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ENGOS' BITTER PILL: ADAPTING TO INCREMENTAL CLIMATE (GOVERNANCE) CHANGE

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Environmental non-governmental organisations (ENGOS) have often been depicted as a section of civil society that is highly critical of the lack of political will in addressing environmental issues. This was again evident during the proceedings of the 17th Conference of the Parties (COP17) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Durban in December 2011. This NTS Alert will, however, discuss the limitations faced by ENGOS in influencing the UNFCCC process, as well as suggest options that ENGOS ought to consider in effecting change within and beyond the UNFCCC process.



Members of Greenpeace protesting on the sidelines of the 2011 Durban meeting.

Credit: WWF@COP17/flickr.

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Introduction

'You've given us a seat in this hall, but our interests are not on the table.'

– Anjali Appadurai, a youth leader delivering a speech at the UNFCCC meeting in Durban, December 2011.

There has been an array of reactions from environmental non-governmental organisations (ENGOS) to the outcomes of the 17th Conference of the Parties (COP17) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Durban in late 2011. While some

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ENGO representatives were contented with the progress of the meeting, others – such as youth leader Ms Anjali Appadurai – perceived it as a failure as it did not deliver a legally binding document with substantial limits on carbon emissions and sufficient funds for climate adaptation.

Such an outcome is not unique to Durban. In an NTS Insight on the role of ENGOs in the UNFCCC process (Jamil and Maeztri, 2011), it was noted that while ENGOs have been able to increase their visibility and influence in the UNFCCC process over the years, they have been circumscribed by structural challenges within the UNFCCC process, where governments are ultimately the change-makers.

This NTS Alert will demonstrate how the recent Durban climate meeting has once again manifested these ENGO limitations. It goes on to suggest options that ENGOs ought to consider in making effective change within and beyond the UNFCCC process.

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Wasted Groundwork?

It is first important to recognise that the roles of ENGOs are essentially to enhance multi-stakeholder participation, to frame the issues to be considered on the policy agenda, and to ensure accountability. A combination of these roles is undertaken by the following three categories of ENGOs: (1) campaign/advocacy groups; (2) research-based organisations or think tanks; and (3) business alliances. The extent of their influence on countries' decisions and on the outcome of UNFCCC meetings is however limited by two factors. The first is the ENGOs' level of legitimacy and credibility, which can be measured by the composition of their respective intellectual, membership, political and financial bases (Gulbrandsen and Andresen, 2004:57–8). The second is the fact that pre-planning of countries' official positions make it difficult for ENGOs to lobby governments to adopt measures that are radically different given the limits that governments have set for themselves. As a result of the above two factors, the efforts of ENGOs in COP meetings are, more often than not, selectively recognised by countries, depending on when it is in their interests to do so.

Several instances during the COP17 reflected the importance of the ENGOs' role in facilitating the climate change process but also revealed areas where these organisations were inevitably hindered by the actions or decisions of states. For instance, in terms of reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD), ENGOs played an important role in supporting pilot REDD projects worldwide (Aurora, 2011) and in monitoring COP17 proceedings on the technical details of measuring emissions from the forestry sector. However, ENGOs were unable to convince countries to make firm decisions on social and environmental safeguards for REDD and to commit to providing sources of funding in the long term (Kovacevic, 2011).



Ms. Maite Nkoana-Mashabane, Minister of International Relations and Cooperation of the Republic of South Africa and President Elect of the COP17/CMP 7 (in red), in consultation with UNFCCC delegates.

Credit: Adopt a Negotiator/flickr.

ENGOs, such as the World Resources Institute, also faced similar experiences during discussions on adaptation, where they were engaged in ensuring transparency, participation and accountability in the design and operations of the Green Climate Fund (GCF) (Morgan and Cameron, 2011). The roles played by ENGOs were significant given differing opinions between developed and developing countries as to which inter-governmental entity would be the interim secretariat of the GCF (Democracy Now, 2011). Ultimately, however, ENGOs failed to convince developed countries to commit to providing financial support for adaptation mechanisms in the developing world.

Without the long-term commitment of funds from the international community to support these schemes, progress on important climate issues will remain at a standstill. As such, while ENGOs have been successful in

ensuring accountability related to the technicalities of legally binding agreements, it remains a challenge for ENGOs to hold countries accountable for their existing and future levels of carbon emissions as well as to commit to long-term funding for climate change initiatives.

