



WHAT'S ON THE AGENDA?

ONE of the biggest issues is the future of the Kyoto Protocol and the need to reach a legally-binding agreement to prevent the average temperature of the earth from going up by more than 2°C. Some countries (especially small islands which are at risk of major flooding from rising sea level) think that it is better to make sure that the temperature does not increase by more than 1.5°C.

The big problem is that the United Nations' expert group on climate change says that if nothing is done to reduce carbon levels, the average temperature of the Earth is very likely to increase by between 2°C and 4.5°C (and possibly a lot more) before 2100.

Although this is a conference about saving the Earth from severe changes to the climate, many of the negotiations will actually be about money and politics, as well as technical and legal issues.

The "poorer" (developing) countries argue that "richer" (developed) countries have caused most of the problems over the last 200 years and therefore have to reduce their carbon emission levels more than the poorer countries which are still building up their economies. The richer nations argue that every country needs to reduce greenhouse gas levels to avoid climate changes which will affect the entire world.

To avoid a temperature rise above 2°C, scientists say greenhouse gas levels must be reduced by at least 50% before 2030, yet the International Energy Agency says that emission levels will actually increase by 55% over the next 20 years.

Another big worry is that scientists think that some level of climate change cannot be avoided because of the amount of extra greenhouse gases which have been building up for nearly 200 years.

This is where some of the money talk comes in. Poorer countries want the richer countries to pay for the cost of adapting to climate change. Some of the negotiations will be about the new Green Climate Fund, to decide who will pay how much into this fund and who will be able to get money from it.

There will also be discussions on burying carbon underground, storing carbon in trees, new carbon taxes, buying and selling carbon emissions, how to measure carbon and how to develop new technology which produces less carbon.

PLANET IN PERIL

Durban and the COP 17 World Climate meeting

What is COP 17 in Durban all about?

COP 17 is a United Nations meeting between more than 190 countries from all over the world to find a solution to the global threat of human-made climate change. The aim is to stop the amount of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere getting to a level which would cause dangerous changes to the world's climate system.

Where is it happening?

The main official meetings will be held in the Inkosi Albert Luthuli International Convention Centre in Durban for two weeks (28 November to 9 December).

There will also be many other events linked to the conference at the nearby Durban Exhibition Centre and a separate meeting of "ordinary people" from civil society in the Curries Fountain/Durban Botanic Gardens areas. There are plans for a massive Global Day of Action protest march through the streets of Durban on Saturday, 3 December.

Why is it called COP 17?

This is the 17th meeting of the "Conference of the Parties" (COP) of the international treaty known as the United Nations' Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The first COP was held in Berlin, Germany in 1995 and there has been a meeting every year since then in many cities around the world. The second part of the meeting is known as CMP 7 because it is the 7th meeting of countries which have agreed to the Kyoto Protocol.

Who is coming?

It is difficult to know exactly how many people will arrive for the Durban meeting. At the COP 15 meeting in Copenhagen in 2009, there were about 10 000 government officials, 13 000 people from UN agencies and non-government groups and more than 3 000 journalists. At the COP 16 meeting in Cancun, Mexico, the UN estimates that there were almost 12 000 participants.

It is possible that somewhere between 15 000 and 30 000 people will come to Durban for the meeting. They will include presidents, ministers, senior government and UN officials, advisers, scientists, climate activist groups, businessmen and journalists. Only 15 000 people can be accommodated at the main meeting.

Can anybody attend the main meeting?

No. Anyone who wants to attend the main COP 17 meeting has to apply for accreditation (permission) from the United Nations in advance.

This is restricted to government representatives, accredited observer organizations and accredited press.

Many of the committee meetings will also be behind closed doors and will not be open to the press and some observer bodies.

WHAT IS THE KYOTO PROTOCOL?

The Kyoto Protocol is a legally-binding agreement to reduce the level of greenhouse gases in the Earth's atmosphere. The protocol was set up in 1997 in Kyoto, Japan, but it took another eight years before the treaty came into force in 2005.

The main feature of the protocol is that it sets legally-binding targets for nearly 40 of the richer countries to reduce their joint greenhouse gas emissions by about 5% before the end of 2012 (compared to 1990 levels). The treaty recognises that these richer countries are mainly responsible for the high level of industrial greenhouse gas emitted over the last 200 years whereas poorer, developing countries have not produced as many emissions over this time period.

Next year is a crucial deadline date because it marks the end of the Kyoto "first commitment period" of emission reductions which runs from 2008 to 2012. The original idea of the treaty was to steadily reduce the level of greenhouse gases in the air, and next year should mark the start of the "second commitment period" (2012-2016).

However, one of the world's single biggest greenhouse gas emitters (the United States of America) has not yet signed the protocol, and now there are signs that some of the other rich nations are thinking of pulling out of a second period of reductions unless some of the bigger developing nations like China, India, Brazil and South Africa also agree to make legally-binding emission reductions.

Over the past few years, richer and poorer nations have not been able to agree on who should be included in this second period of reductions, or about how big these reductions should be.

During the COP 15 meeting in Copenhagen two years ago, several governments announced plans to reduce emissions on a voluntary basis which is different to the compulsory reductions needed by the Kyoto Protocol. However, time has almost run out now, because the treaty will expire in December 2012 unless it is renewed. This is why the Durban meeting is so important — to find an agreement before the deadline.

Unless an agreement is reached at the Durban conference there is a strong possibility that the Kyoto Protocol could collapse entirely or that there will be a time gap in reducing greenhouse gas levels from 2012 onwards.



THE MERCURY

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- 1. Environmental Affairs — www.environment.gov.za
- 2. UNFCCC — <http://unfccc.int/2860.php>
- 2. COP 17 — www.cop17-cmp7.durban.com/



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