

Background on and Outlook for the 16th Session of the Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

The 16th Session of the Conference of the Parties¹ (COP16) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) will be held in Cancun, Mexico, from November 20 to December 10, for the purpose of signing a **legally binding agreement**.

The new agreement must be based on the principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities,” with the goal being to a) hold the increase in global temperature below 2 degrees Celsius, and b) stabilize greenhouse gas concentration in the atmosphere at the level of 450 ppm of CO₂.²

Was the COP-15 (Copenhagen, 2009) a missed opportunity?

The COP-15 failed to reach a fair, ambitious and binding agreement based on the principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities.” In other words, even though the agreement recognized that all the countries of the world are responsible for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, only the developed countries were bound to honor binding and quantifiable reduction commitments (Kiessling, 2010) under the concept of climate justice.

Disagreements regarding the emission reduction goals set for the developed countries, and the proposed requirement that China and India be included in the reduction commitments and permit the application of mechanisms for verification and monitoring in their territories, **made it impossible to reach a legally binding commitment**. However, even though it was not possible to reach a global climatic agreement, the COP15 did serve to make countries more aware of the need to move forward with an effective Reduction of Emissions from Deforestation and Forest

¹ Parties are those countries that ratified these treaties and agreed to abide by and comply with its contents.

² Which means that, taking a given year as the base year (1990 has been proposed), the developed countries would reduce (%) of their emissions under commitments or monitored, informed and verified mitigation measures, adapted to conditions in each country, including the quantified objectives of limitation and reduction of emissions, ensuring the comparison of the activities among themselves and bearing in mind the difference in national circumstances; and the developing countries, under mitigation measures adjusted for each country in the context of sustainable development, supported and facilitated by technology, funding and capacity building activities, in a measurable, notifiable and verifiable manner.

Degradation (REDD-plus).³ Also, even though they were not binding on them, the developed countries assumed the following commitments: (UNFCCC (COP15) Copenhagen, 2009).⁴

- **To provide new and additional resources (including for forestry) totaling approximately US\$30 billion for the 2010-2012 period, distributed evenly between adaptation and mitigation.**
- **To contribute US\$100 billion annually through 2020, in order to meet the needs of the developing countries.**
- **To provide new multilateral resources for adaptation via effective and efficient fund arrangements, with a governance structure providing for equal representation of developed and developing countries.**

What challenges does the COP-16 face?

Even though it can be expected that the discussions of the COP-16 will begin with unanimous acceptance of the need to hold the increase in global temperature below 2 degrees Celsius and to recognize common but differentiated responsibilities, there are **six main challenges** that must be met before a legally binding agreement can be signed:

1. **A considerable number of countries (both developed and developing) consider that the reduction goals and verification processes threaten their sovereignty and their right to establish their own policies and environmental goals.** For example, China has repeatedly stated its wish to have complete freedom in formulating and implementing its environmental policies and to not subject itself to international goals. Linked to this point is the discussion regarding the prohibition against production activities in Amazonia. While Brazil argues that it has absolute sovereignty over this territory, some members of the international community feel that the region should be declared a world heritage natural site.
2. **Many developed countries tie their reduction promises to other demands being met.** For example, Japan and the European Union tie their promise to reduce emissions by 25% to 30%, respectively, by 2020 to the demand that all developed countries commit to similar reductions. In addition, Russia ties its goals to the assurance that an appropriate amount of resources will be allocated for its forests and to the binding commitment that the largest emitters will reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, among others, have also placed conditions on their promises.

³ The last Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), held in Bali in 2007 (COP13), recognized the reduction of gases from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD-plus) as a valid mechanism in combating climate change.

⁴ The draft of the proposed Agreement of the COP15 can be found at:
<http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2009/cop15/spa/l07s.pdf>

3. **Some developed countries have asked that China and India be included in the binding agreement that includes control and transparency mechanisms, given their economic importance and the important % of total emissions of greenhouse gases they contribute.** For example, the European Union and the United States have asked that China be included as one of the countries that must reduce greenhouse gases.
4. **Even though world leaders have recognized the need to set up a fund for the REDD-plus in developing countries, the last meeting of the G-20, held in Seoul, Korea, showed that, during an economic downturn, the topic of climate change gets placed on the back burner.** Indeed, the official report on the meeting barely mentioned the aid fund for the developing countries.
5. **Even though there is a commitment to speed up the development and transfer of adaptation and mitigation technologies that will make it possible to reduce vulnerability, the developed countries have questions regarding the mechanisms that will be used to achieve this objective, without violating their intellectual property rights.**
6. **There is a broad movement that demands greater democratization of the agreements and greater participation of civil society in decision making.** The demand for participation and the mistrust among the parties makes its very difficult for the ad-hoc working groups to do their work. Discussions easily get off topic and more time is spent on reaching agreement on details. All the promises combined are insufficient and very few hold the key.

This notwithstanding, if China and the United States could reach an initial agreement on the main points, the remaining developed and developing countries could second them. It would seem feasible that during the COP16 the countries could reach consensus on topics that would facilitate a subsequent agreement, such as the details of the funding mechanism that will be implemented to encourage the developing countries to combat deforestation and soil degradation, the methodologies for quantifying the reduction of greenhouse gases and how the fund proposed by the developed countries to finance adaptation and mitigation actions such as REDD-plus in the developing countries will operate.

All these intermediate goals that may be defined at the COP16 are of great importance for agriculture in the region, since almost all the economies of Latin America and the Caribbean need to have access to more financial and technological resources for adapting to and mitigating the effects of climate change on their agricultural systems (agriculture, livestock and agroforestry).

The importance of the COP 16 for agriculture in the Americas

A legally binding agreement will be fundamental in reducing the impact of climate change on agriculture, which, to date, is the economic activity most affected by higher temperatures, due to fluctuations in rainfall, the increased incidence of droughts, the more frequent occurrence of extreme weather events (heat waves, freezes and hail), and the increased intensity and frequency of hurricanes and the costs they generate. Total economic losses for such events in LAC reached US\$81 billion in 1970-2008. According to estimates from Washington and Stanford Universities, an increase of one degree centigrade in temperatures could cause crop losses of between 2.5% and 16%, due primarily to the inability of plants to adapt.⁵

It is estimated that agriculture is responsible for 12% of the emissions of greenhouse gases and for 48.3% of deforestation and uses 70% of the fresh water available; which makes it necessary to think of sustainable agriculture capable of coping with the challenges and tapping opportunities, based on a knowledge of its vulnerabilities.

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⁵ <http://www.sciencemag.org>