Frustrated with these structural challenges, some ENGOs have sought to confront government officials using more direct means. For example, some advocacy-focused ENGOs have organised protests to disrupt the Durban proceedings in a bid to compel countries to agree on legally binding carbon emissions targets and sufficient funding for adaptation. Such approaches have however been criticised and have only damaged the credibility of advocacy-type ENGOs and curtailed their ability to participate in the actual meetings themselves. The timing

of the passionate speech by Ms Appadurai – who represented youth ENGOs in Durban – was an example of the little regard given to ENGO representation as it was delivered at the tail end of the meeting in a room only half filled with delegates.

As such, while ENGOs have played a crucial part in laying and enhancing the foundations of international agreements using their various expertise, their ability to influence the outcome of COP meetings has been limited by the consensus-making process among states. This process, coupled with the reluctance of states to commit to long-term funding and binding carbon emissions targets, has resulted in diluted government statements and proposals. Such developments only create incremental change, which is a fraction of the progress that ENGOs wish to achieve.

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Strategy Shifts for Greater ENGO Effectiveness

Despite these setbacks, there are several lessons to be gained from the Durban meeting that can provide guidance for future progress. Moving forward, this would possibly require a rethinking of ENGO strategies. ENGOs should consider three main shifts in strategy.

Shift 1: Stepping Away from Radical Change

Accepting the notion of incremental change in the UNFCCC process would require a radical change in mindset for ENGOs; it would be a bitter pill for some ENGOs to swallow, but it is nevertheless a wise approach to take. There are several factors that ENGOs ought to consider. One would be that while some ENGOs criticised the outcome of the Durban meeting as being not ambitious enough thus squandering precious time in addressing climate change, it was in retrospect important to strike a balance between idealism and reality, and to maintain some sense of pragmatism, to avoid a repeat of the 2009 COP15 meeting in Copenhagen, where talks failed partly as a result of exceedingly high expectations.

Also, the current goals of climate change talks, which have till now been overwhelmed by contending interests and a lack of financial support, may not be sufficient to effectively address climate change given recent scientific updates on the climate. James Hansen, Director of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's (NASA) Goddard Institute for Space Studies, voiced his concern that the goal of the COP17 to limit carbon emissions to avoid a 2 degree celsius increase is becoming increasingly outdated given current rising emission levels in various industrialising and developing countries (Connor, 2011). Furthermore, the non-participation of major emitters such as the US and China in the second phase of the Kyoto Protocol, as well as Canada and Japan (who have dropped out), only serves to suggest that current efforts to substantially reduce climatic changes remain inadequate. ENGOs should therefore step away from insisting on radical change in climate mitigation goals; they could instead focus on enhancing capabilities for building resilience and adapting to climate change.

ENGOs should also consider reflecting on their own limitations in the UNFCCC process. On one hand, ENGOs are critically important in tabling issues and solutions for countries' consideration, and monitoring and ensuring transparency in the COP discussions. On the other hand, ENGOs that devote energy to lobbying and advocacy work during international negotiations have unfortunately had minimal impact in influencing the process. It is therefore important for advocacy-type ENGOs to review their efforts, and explore other avenues for influencing policies on climate change.

Shift 2: From Global to National and Local Governance

In rethinking their strategies, ENGOs must recognise several developments in Durban that demonstrate the need for more efforts to be channelled to regional and local levels. Firstly, there has been progressive recognition of the role played by local governments. In terms of adaptation, the UNFCCC's Ad Hoc Working Group on Long-term Cooperative Action has, since the UNFCCC Bali Action Plan in 2007, emphasised the importance of building adaptive capacity at the local level. This was complemented by the signing of the Durban Adaptation Charter for Local Governments by 114 mayors from 28 countries (ICLEI, 2011). The Charter also builds on other inter-city-led initiatives such as the Global Cities Covenant on Climate (otherwise known as the Mexico City Pact), the African Mayors Climate Change Declaration 2011 and the 2011 Bonn Declaration of Mayors. Such momentum for local governments is therefore a sign that this is an area in which ENGOs can engage. These include following up with local governments on the steps that they are taking to climate-proof their localities and to examine the extent to which these steps are in sync with national policies on addressing climate change. COP17's Adaptation Hub, a forum to support the operationalisation of the Cancun Adaptation Framework at local and national levels, would provide a strong foundation to build on this shift in thinking.

