remains a sense of hope, as COP18 extends beyond the negotiations, and includes local, regional, and non-government role-players, who use the event to showcase their achievements and solutions.

Through conversations, side events and the pavilions on show, the professions linked to the built environment seemed already to understand and recognise that “non-renewable energies” will run out. And, that this meant more than just building “greener”, but required a broader consideration of a building project in the context of the city or community in which it operates.

CITIES TO TAKE THE LEAD?

The deadlock in negotiations and the inability of the current system to yield a meaningful outcome inevitably leads to more cynicism about multilateralism.

It may be up to cities and local governments globally to take the lead as the devolution of powers from national governments becomes more common through decentralisation. This implies that cities will have a greater role to play in ensuring that they become more climate change resilient – and their new powers would give them a greater ability to influence the built environment and its long-term sustainability.

The City of Cape Town has already taken the initiative by developing a climate change strategy, considered rare for a city. According to Cape Town’s Climate Change strategy report, *Moving Mountains*, South Africa’s total emissions are roughly 500 Mt/year, with Cape Town accounting for approximately

27 Mt/year of that (roughly 5%).

While many targets in the plan are ambitious and several areas lack detail; the report does include several objectives which may have a significant impact on the built environment.

These include the need to build a more compact, resource-efficient city and the development of a more sustainable transport system: the former as a part of a long-term strategy, but the latter which could have a sizeable impact on reducing carbon emissions within a shorter time frame.

TOWARDS 2015

“The 2015 agreement must ensure equitable participation of all nations and be responsive to the exigencies of science. Above all, it must be a testament to the will of our generation to act,” concluded Christiana Figueres, UNFCCC executive secretary, in her final address at COP18.

Figueres presented a sense of both urgency and optimism and believes that “the international negotiations are moving steadily in the right direction, but alarmingly slow”.

On the journey to 2015, when it is expected that a new protocol binding all nations to limit greenhouse gas emission would be drawn up, the Doha Gateway presents a small step.

It was, however, unable to produce any meaningful action until such an agreement becomes legally enforced in 2020 - leaving many vulnerable countries despondent and frustrated in the interim.

“Ultimately, history will judge us on whether we have reduced greenhouse gases enough to avoid the worst climate change. The fact is that we can do this right now in ways that both boost the economic sustainability of everyone and at the same time safeguard those most vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change. And that is why a universal agreement is necessary and possible,” concludes Figueres. ●



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