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Rio+20: A green industrial revolution or climate change diplomacy?
Diplomats at climate change talks this week appear unlikely to draft a workable legal document on CO2 reduction.
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Climate change is disproportionately affecting people living in the world's least developed countries [EPA]  

**Santa Barbara, CA** - Last week in Bonn, Germany, where the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) secretariat is located, diplomats from member states were negotiating to prepare a workable legal document for the next annual meeting of the Climate Change Conference.

The [last one was at the end of 2011 in Durban](http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/05/20125261252383657...), South Africa and the next one will be held at Doha in December 2012. Generally UN preparatory meetings, such as the one in Bonn, do not get much attention from the mainstream media, because they tend to be technical, no prominent political leaders take part, and as a result there are rarely any sound bites for the media.

This time it is different because, shortly after this meeting a major summit of UN Sustainable Development, Rio+20, will be held. The 1992 summit in Rio de Janeiro was a turning point in global awareness for several reasons. Major environmental law documents were produced - the Rio Declaration, a Global Policy of Sustainable Development for the 21st Century, and Agenda 21 - and two important global framework conventions on climate change and biological diversity were agreed upon.

The [Earth Summit](http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/05/20125261252383657...) was by far the biggest international conference ever convened. More than 100 heads of states took part. Rio+20 will not be nearly as successful.

Many important leaders from the United States, Germany and France, will not be attending. A few months ago the UN organisers announced that the main agenda will not be climate change. The focus will be placed on green development, green energy, job creation, and sustainability.

The objective is to lay the groundwork for a new phase of the global economy, almost a second industrial revolution. Therefore many NGOs are very sceptical about this prospect. They worry that the Rio+20 is being hijacked by the corporations to showcase the “new green sector”, a colour normally associated with [making profits](http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/05/20125261252383657...). We will find out soon in Rio whether these fears are justified.
'A dangerous threat'

Many things have changed since 1992. Most importantly, climate change has been recognised as a dangerous threat to human security caused in large part by human activity. This threat is gradually entering our daily life. At the same time, geopolitical, economic and technological competition among the old guard economies and new members of world society have become fierce.

This is what makes the Bonn talks so important. We the citizens of the world should follow what is going on there. During the last few years the multilateral UN talks to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) so as to lessen the major impact of climate change's adverse effects, degenerated into a kind of international contest between developing and developed countries, doing nothing to reduce emissions while blaming each other for the failure.

The diplomats who started these talks in the early 1990s are already retired. A new generation has arrived, new political leaders emerged, and different ideological perspectives have gained prominence. More importantly, geopolitical balances have become more complicated. The geopolitical map is far more complex than 20 years ago, almost giving rise to nostalgic feelings of fondness for the Cold War era of stable bipolarity.

The sharp division between developed and developing countries no longer describes environmental diplomacy, although it continues to exist on paper. China still sits at the table of the G-77, but everyone realises that China no longer belongs there. Its emergence as a leader gives China global legitimacy among the countries of the South. India and Brazil are still developing countries, but their ambition is not associated at this time with asserting claims of global leadership. Their robust economic growth in recent years does make them eager to play a leadership role.

Yet they are not willing to give up their growth-oriented economic policies easily, and their internal economic challenges remain enormous, especially mass poverty. Voices advocating policies beneficial for the developing world are still not strong enough to ensure that the developed world continues to uphold legally binding commitments.

Flirting with disaster

This was demonstrated at the recent Durban meeting. There are also emerging mid-income developing countries, including Mexico, Turkey, South Africa and South Korea, trying to find their own comfort zone, reflecting their particular national interests. Meanwhile, the 48 Least Developed Countries (LDCs), 33 of them in Africa, are becoming a voice of the voiceless, as the UNFCCC gives them more rights than others in relation to climate change commitments. These countries are the most victimised by the threats posed by climate change, despite being the least responsible for the buildup of greenhouse gases.

In Durban, with the help of European Union, the LDCs played an active role to make sure that the legal commitments of the emitting countries will be renewed and maintained. According to scientific studies, any further delay in addressing climate change is dangerous, and amounts to flirting with disaster.

The outcome of the Durban meeting last December gave hope to many that diplomats will develop a working document for the next meeting in Doha to be finalised in 2015 and take effect in 2020. So far, the talks in Bonn do not appear to fulfill the Durban expectations.
First, the European Union is now preoccupied with difficult internal problems, trying to keep the eurozone intact to prevent a financial disaster that could spread to the rest of the world.

Second, the new Green Fund, established by the developed countries to help developing countries for adaptation projects, still has not received most of the pledged contributions. In recent climate change negotiations (Copenhagen, Cancun, and Durban), to enable developed countries to hide their dysfunctional policies, they proposed to establish such a fund. Any commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions were voluntary undertakings.

As a compromise, a new fund was established, and was supposed to give $100bn each year to the most vulnerable countries to enable adaptation. But not only is the money not there, there are significant disagreements among member states about how to administer the fund. Developing countries want to be part of the decision-making process, to avoid repeating the old days when financial institutions excluded their voices. This touchy question of participation is still up in the air.

Third, since Durban, one of the major principles of international environmental law - "common but differentiated responsibility" and "equity" - have come under serious threat. This principle helps to determine the level of international responsibilities based on the developmental status of a country. Now, it is not clear what will happen to this principle in future documents, as the language of the Durban Platform was somewhat obscure, and only careful scrutiny identified the problem.

**Not just development - survival!**

Now this obscurity is being exposed. Crucially, the United States does not seem willing to retain this principle of differentiated responsibility. The reason is, if the principle is allowed to remain operational, it would mean that China, India, Brazil and other emerging market countries will remain off the hook. Almost a decade ago, this exemption of large emerging countries was one of the major reasons why the United States withdrew from the Kyoto Protocol. The absence of responsibility for these large countries made it much easier for the government to tell the American people why the United States was not adhering to climate change standards as set forth at Kyoto.

The US Congress was very clear about rejecting Kyoto. During that period, many newspaper ads were asking the American people why the US economy should have this burden while major emitters such as China and India are without any responsibility. After almost a decade, Kyoto reached its date of expiration, and the dilemma persists. Now the United States is questioning emerging economies about the relevance of common but differentiated responsibility, and is proposing an "evolving approach" instead of a categorical fixed one.

In response, developing countries are asking, "what about historical responsibility?" "Didn't Europe and North America produce most of the CO2 ever since the start of industrial development? Over time, carbon and other gases accumulated in the atmosphere, and made your countries rich and modern. It is our time now to develop. Why should we bear the burden of your development?"

LDCs and Small Island States are screaming: "This debate is not only about development, it is also about our survival."
These are important questions, and diplomats are not equipped to answer them properly. It needs philosophical and ethical understanding, responsible leadership, and, in the end, public-spirited and globally oriented solutions. The ugly alternative is to go it alone, build a wall to keep your own country safe from an influx of unwanted environmental refugees. This is the main recommendation of a recent report in Israel, which would, if enacted, be an ominous development in the Middle East, one of the regions in the world most vulnerable to climate change and water scarcity.

This seems a fool's paradise. We need to ask ourselves: how long can we expect to keep ourselves safe and secure behind man-made walls as we face the perils of climate change?

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