

1-27-2011

# Cancún Summit on Global Climate Change a Success or Failure, Depending on Whom You Ask

Carlos Navarro

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/la\\_energy\\_notien](https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/la_energy_notien)

---

## Recommended Citation

Navarro, Carlos. "Cancún Summit on Global Climate Change a Success or Failure, Depending on Whom You Ask." (2011).  
[https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/la\\_energy\\_notien/44](https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/la_energy_notien/44)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin American Energy Policy, Regulation and Dialogue at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiEn: An Analytical Digest About Energy Issues in Latin America by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [disc@unm.edu](mailto:disc@unm.edu).



Your information source on **Energy Policy, Regulation**  
and **Dialogue in LATIN AMERICA**



## **Cancún Summit on Global Climate Change a Success or Failure, Depending on Whom You Ask**

By Carlos Navarro

Depending on whom you ask, the UN conference on climate change in Cancún, Mexico, on Nov. 29-Dec. 11, 2010, was a total failure or a step in the right direction to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions, generally thought to be responsible for the warming of the Earth's atmosphere. The Cancún gathering was also known as COP16—an abbreviation for the sixteenth edition of the Conference of the Parties of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

Those who viewed the results of COP16 with the "glass-is-half-full" premise included the host of the gathering, Mexican President Felipe Calderón, who said the agreements reached at the conference "put Mexico and the whole world on the right path to confront the threat of global warming and climate change."

Critics argued that the industrialized nations did not make sufficient commitments to reduce emissions, and, because of that, any agreements reached in Cancún were hollow and ineffective. The harshest criticisms came from Bolivian President Evo Morales, who chided the industrialized countries for their refusal to make a binding commitment to reduce emissions. Morales and other critics, including the environmental organization Greenpeace, pointed out that the poorest nations produce the least emissions but would suffer the most from the impact of flooding, drought, and other effects of the warming of the global atmosphere.

### **Agreements include concrete actions**

The general consensus among participants was that the talks were at least partially successful. The evidence, said supporters, is that 193 of the 194 participants signed the final declaration from the two weeks of talks, even though many still had reservations. Bolivia was the only country that refused to sign the document.

Another point of agreement among participants was that there was a greater sense of optimism and commitment at the Cancún gathering than there was a year ago at the conclusion of the talks in Copenhagen. "It is important that we be seen to be doing something on something as important as this," said John Ashe, ambassador to the UN for Antigua and Barbuda.

Observers said the talks could be considered a success because participants were able to reach agreements on three difficult areas.

1. The US and China—the two countries most responsible for greenhouse-gas emissions—endorsed international, transparent standards for countries to verify their reductions of carbon dioxide and other heat-trapping emissions.
2. Participants agreed on a plan for wealthy nations to establish a US\$100 billion green climate fund by 2020 for poorer countries to use to adapt to the effects of a warming planet and to develop renewable-energy sources. Before the summit, many countries had raised concerns that their needs were being ignored by industrialized nations.
3. Participants achieved a far-reaching agreement to reduce global deforestation, another step in the effort to lower carbon-dioxide levels in the atmosphere. Some experts have suggested that the growth in emissions from deforestation is at least equal to global emissions from all forms of mechanized transportation.

Representatives of developing nations credited President Calderón for acting as an intermediary to facilitate dialogue between industrialized countries and developing nations. "Everything was open," said M. Komi Tomyeba, a negotiator for Togo. "There was not any frustration, so people were free to be themselves and to say what there was to say."

Those discussions paved the way for an agreement on the green climate fund. "When we as a developing country looked at this document--issues around finance, how funding will be raised and distributed...the organizers in the country very openly took care of every question," said Tomyeba.

Former Mexican finance secretary Jose Ángel Gurría Treviño, now secretary-general of the Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation (OECD), agreed it was appropriate for the rich industrialized nations to assume the costs of the green climate fund but said the developing countries have the responsibility of ensuring that the money is used appropriately.

The conference also reaffirmed the goal set in Copenhagen of limiting global warming by less than 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. But, unlike previous discussions, there had not been a concerted effort such as the one that came out of Cancún. "Scores of rich countries made pledges over the past year to cut their greenhouse gas emissions by 2020 under the Copenhagen accord but they were not incorporated in the official UN process," said the London-based newspaper *The Guardian*.

"The achievements attained at COP16 are the result of the good will of each and every one of the participants, who set aside their particular interests to work for the good of humanity," Calderón said after the conference.

"We have proven that multilateralism can produce results," said EU Climate Commissioner Connie Hedegaard.

Still, Ashe was uncertain how the Cancún conference would be viewed down the road. "It is hard to know whether or not if we failed here the process would come crashing down. It would certainly put some strains on the system, I can see that much."

"The biggest goal--a legally binding global treaty on greenhouse gas emissions reduction--remains elusive. But in Cancún, groundwork was laid for the 2011 conference in South Africa," *The Miami Herald* said in an editorial.

## Critics say lack of binding agreement doomed conference

But critics said the ability of countries to come to an agreement on a set of proposals should not necessarily be seen as a success. While participants in the Cancún conference learned to work together to reach a consensus, they might not have taken sufficient actions to address the crisis of global climate change.

