

***Why the UN Conference on Climate Change Failed:  
The Prospects for Climate Justice***

*The complete report of the Anglican delegation to Copenhagen can be obtained through  
The Anglican United Nations Office in New York*

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*Introduction*

In 2009, the Anglican Observer at the United Nations, Ms. Hellen Grace Akwii Wangusa, sent an Anglican delegation of five people, including myself, to the United Nations Conference on Climate Change in Copenhagen. It was not an easy conference to cover. By all accounts, the Conference was dismal; by any reasonable standard, it was a failure. It would be misleading to pretend otherwise. And yet, it would be shameful and false to overlook another point, which could easily be forgotten: The fact that the Conference happened at all -- including the process that led to it and that hopefully will continue -- is a reason for gratitude. Our thanks goes to the United Nations itself, for without their efforts, there would be no platform or process for discussing matters that will affect the lives of everyone.

The problem in Copenhagen was not that the issues, difficult as they were, were completely avoided -- everyone knew what the issues were. The problem was not the United Nations, nor was the problem any lack of interest or disregard for the urgency of the catastrophic consequences of climate change that have, in all likelihood, already begun. Even now, if you listen to parties on several sides of any particular issue, you find that there is no simple answer, no single key issue, or sole explanation that stands out as "the explanation" for why an agreement was not reached. By standing back and looking at the big picture, one dynamic stands out in high relief: Any number of issues relating to "climate justice" can be found behind every point of contention, every question about process, and every obfuscating maneuver that took place on the negotiating floor or that took place in the years leading up to the Conference. In Copenhagen, the outstanding exceptions were, I'm proud to say, two Anglicans at the highest level of leadership -- Archbishop Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu. I say "exceptions," because they brought issues of climate justice into the public square like no one else has. To them, we also offer our gratitude.

My purpose here is to sketch out the key elements of the larger picture, especially as they relate to climate justice, the negotiations in Copenhagen, and the consequences for the environment, economic systems, communities, and democracy. It's not a pretty picture, but I can't help that. What the church, can do is to gain a better understanding of what happened and why, and then do what needs to be done to move our "lives together" in the right direction. This must be done for our sake, for the sake of our brothers and sisters, and for the sake of the sacred body of life that we call the "Earth."

*Background of the Climate Change Issue and the United Nations:*

Since the 1970's, scientists and policy-makers have known that unchecked environmental destruction, including human-induced climate change, will have dire consequences. The impact of climate change is already a fact of life everywhere, some regions being affected more severely than others -- for example, drought and desertification in Africa and the destructive effect they have on food, water, agriculture, and health. One region, however, is not separate from another. Human life is part of one vast network of life, on which all life depends. What affects one region or one people has an impact on everyone. What happens to the atmosphere, the oceans, and the forests affects every part of the earth. All our lives are our lives together. We are brothers and sisters in every respect -- morally, biologically, politically, economically, and environmentally. Taken together, all these dimensions of life describe our interdependence, spiritually. This is more than an ideal to which we aspire. It is an accurate description of "reality" itself, although this reality is not the version of "the world" that has gained the upper hand in climate change negotiations.

To explain this, let me begin with a brief overview of the climate change crisis. Despite longstanding efforts by the UN, some member States, NGOs, and environmental groups, greenhouse gas emissions are continuing to warm the earth. Unless those emissions are significantly reduced, they will continue to warm our climate with a speed that's increasingly destructive to human life. These emissions come from a variety of sources: roughly half from CO<sub>2</sub>; the rest from largely from hydro fluorocarbons, methane, and the particulate matter in soot. The burning of fossil fuels account for the greater portion of these emissions, and fossil fuels are the energy source on which economic development has depended since the industrial revolution. In a nutshell, to slow, halt, or reverse climate change, the very foundation of our increasingly globalized economic system must be seriously transformed.

