

# **Reflections on Cancún**

*Fr. Seán McDonagh, SSC*

At 4.30 am on the morning of December 11, 2010, the participants at the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) broke into a long applause and by acclamation ratified what has become known as the Agreement. Bolivia held out to the end and refused to ratify the agreement. Two of its close allies, Cuba and Venezuela did ratify the agreement.

No one in the hall was claiming that the Agreement was a historic moment in effectively dealing with climate change. Even those most favourably disposed to the 147 paragraphs in the Agreement, did not claim that it offers any ground breaking ways of dealing with climate change and its effects. In fact, many intractable problems were kicked to touch or just fudged. But there was genuine relief that the multilateral negotiating process within the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) actually did finally succeed. If the Conference had been as frustrating an experience for developing countries as the Conference in Copenhagen was in December 2009, multilateralism may not have survived.

One of the reasons why it did succeed was due to the patient, professional diplomatic work of the Mexican government during 2010 and, especially, the skillful handling of the negotiations by the Mexican Foreign Minister Patricia Espinosa. During the midnight plenary on December 10, 2010, the Zambian negotiator spoke for almost everyone in the room when he addressed the chair, Minister Spinoza and said, “thank you for lifting our spirits from the depression of

Copenhagen; you have restored our trust in multilateralism.” There was also praise for Luis Alfonso d’Alba, who was the chief negotiator for Mexico. The modest success at has ensured that the UNFCCC will be the primary home for climate decisions, and not organizations such as the World Bank or G20 which is favoured by a number of rich countries.

What gains were made at Cancún? The U.S. was happy that there was some progress on measuring, reporting and verifying methodologies (MRV). This means that domestic climate change efforts which might otherwise be unsubstantiated can now be registered, monitored and verified. The developing countries and China had earlier set their faces against any such monitoring and verification,

Developing countries were happy with the decision to set up a Green Climate Fund. This money will be used for climate mitigation and adaptation programmes in developing countries. According to paragraph 16, this fund is “accountable to and functions under the guidance of the Conference of the Parties (COP).” For the next three years, the World Bank will be the interim trustee of this bank. This particular bone of contention has been around for years. The U.S. and other rich countries want any financial entity tasked with addressing climate change be located at the World Bank, where it has considerable control. At least, so this argument goes, there will be less corruption in disbursing the money. Most developing countries, on the other hand, have had a long, negative experience of working with the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) during the Third World Debt crisis in the 1980s, 1990s and right up to the present. Many participants from poor counties saw these multilateral lending agencies as merely debt collectors for northern banks and northern governments. Developing countries want the Green Fund to be under the control of the Conference of the Parties

(COP), where they have greater representation. It is hoped that €100 billion will be available annually for the Fund by 2020. Much of this money will come from carbon levies of utilities, energy-intensive industries and the aviation and shipping industries.

There were other gains in on what is called REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation). Under this initiative countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Zaire and other developing countries which have forests can receive aid for keeping their forests intact, so that they act as carbon sinks. Anyone who has been involved in issues surrounding tropical forests knows how difficult it is to monitor projects. This was my own experience during my years in Mindanao. For a number of years I have been encouraging Catholic Development agencies to get involved with REDD projects. Such projects could deliver significant economic benefits to poor people who live in the vicinity of tropical forests. By securing the forest they could have a constant stream of income based on sustainable forest products and also ensure the protection of biodiversity. But, of course, these Development Agencies which in the past have specialized in areas such as education, health care and livelihood projects would need to develop a competence in this area. This should not be difficult as there is quite a bit of money there for capacity building. REDD also leaves the door open for big business to get involved in using forestry project in the carbon offsetting market. Many community groups would be opposed to this development.

There was also some movement on clean technologies. According to Michael Jacobs writing in *The Guardian*, “After Cancún the global race to produce clean

technologies is back on. Business and investor confidence (in these technologies) has a chance of being restored.”<sup>1</sup>

Before the Conference began, Japan stated that they would not sign up to a second Kyoto commitment. They were joined by Russia, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. During the first week this demand seemed almost poised to wreck the negotiations. The reason for Japan’s jaundiced view of Kyoto is that it commits the signatories to making binding cuts, where other countries such as the U.S. are only making voluntary cuts. Developing countries see the binding commitments under the Kyoto Protocol (KP) as a good example of the “common but differentiated” approach to climate change and cutting greenhouses gases. Developing countries point to the fact that the prosperity which rich countries have enjoyed for more than 100 years, is directly related to their use of fossil fuels. It is reported that many world leaders telephoned the Japanese Prime Minister, Naoto Kan, in order to get Japan to soften its position on KP. The issue was fudged rather than solved. It is still part of the negotiations, and developing countries are now more confident that richer nations will support the second commitment period. Professor John Sweeney of National University of Ireland (NUI) Maynooth points out that an over concentration on the Kyoto Protocol would miss the point that “only 25% of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions come from countries within the KP.”

With all the various sub plots it is easy to forget that the whole point of these negotiations is to reduce GHG and thus forestall very disruptive climate changes. In the run up to the Conference, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) had carried out a study called, *The Emissions Gap Report*. This made it crystal clear that, when one added the voluntary pledges under the Copenhagen Accord and the

---

<sup>1</sup> Michael Jacobs, “Why Cancun gives us hope,” *The Guardian*, December 15, 2010, page 32.

reductions under the Kyoto Protocol, there was a gap of 5 gigatonnes of GHG in the atmosphere if the stated goal was to reduce GHG emissions so that the average global temperature would not rise above 2 ° C. Many scientists are now saying that even a 2 ° C rise would lead to disruptive climate changes and that we should be aiming instead for 1.5 ° C. This would mean reducing the parts per million of GHG in the atmosphere to 350ppm. Currently, it is 389ppm and rising at about 2ppm every year. Given this new scientific knowledge, it is imperative that much higher mitigation targets need to be made before the next Conference of the Parties (COP 17) in Durban, South Africa next December.

Not everyone shared the euphoria in the room on December 11, 2010. Meena Raman of the Third World Network was depressed by the outcome of the Conference. She claimed that the Kyoto Protocol was being eroded away and that rich countries made greater gains at than poorer countries. Others may not be as pessimistic as Raman, but they realize that a lot of the hard decisions have been kicked down the road to Durban. A lot of hard work will need to be done during 2011, if a far, ambitious and legally binding agreement is going to emerge from Durban in December 2011.