Oasis or Mirage? The Doha Climate Gateway

On December 8, 2012, delegates at the United Nations climate change negotiations1 in Doha, Qatar, concluded their work by agreeing on a balanced package of decisions—dubbed the Doha Climate Gateway package—designed to advance the international climate process. While the package appeared to represent an oasis of agreement after two weeks of arduous wrangling over who has to do what by when, a closer examination suggests instead that it may only have been a mirage of progress.

Doha was the latest step on the long road of climate negotiations first formalized with agreement on the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992, which established a global voluntary aim of reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. In 1997, the Kyoto Protocol was agreed to, which established legally binding emissions reductions commitments for developed countries for the period 2008–2012, but involved “no new commitments” for developing countries.2 However, the important details of how developed countries could meet their targets were not agreed to until 2001. By that time, the United States had indicated that it would not ratify the protocol, and the UNFCCC process languished for a number of years.

Then, in 2007, the parties (U.N.-speak for “countries”) agreed on the Bali Action Plan in Indonesia, which was designed to address a long list of issues and lead...
to a new agreement under the UNFCCC (theoretically applicable to all countries). Since the parties had previously agreed to develop a second round of legally binding emissions reductions commitments for developed countries under the Kyoto Protocol (KP2), this created a two-track negotiating process.

**Two-Track Negotiating Process**

The two-track process was supposed to conclude in 2009 in Copenhagen, Denmark, but in a well-known public failure, the parties were unable to reach agreement on the Copenhagen Accord. Nonetheless, many elements of the accord were agreed to during subsequent negotiations in Cancun, Mexico in 2010 and in Durban, South Africa last year. Most notably in Durban, nations agreed to negotiate a new global climate change agreement by 2015, covering all countries and which will enter into force after 2020 (theoretically following the conclusion of KP2).

The Doha meetings were designed to advance the climate change process by resolving three key issues that could not be solved in Durban: finalizing the timeframe for, and formally establishing, a KP2; terminating the work of the bodies negotiating the two-track process; and agreeing on a schedule of work for the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Durban Platform for Enhanced Action (ADP), the body negotiating the new global climate change agreement.

Underlying the negotiations was a continual push by many developing countries, including China and India, to insert terms such as “common but differentiated responsibilities” and “equity,” or references to the principles of the UNFCCC, into the agreements. This was done in an attempt to ensure a Berlin Mandate-like “firewall” between the obligations of developed and developing countries in the new global agreement, and to ensure that developed nations aid developing countries through transfers of finance and technology. The United States and other developed nations believe that this distinction in actions was eliminated in the decisions taken in Durban. Nonetheless, those terms and references were included in the final decisions.

Another key element of the final package was agreement on cross-cutting financing issues. Developing countries had sought firm commitments for

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Reflections on Doha

COP-18, held in Doha, Qatar, was the first Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC held in an Arab country, and left one struck by a number of different images and juxtapositions. At the most obvious level, there was the irony of holding an international climate change negotiation in a country with one of the world’s highest per-capita GHG emissions.

Furthermore, everything in Doha seems to be imported—the Western stores, the Western lifestyle, even the workers, most of who are from other countries—yet some Western behavior, such as drinking alcohol or wearing a bikini or swimsuit to the beach, is restricted to your hotel. And while the downtown is replete with skyscrapers featuring the latest in architectural design—along with numerous 4- and 5-star international chain hotels, the finest jewelry stores, restaurants, car dealerships and everything else—Qatars still follow many Muslim traditions, including traditional clothing and veils worn by women.

Finally, the amount of money and investment going on in Doha is mind-boggling. There are cranes everywhere building more hotels, a massive education city, an equally large medical city, and so forth. And soon the country will start building six stadiums for hosting the World Cup in 2022, after which four of the stadiums will be torn down and given to developing countries as gifts. Most of the buildings that have been built are state-of-the-art, including the conference center where the COP-18 meetings were held, which was also so enormous that getting from one meeting to another could easily take 15 minutes or more. Yet in the end, one was left wondering most about the sustainability of the entire enterprise. Who will fill the hotels and stadiums and schools and stores? Only time will tell.

To Agree Or Not To Agree?

Although the parties met their objectives, it was unclear exactly how much “agreement” there was on the final package, as numerous parties expressed their reservations with various elements of the decisions. For example, the United States and other developed countries stated that language in the decisions referring to equity, common but differentiated responsibilities, and the principles of the UNFCCC would not change their understanding of the meaning of the language in the Durban decisions. Russia deplored the process followed in adopting the final package and not having its concerns addressed about ensuring the availability of so-called “hot air” credits in the emissions trading program under KP2. Developing countries expressed deep disappointment with what they believed were weak reduction targets under KP2 and the lack of financing commitments. This was best captured by a delegate from Nauru who said, “Much, much more is needed if we are to save this process from being simply a process for the sake of process; a process that simply provides for talk and no action.” Thus in the end, it appeared that the parties chose to adopt the final package and disagree on its interpretation rather than risk not agreeing on a package at all.

Nonetheless, Doha marked another important milestone in the international climate negotiations, with the extension of the Kyoto Protocol and the end of the two-track negotiating process. The spotlight now turns to the work of the ADP and efforts to develop the 2015 agreement. Similar to the Kyoto Protocol, the new agreement will likely require a separate negotiation on the details of its implementation, which might not be completed until close to 2020. Whether that will represent the oasis of success so many seek, or is just another mirage in the long road of climate negotiations, remains to be seen.

More information, including the final decisions, can be found online at http://unfccc.int.

Notes
1 Formally known as the 18th Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC (COP-18) and the 8th Conference of the Parties serving as the Meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol (CMP-8). Other bodies meeting included the Ad Hoc Working Group on Long-Term Cooperative Action under the UNFCCC (AWG-LCA), the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Kyoto Protocol (AWG-KP), and the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Durban Platform (ADP).
2 This phrase was enshrined in the Berlin Mandate, agreed to as part of the negotiations leading to the protocol.