For that reason, the Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was adopted by UN Member States at the 1992 "Earth Summit" in Rio de Janeiro, on the basis of recommendations by the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) that came into existence in 1987. The goal of the Convention was (and is) "to achieve stabilization of greenhouse-gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system." This was one among other Conventions discussed at the Earth Summit that included agreements on biodiversity, forests, and desertification. Five years later, in 1997, thirty-eight industrialized nations signed the Kyoto Protocol in order to implement the principles of the UN's Climate Change Convention. The goal of the Kyoto Protocol is to reduce global greenhouse gas emission by 2012 to a level 5.2 percent lower than the emission level in 1990. This was considered to be the level of reductions necessary to avert catastrophic climate change. Since that time, the majority of scientists working on this

problem, including the IPCC, have revised those figures, indicating that more needs to be done, not less; and more quickly.

The 2009 UNFCCC meeting in Copenhagen (hereafter called COP15) began a second round of climate change negotiations. These negotiations were (and still are) urgently needed for two reasons: (1) serious questions about the effectiveness of and rationale for the Kyoto Protocol (or some of its provisions) have been raised, and (2), despite the Protocol, greenhouse gas emissions have steadily increased, rather than decreased. Without a more productive agreement, the most devastating forecasts for the impact of climate change are all but certain to happen.

There were days in Copenhagen when our Anglican delegation thought the whole conference might fall apart, and we were not alone in this assessment. Quite honestly, the measure of success for governmental representatives seemed to be whether they could agree to be in the same room together. Why did this happen?

As described below, answers (there are more than one) to this question are not difficult to understand. They can be traced to the Kyoto Protocol itself, and deep divisions between developed and developing countries concerning responsibility and accountability for climate change, sovereignty, the right to development, the relation between sustainable development and poverty eradication generally, and financial assistance to developing nations for dealing with climate change, specifically. Although all these issues revolve around the issue of justice, they have been played out in various ways relating to misinformation and the nature of the scientific data, debates about strategy, and questions about finance.

### *Debates about the Reality and Urgency of Climate Change*

After the Earth Summit in 1992, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was assigned the task of providing policy makers with the most reliable information available. Their work takes into account the research of nearly 2,500 scientists across the globe. In their 2007 report, the IPCC warned that presents trends, if left unchecked, could result in a global rise in temperatures of more than 6 degrees Celsius by 2100. Sea levels could rise by up to 60 centimeters. From a human point of view, this would be terrible.

The first and most important line of debate, which has received little coverage in the mainstream press, comes from climate scientists themselves. From their point of view, the IPCC findings probably represent a conservative (i.e., overly-optimistic) estimate. For example, Dr. James Hansen, a highly-respected scientist at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration in the US, has argued that these estimates are woefully inadequate insofar as they don't take into account the effect of feedback loops within the atmospheric system that actually accelerate the warming trends. The same can be said for systemic interactions between the atmosphere and the oceans. Moreover, very recent findings from the Arctic indicate that methane gas escaping from beneath the rapidly melting ice sheet is contributing to atmospheric warming to an extent that has not been

fully taken into account -- or expected to happen so soon. For these other reasons, not only Hansen, but also a host of climate change scientists believe that the Kyoto agreement and the projections of the IPCC have not been strong enough to meet the climate change challenge. They are NOT saying that the agreement has no value, but that the agreement's content is not anywhere near strong enough.

The opinions of these scientists have received considerably less attention in the press and in UN deliberations than they deserve. The reason for this is primarily strategic. In other words, the facts have been played down in order to build a consensus around preserving the possibility of any kind of agreement -- largely in response to the negative influence of the United States, which has refused to sign the Kyoto Protocol. As convoluted as this may sound, it accurately describes the negotiating process that has taken place to date. The result is that the overriding goal of policy makers has been, first and foremost, to forge a consensus around the urgency of climate change as an issue. Once the political will has been marshaled, it is believed that then more substantial steps can be taken toward reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Despite the opinions of the IPCC and its critics (those claiming the scientific findings are too conservative), criticism from climate change skeptics has received considerably more press than it warrants. This affects public opinion, which, in turn, influences political leaders; and that has influenced UN negotiations, as it did during COP15. The arguments of skeptics range from accusations against the integrity of the IPCC to claims that inherent uncertainty in computer projections makes the reduction carbon emissions a matter of debate, rather than a necessary strategy for survival. It is important to know that funding for climate change skeptics comes largely from the oil industry; and some of their strategic planners have previously worked for the public relations campaigns of tobacco companies. At best, their argument is that we should wait and see; at worst, they claim that climate change is a hoax. While it is true that everyone has a right to an opinion, all opinions are not equal -- and this one has no legitimate basis.