"When are we going to find the courage to move away from the astrology and toward the science of climate change?" Kevin Anderson, director of the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England. "The astrology tells us that Cancún represents a platform for future and more substantive agreements after which low-carbon technologies will save the day. The science tells us climate change is an issue of emissions accumulating in the atmosphere and consequently every time we fail to agree on meaningful reductions we lock our future into higher temperatures."

Similar comments came from Greenpeace International. "[COP16] saved the UN process but did not save the planet," said Kumi Naidoo, executive director of the organization.

Naidoo repeated the argument advanced by President Morales and other leaders that poor countries often are most vulnerable to the consequences of global climate change, such as flooding and drought, even though they produce the least emissions. A recent study from the UN Environment Program (UNEP) estimated that more than 40 million people in the region were affected by factors related to climate change between 2000 and 2009. Among the factors cited by UNEP were extreme temperatures, forest fires, drought, storms, and flooding.

It is totally inadequate," Bolivian Ambassador Pablo Solón said in announcing his country's decision not to sign the agreement.

President Morales took the issue a step further, suggesting that he would bring the lack of a comprehensive emissions-reduction agreement at COP16 to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague.

During speeches at the conference, Morales blamed the current global economic system, which favors capitalism and profits, for policies that promote climate warming. "We are used to saying the phrase 'patria o muerte' (homeland or death)," said Morales. "Now we say, 'either capitalism dies or the planet dies.'"

As a solution, Morales said the polices on climate change should be subject to a "global referendum," so that victims of climate change can have input on decisions that affect them directly.

Morales, who hosted the World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth in Bolivia in February 2010, said there was no room for compromise. "I do not share the point of view expressed by the UN and Mexico's foreign relations secretary [Patricia Espinosa] that we must find a middle ground," said the Bolivian president.

While Morales was the most vocal critic of the policies of industrialized nations, and Bolivia was the only country to refuse to sign the final declaration in Cancún, other Latin American leaders expressed similar concerns before the conference and during the course of the two-week meeting.

"I find it hard to believe that, instead of investing money in trying to solve the root causes of the problem, they invest millions of dollars in conferences to debate whether certain measures are appropriate," said Panamanian Environment Minister Javier Arias.

A study from the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) said Central America stands to lose about 35% of its biodiversity in the next 40 years if efforts to slow and reverse climate change are not successful. El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras would be the three countries affected most directly, said the report.

ECLAC said the losses are especially alarming when one considers that Central America accounts for 7% of the geologic, geographic, climatic, and biological diversity on the planet.

Colombia's President Juan Manuel Santos was forced to cancel his participation at the Cancún conference to oversee emergency responses to massive flooding in his country, including severe mudslides near Medellín. The rainy season in Colombia has been the worst in many years, affecting hundreds of people. As of Dec. 9, the toll from the floods and related problems included 206 dead, 119 disappeared, 246 injured, and 1.6 million suffering some sort of property loss.

Colombian officials said there was no doubt that the disaster was the direct result of climate change. "We make this appeal [to participants in Cancún] from a country hammered by an unprecedented severe winter season to produce an agreement that will give us hope for the future," said Sandra Bessudo, a high-level adviser to Santos on environmental matters.

### **Do Cancún results advance Kyoto Protocol?**

Optimists said the results of the Cancún agreement created the framework for the global community to enact meaningful changes at the next scheduled summit in Durban, South Africa, in 2011. There is hope that changes can be enacted before the Kyoto Protocol expires in 2012 and is replaced with a new agreement in 2013.

The protocol, signed in 1997 in Kyoto, Japan, requires 36 industrial nations to reduce emissions of carbon dioxide, methane, and other transportation, industrial, and agricultural gases blamed by scientists for atmospheric warming.

The problem is that the US, one of the world's largest emitters of greenhouse gases, has not signed the protocol because it does not obligate countries like China and India, which also produce high levels of harmful gases, to reduce their emissions. Still, observers said the agreement by China and the US to endorse international-verification standards was a positive result that came out of Cancún.

In testimony before the British Parliament, Britain's Energy Secretary Chris Huhne said the promises by developed and developing nations to reduce emissions represented a "valuable point of departure" for future negotiations.

But others were discouraged by the refusal of key countries like Japan to make a greater commitment to reduce emissions. Japan has complained that the Kyoto Protocol covers only 27% of global greenhouse-gas emissions, in addition to not including the US and China.

"In effect, that means any emissions reductions by major industrial nations will be voluntary and at their own discretion--a far cry from the enduring, global commitment to reduce global warming agreed to in Kyoto 13 years ago," journalist Betwa Sharma wrote in *The Christian Science Monitor*.

Other major powers, including Russia, New Zealand, Canada, and Australia, were also pushing for a single new treaty that puts binding obligations on all countries responsible for large emissions.

"But the prospect of that happening any time soon--with a US Congress filled with politicians who argue that forced emissions reductions would do too much economic damage, and China saying economic growth to pull millions of its citizens out of poverty is more important than emissions controls--[is unlikely.]" said Sharma.

"If we here throw the Kyoto Protocol into the garbage dump, we would be responsible for ecocide...indeed, for genocide...as we would be harming humanity as a whole," Bolivia's President Morales warned at the conference.