

What has happened in Durban?

More than 190 countries met for two weeks for the latest round of United Nations climate change negotiations. The aim of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is to stop global warming by limiting global carbon emissions. The talks dragged on two days longer than expected, making this the longest UNFCCC meeting ever experienced.

What has been achieved?

At the end of the gruelling talks the world decided on the "Durban Platform for Enhanced Action". The two-page document commits all countries to cutting carbon for the first time. A "road map" will guide countries towards a legal deal to cut carbon in 2015, but it will only come into effect after 2020.

Is this a step forward for the world or backward?

It depends who you ask. It is a success in terms of keeping the climate change talks on track after it was feared no decision would be reached, making a mockery of the UN process – especially after the collapse of the last high profile talks in Copenhagen in 2009. The EU, who led calls for the so-called "road map" are hailing it as "an historic breakthrough". The bloc point out that this is the first time that the world's three biggest emitters: The US, China and India have signed up to a legal treaty to cut carbon.

However it is a failure in terms of the expectations of certain countries, like the small island states, and the charities, who wanted a much stronger agreement. They argue that the legal language needs to be a lot stronger to force countries to act and dates should be brought forward to stop global warming. They point out that carbon emissions will have to peak by 2020 and start to come down for the world to limit temperature rise to 2C.

What about the Kyoto Protocol?

The EU and a few other developed countries have signed up to a second commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol that ends in 2013. This will ensure that there is still some form of legally binding treaty to cut carbon in place in the interim eight years before the new agreement comes into force at the end of 2020. However most of the developing world and the US remain in voluntary agreements to cut carbon until 2020.

What about the money on the table?

The world has agreed to help poor countries cope with climate change through a new Green Climate Fund that will hand out around £60bn per annum from 2020. However, again the details of the agreement are very vague. All that has been decided is that a body will be set up to distribute and manage the funds. It is not yet clear how the money will be raised. Possible plans to raise fund from a tax on shipping or aviation have not been signed off.

What about deforestation?

A scheme to pay poor countries not to chop down trees, Reducing Emissions from Degradation and Deforestation (REDD) has barely moved forward in the meeting as again countries cannot decide how to raise the cash. There are concerns that money from carbon markets could make it too corrupt and that indigenous people will be pushed out. However REDD remains on the table and will be developed over the next few years as part of the new deal alongside rules in the Kyoto Protocol to stop deforestation.

What next?

There is still a lot of work to do on the agreement. The next UNFCCC meeting in Qatar next year will start negotiations towards the 2015 deal, including the kind of targets each country will sign up to. There will also be discussion of carbon cuts for the EU and a few other countries under the second commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol. The rest of the world will be pushed to increase their targets to cut carbon through voluntary agreements before 2020 through civil society and political pressure.

What is the gigatonne gap?

There remains a gap between how much the world has pledged to cut carbon and how much carbon emissions need to come down to stop global warming according to the science. The UN estimate there is still a six tonne "gigatonne gap" unless ambitions can be scaled up through voluntary agreements over the next decade.

What was the sticking point that brought the talks to the edge of collapse?

In the closing hours of the meeting it came down to a dispute over legal form. India and China, the world's two biggest emerging economies, wanted the more vague "legal outcome" because this would allow a more loose treaty on cutting carbon for developing countries. But the EU insisted on "protocol or legal instrument" for all. In the end a compromise was found of "agreed outcome with legal force" that both sides could live with.

Who are the heroes and villains?

India emerged as the villains, after Jayanthi Natarajan, India's Environment Minister, refused to sign up a deal that would commit the developing world to a strong legal treaty. She was backed by China, who also seemed reluctant to cut carbon at home.

However although the protests by the world's second and third biggest carbon emitters claimed their concerns are based on "climate justice", they argue that they need to carry on emitting carbon to bring millions of people out of poverty over the next few decades.

The US was unusually quiet throughout the talks, but as the world's biggest emitter made it clear they were also happy with a weak legal outcome.

The EU are painting themselves as the heroes of the hour for rescuing the talks from collapsing but it could be a bitter victory as the deal is so vague and fails to cut carbon fast enough.

The South Africans were criticised for letting the conference go into extra time for two days but ultimately it has been a success for them by achieving some sort of a deal.

What does it all mean for ordinary people?

This is a major signal to business to start investing in green technology as the world moves towards a low carbon future.

Europe is already cutting carbon but this will increase pressure to increase the target from 20 per cent by 2020 to 30 per cent by 2030. As part of the bloc it will also encourage the UK to increase our targets, although we are already committed to 34 per cent by 2020. The rest of the world will also be encouraged to cut carbon on a voluntary basis at first and as part of the deal in 2020.

It could mean the carbon price increases and carbon markets begin to function better pushing up the price of fossil fuels but ensuring investment in wind and solar. In the UK this could mean 'green jobs' for the economy but also costs to the tax payer through energy bills to pay for the new power stations.

The new Green Climate Fund will also be paid for by tax payers. The UK has already spent £3.4bn on helping poor countries fight climate change and will invest around £1bn a year from 2020 as part of the fund. The climate change conference itself costs the UK Government around £500,000 every year.

Didn't this conference just produce more carbon towards global warming?

Well yes. It has been estimated that the carbon footprint for the event could be in the order of 15,000 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent. However this does not include the flights of the 13,000 delegates that are likely to increase the emissions to the annual footprint of a small African country. Durban City Council is offsetting the footprint through an ecosystem rehabilitation project in the Umbilo catchment west of Durban. It is expected to offset 16,000 CO<sub>2</sub>e.

Link:<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/environment/climatechange/8949099/Durban-climate-change-the-agreement-explained.html>