### *The Kyoto Process and the United States*

Although Vice-President Al Gore has played a prominent role in the Kyoto Process, and President Obama has made clear statements about the urgency of the climate change, the facts are that the United States has never ratified the Convention, it does not have a coherent energy policy, and it continues to show little leadership in tackling the issue. The fact that the US remains a Party to the Convention, and has agreed to take its own steps, similar to other nations under agreement to the Protocol, has had little positive influence. This has complicated the process and raised questions about the "binding" nature of legal agreements.

The questionable role of the United States actually began in the early nineties, when the Kyoto Protocol was first formulated. At that time, the US said, in effect, that there would be no agreement, unless it incorporated a complex, economically innovative, and environmentally controversial provision, eventually known simply as "cap and trade." This provision was conceived primarily by Wall Street investment firms; notably

Goldman Sachs. The principle behind “cap and trade” is that carbon emissions would be regulated or “capped” at a level to be negotiated by Member States, while creating the “right to pollute” as a tradable commodity in the financial marketplace. For example, a corporation in one country can continue to emit carbon by reaching an agreement with another corporation in another country who makes a commitment to reduce their emissions.

Two key points must be kept in mind. The first is that “carbon trading” is not actually a mechanism for capping or reducing emissions, but a strategy for saving or making money in an emerging pollution market. In a nutshell, cap and trade allows corporations to continue with business as usual. A cost is placed on pollution; and in that sense, greenhouse emissions are “regulated,” but they’re regulated by the free market, rather than by legally binding “caps.” Actual practice has shown that the free market is an ineffective mechanism for actually reducing carbon emissions. The second point involves what is not taken into account -- the real ecological cost of continued carbon emissions, which was and is the whole point of the Kyoto Protocol.

“Carbon offsets” are another financially lucrative type of carbon trading that should also be mentioned in connection with “cap and trade.” The idea behind “offsets” is that a corporation (or government or financial institution) can avoid reducing emissions themselves by underwriting or partially financing carbon reduction projects in other countries. The significant problem with this scheme is that the presumption of “carbon savings” is based on imaginary calculations of what “might have happened” if the “offset” project had not taken place. The actual result has been no significant reduction in greenhouse emissions.

### *Problems in the Process of Negotiating an Agreement on Climate Change*

To understand what happened (and what did not happen) in Copenhagen, we have to keep in mind that environmental groups in developed and developing nations may have widely different opinions about the Kyoto Protocol. Some may favor the agreement, even with the “cap and trade” provision, and knowing that the agreement was not strong enough in terms of emission reduction targets. They believe that the agreement we have is better than no agreement at all, and that the participation of Wall Street is an essential ingredient in any solution to the climate change crisis. Other environmental groups and climate change scientists take the opposite position. They argue that a flawed agreement creates the illusion of progress, wastes valuable time, and diverts the public’s attention from the kind of steps that actually need to be taken. The irony in all this is that some environmental groups seem to share the position of climate change skeptics concerning the Kyoto Protocol. Both oppose “cap and trade,” but for very different reasons: skeptics believe that it’s a waste of time and money; some environmentalists say that, as a strategic measure, it’s not nearly effective enough.

This ambiguous climate of opinion, which was clearly expressed in Copenhagen, made it easy for many Member States (and NGOs) to have strong opinions about any number of issues, but not a strong enough commitment to maintain the negotiating

process -- which is the heart of the Kyoto Protocol and the Convention on Climate Change. This was further complicated by misinformation campaigns launched by climate change skeptics, working, overtly and covertly, for the interests of Big Oil.