Secondly, such support for local governance is strengthened by the potential that solutions derived from traditional/local knowledge have for addressing climate change. The launch of the Momentum for Change Initiative during the Durban meeting was a means of showcasing ongoing pro-poor mitigation and adaptation (or a combination of both – known as MitAd) initiatives that have the potential to be upscaled. The Initiative – whose pilot projects are funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation – would also provide another avenue for states to seek financial support for projects not classified as a Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) or Joint Implementation (JI) project (UNFCCC, 2011).

Shift 3: Looking beyond the UNFCCC Process

A related third shift in strategy is for ENGOs to examine other avenues for progress beyond the UNFCCC process.

The issue of funding is oftentimes the main impediment to facilitating ENGOs' work and upscaling climate change mitigation and adaptation projects at local and national levels (IPCC, 2011). ENGOs should devote more time to lobbying private corporations to support these efforts. In the event that corporations only provide funding in the short to medium term, it would be useful for ENGOs to think about innovative ways of generating income to ensure the sustainability and upscaling of such projects in the long term.

Such a shift would thus require that some ENGOs change their way of engaging with private corporations. While some advocacy-focused groups are often quick to demonise private entities and name them the culprits behind many instances of environmental degradation, it would be more productive for these ENGOs to collaborate with rather than confront or oppose these companies when addressing environmental issues or concerns. This is particularly so because an increasing number of companies are looking to incorporate socially responsible activities into their daily affairs, but need to be given more detailed guidance on the issues at hand so as to avoid adopting greenwashing and ill-informed strategies. ENGOs could therefore have a crucial role to play in engaging companies and highlighting areas of need. ENGOs need to be more effective in bringing attention to the ways in which climate change issues are relevant to other sectors such as economics, livelihoods and social development. Additionally, ENGOs need to develop more business-savvy strategies and modify their ways of communication to suit corporate audiences.

There are already existing examples of collaborative private-public efforts. For instance, the Philippine Business for Social Progress is the Philippines' largest corporate-led non-profit organisation geared towards reducing poverty in the country. Its current initiatives have also taken into account gaps that need to be filled in responding to weather-related disasters in the Philippines, particularly in minimising the disruption to meeting the poor's socioeconomic needs during such times (interview with Rene Fortuno, 30 June 2011, in Manila). Such collaborative efforts have also been initiated at the regional level, where ASEAN along with the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) has acknowledged the importance of providing mechanisms for disaster risk financing and of insurance strategies (ASEAN Disaster, 2011).

By engaging effectively in such local and regional efforts, ENGOs could serve to better inform and enhance other global environment-related initiatives. While the Earth Summit in June 2012 (also known as Rio+20, the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development) will be the next big global event for ENGOs, it is important that ENGOs understand the regional nuances in, and challenges of, sustainable development, as has been raised at other international meetings such as the Eye on Earth Summit (Sharma, 2011) and the five regional preparatory meetings held in the lead-up to the Earth Summit.

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Conclusion

ENGOs need to recognise their inherent limitations in the UNFCCC international negotiation process and adapt their strategies to more effectively make use of opportunities at lower levels of policy formulation. Some ENGOs have partially realised the importance of and the need for shifting their strategies – particularly after the failure of the 2009 COP15 meeting in Copenhagen. However, more can be done to encourage other ENGOs to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses in relation to their engagement in the UNFCCC process. This NTS Alert has sought to highlight ways in which such passion can be best channelled in the complex arena of international politics, where energy, economics and short- to mid-term interests often determine the fate of the environment and its long-term sustainability. It should be noted that while this NTS Alert has expressed reservations regarding the effectiveness of current strategies used by advocacy-type ENGOs, it does not discount their sheer importance in furthering the causes that they stand for. Indeed, in such an atmosphere, optimism and passionate ideas for humanity are vital in addressing issues related to the environment. More importantly, the efforts of ENGOs provide a fundamental basis for enhancing global climate governance.



An NGO briefing by a panel comprising civil society executives from CAN International, Greenpeace International, Oxfam, WWF and International Trade Unions held on the sidelines of the Durban meeting.

Credit: WWF@COP17/flickr.

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