It should be noted that one of the strongest NGO statements in favor of the Kyoto Protocol came from the Third World Network -- despite the ineffectiveness of the agreement so far in reducing greenhouse emissions. The TWN believed, rightly, that developed nations might derail the process and create another one without the participation of developing nations as equal partners. Bluntly put, the underlying concern was (and is) that developed nations, realizing that dire forecasts for the impact of climate change are likely, want a different process -- one that favors their survival at the expense of the survival of developing nations, who they are willing to sacrifice. This had led well-respected climate justice activists, such as Naomi Klein, to speak not only of “endangered species,” but also of “endangered nations.”

Among the many issues that were debated in Copenhagen, the impact that a derailed negotiating process would have on the survival of developing and vulnerable nations was the most significant. In other words, the major issue was not whether climate change is “real,” which captured the most media attention, but whether a transparent, equitable process would survive Copenhagen. Lim Li Lin, of the Third World Network, has admirably outlined the dynamics already, which I will summarize in a few brief sentences here. In effect, the wide-spread assumption, prior to Copenhagen, was that the purpose of the conference was to re-negotiate the entire Kyoto Protocol, since it would expire in 2012. This assumption was false on two counts: first, the Protocol would not soon expire; and second, two separate negotiating tracks had been in place for some time. One track involved the actual commitments that developed nations would make in implementing the Protocol; the other, focused on levels of emission reductions and timelines that developed nations would commit to under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. These were two separate agreements, both of which were in the negotiating process prior to Copenhagen. The fact that neither track was successful does not mean that the Kyoto process was nullified. However, the implications of the failure to fulfill these commitments remain to be seen.

There’s no doubt that efforts to merge the two tracks by some developed nations could bring an end to the Kyoto process after 2012. Such a development could, feasibly, result in a stronger agreement. The more likely outcome, however, is that a new process and agreement would allow developed nations to pursue their own, less ambitious goals and strategies separate from developing nations. This is why the TWN and other NGOs held firm in their support of the Kyoto Protocol process, apart from the many problems with “cap and trade.” In effect, something much more significant was at stake -- the possibility that a range of policies were being formulated in a radical, but non-transparent way that served the interests of developed nations and the economic marketplace, but no one else.

*REDD: Reducing Emissions from Deforestation in Developing Countries*

The one outcome of the negotiating process in Copenhagen that was adopted by the Conference was an otherwise little known program, administered by the World Bank, called “Reducing Emissions from Deforestation in Developing Countries,” or more simply “REDD.” Officially, the principle behind this program is that the chief value of forests lies in living trees, rather than extractive products like lumber or wood pulp. This sounds good, until the details are examined more closely. The purpose of REDD is to encourage forest management, rather than deforestation, by putting a price on the ability of forests to absorb carbon. This will significantly expand the carbon credit market into the management of forests, under a program that will be very likely involve public funds as well as corporate investments brokered through the World Bank.

It is important to know that the operating details of REDD were not included in the official negotiating process leading up to Copenhagen, which underscores some of the critical questions raised by its detractors. For example, a long standing debate since the 1992 Rio Summit involves the definition of a “forest” and the pressure from lumber companies to include tree plantations within the range of its meaning. It should go without saying that a “forest” is an ecosystem with its own functional integrity -- a characteristic that tree plantations do not have. An even more important issue regards the ownership of forests: To whom do they belong? Who has the responsibility of caring for them? Questions like these are not addressed at all in the new agreement. REDD presumes that forests are now commodities whose value is determined by the economic marketplace, rather than by the people who care for them and live within their bounds. One practical consequence is that indigenous and traditional peoples will no longer have free access to the forests on which their livelihood depends. Instead, the “use” and/ or “management” of forests will be appropriated by corporate interests, thereby rewarding richer countries with new opportunities for making profits. REDD looks very much like a new form of corporate green-washing, endorsed by the Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen.

### *Where Do We Go From Here?*

It should be obvious that the failure of the Climate Conference in Copenhagen cannot be explained solely on the basis of the scale of the problem or uncertainty about how to solve the crisis. Even conflicting ideas, goals, and competing agendas are not enough. A closer examination of what actually happened at the Conference suggests that purposeful misinformation and a willingness to exploit the ambiguity with shameless obfuscation played the larger role in the conference’s failure -- as it has for some time. Any reasonable participant at the Conference would get the impression that its purpose was to avoid issues of justice, to circumvent the idea that all of us are in this crisis together, and to listen to the immediate desires of Wall Street. This brings us to the questions that we should be asking, particularly with regard to the meaning of three key words: “the environment,” “the economy,” and “community.”

Let’s take a closer look at the nature of the debate as it has unfolded from the beginning -- in 1992, at the Rio Summit, and before that, in the 1970’s, when “the environmental crisis” and “sustainable development” were first discussed at the United

Nations. There have always been serious questions concerning what we mean by “the environmental crisis” as well as “sustainable development.” From the beginning, many religious NGOs -- notably the World Council of Churches -- have been cautious, if not suspicious, about where the nature of the debate would lead. As early as the 1970’s, the WCC was reluctant (and rightly so) to create a category of programs for “the environmental crisis” separate from “economic justice.” It would be misleading to suggest or imply that the root causes of environmental destruction are anything other than economic and political exploitation. At the time, many environmental groups in developed nations misunderstood the WCC’s critique, following the mistaken assumption that the WCC had misunderstood how severe “the environmental crisis” actually is. When, in fact, the WCC (and developing nations generally) understood quite well, and also perceived its true causes.

The point is that the environmental crisis is an economic crisis at its heart -- the impact of taking more than we give, destroying what is not ours to destroy, and claiming the web of life as ours to do with as we will. Look to the causes of any kind of environmental problem and we’ll find economic causes, directly or indirectly. We’ll also discover that the solutions are rooted in economic transformation. By continuing to use the words “environmental crisis” or “climate change crisis,” rather than “climate justice,” we are, intentionally or unintentionally, diverting attention from the source of the problem. Human induced climate change, for example, and the astonishingly large and increasing gap between the wealthy, on the one hand, and the vast poverty-stricken majority of humankind, on the other, is all outward and visible signs of the same underlying problem.

As corporate globalism continues to intensify, issues of climate justice become even more difficult to tackle. If the meaning of “environment crisis” hasn’t been difficult enough, today the same can be said for “economic justice.” Not that long ago, even as recent as the 1970’s, we routinely -- and rightly -- thought of economics in relation to “livelihood.” It was assumed that the meaning of “livelihood” involved a way of making a living -- having a life that in some way contributed to the web of life. Since the industrial revolution, this common understanding may have expressed “the ideal” more than “the real”; nonetheless, people understood what it meant, and they knew the difference between the two. Today, “economics” is understood primarily in relation to the global financial system. Not only that, this financial system has no intrinsic connection to the livelihood of the vast majority of people, in the same way that the once common, everyday meaning of “economics” has no direct bearing on the how we understand “livelihood” now.

Exactly the same can be said for “community,” the last and possibly most significant of the three: environment, economics and community. Today, communities are not being created or nurtured, but gradually (or not so gradually) dismantled. Everyone knows this, but we still don’t talk about it very much. Livelihood and community are considered to be sacrifices we must make for the sake of the so-called “economic system,” on which we all supposedly depend. The end result, from an environmental point of view, was the failure in Copenhagen. No serious negotiations about

environmental justice, economic justice, or the survival of communities in developed or developing countries took place. The one agreement that was reached -- involving forests -- was not based on “real forests;” it won’t lower greenhouse emissions in any significant way; and it was negotiated in a non-transparent way. The only beneficiaries are developed nations and large globalized corporations.

A few months after COP15, a controversial, yet hopeful, not unexpected, and not to be underestimated event took place in Cochabamba, Bolivia. Evo Morales, President of Bolivia convened “The World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth.” Thirty thousand people attended this thoroughly “climate justice” event. Andean glaciers are expected to melt very soon, as a result of climate change, which will threaten the water supply of major Bolivian cities. What was on the agenda? One answer should be obvious: “climate debt,” meaning the payment owed by developed nations, where the majority of fossil fuels are burned, to developing nations, who bear the brunt of the damage. The second answer is “democracy” -- the only practical way to achieve even a measure of justice for the world’s people and the Earth. The people in Cochabamba carried forward the vision that the Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen had forgotten or willfully ignored.

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