

The final countdown

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Introduction

Copenhagen. In the past year the name of this Danish city has taken on a whole new meaning. For some it stirs feelings of hope and change, for others it brings tension and anxiety. This is because from December 7 to 18, 2009, world leaders will meet in Copenhagen to discuss the future of our planet. The United Nations Climate Conference will provide a crucial opportunity for world leaders to address a problem that affects all of the world's citizens.

While the effects of climate change know no borders, action to slow climate change has, all too often, been defined by what individual countries are prepared to do within their own political and economic systems. In Australia we have witnessed the difficulties of reaching a consensus about what action is appropriate. The Government's attempts to pass their Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme (CPRS) bill have exemplified these difficulties.



Climate change demonstrators making a colourful statement in the Great Barrier Reef. Photo from 350.org website.

Reaching consensus on a global scale may seem like an impossible task, but it is the goal of the Copenhagen climate conference. Attempts to map out global action bring with them moral and political minefields. Many would argue that in order for the planet to avoid catastrophic climate change each and every country needs to reduce their greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. However, there are also those who argue that developing countries should be allowed to pollute at a higher level until development imbalances can be redressed.

Someone who has seen first-hand the link between climate change and development is Phil Glendenning, the director of the Edmund Rice Centre. In this issue of *Watermark* we talk to Glendenning about his experiences with the Pacific Calling Partnership (PCP) and what he hopes will occur at the Copenhagen climate conference.

No matter which way you look at the Copenhagen conference it will be a historical event for our planet. Copenhagen presents not just an ecological challenge, but a democratic one. Coming to an effective international consensus about climate action will be difficult, but if one is reached it will be a sign of hope not only for our planet but for all of the planet's peoples.

Facts, figures, and the future

What's the big deal?

We know that climate change is a problem; we know that urgent action to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) pollution is our best bet to avoid a disastrous future. Why do we need an international conference to discuss the matter? Climate change is an issue that knows no borders. It is a global problem that requires a truly global response.

This is why so many peoples' hopes rest on the outcomes of the 15th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change – known more commonly as the Copenhagen climate conference or COP15. If a strong international treaty can be reached it will mean that the world will have a clear action plan to collectively mitigate climate change.

International cooperation is key to the success of real climate change mitigation. A close relationship will need to be formed between economically developed and developing countries. The industrialised nations that have most contributed to global warming are better equipped to deal with its impacts. The opposite is true for low-income countries, which are the most vulnerable to changes in climate. Hopefully, any treaty reached at the Copenhagen will address this imbalance. If real change is to be achieved globally, economically developed nations will need to assist developing countries in implementing renewable energy technology, funding adaptation projects and, in worst-case scenarios, relocating populations. This is something, in particular, that Australia, having many low-lying island neighbours, will need to consider.

The way the Copenhagen conference has been organised means that developing countries and low-lying island nations will be able to gather their voices into a strong, united front. Hopefully world leaders, however disparate their politics, will be able to respond to the urgent call of those who will be (and are being) hit hardest by climate change.

Why now?

The Kyoto Protocol has been the dominant international agreement guiding countries' actions on climate change over the past decade. However, the target dates for GHG reductions defined by the Kyoto Protocol will soon expire. The world will need a new set of guiding principles by which to collectively act after 2012.

As its targets do not reflect the current science it is also essential to replace the Kyoto Protocol.

Despite the fact that the world's scientists are amassing more and more evidence that human activity is causing climate change, there are still some people who disagree about the science of climate change. Many political leaders have conflicting opinions as to how much action should be taken, how soon, and by whom. These disagreements make the logistically difficult task of reaching an international consensus even more challenging.

What do people hope will come out of the Copenhagen conference?

The main aim is to work together to reduce GHG pollution and reign in global warming before it accelerates beyond our control. In order to do this, very specific targets are needed. Sometimes these targets are expressed as percentages. Australia, for example, has committed to reducing our CO² emissions by 5-15% of 2000 levels by the year 2020. Sometimes these targets are expressed in ppm – parts per million. Many in the scientific community, for example, believe that we can safely sustain a **maximum** concentration of 350ppm of CO² in our atmosphere. Sometimes these targets are expressed in terms of degrees Celsius. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), for example, states that we must reign in temperature increase to 2°C above pre-Industrial temperatures to avoid catastrophic climate change.

In the year 2009, Australia's CO² emissions are steadily **increasing** from 2000 levels, the concentration of CO² in our atmosphere is nearing **390ppm**, and temperatures have **risen** about 0.8°C since pre-Industrial times. It is clear from these figures that the real journey to a sustainable future has not yet begun.

It is said that journeys of a thousand miles begin with a single step. Hopefully the Copenhagen climate conference will be that first step, and a step in the right direction for our planet. Needless to say, having companions makes any journey easier, let us hope that the international community can step bravely into a better future, together.

A long way to go

An interview with Phil Glendenning before he travels to the Copenhagen climate negotiations in December



Phil Glendenning. Director of the Edmund Rice Centre

Parallel to the push for the science of climate change to be recognised is the struggle to make the human face of climate change known to all. Phil Glendenning, the director of the Edmund Rice Centre in Australia, is well acquainted with this human face through his work with the Pacific Calling Partnership (PCP). The PCP is a network of committed individuals who carry out advocacy work for the peoples of low-lying Pacific islands. It is the people of such places as Kiribati and the Carteret Islands who are experiencing the effects of climate change right **now**.

In our interview with Glendenning he urged those in power, “don’t get bogged down in only the science and technology”, insisting instead that decisions should be made to reflect human need. Belying the idea that climate mitigation needs to occur for the sake of future generations, Glendenning believes that climate change is impacting *today* on the lives of real people in places like Kiribati.

When asked what everyday Australians could do to assist the PCP’s cause, Glendenning stressed that action on climate change must be aligned with the fundamental Australian idea of the “fair go”. The fact that people who have made the smallest contribution to global warming are being asked to “pay the maximum price” should call upon our notion of fairness. Australians should act not only for the sake of our own ecological or economic future, but for the future of those who are being hurt by our excessive consumption. Glendenning pointed out that Australia is the world’s biggest emitter per capita, making it all the more important that we take a key role in dealing with the human impacts of climate change.



The notion of owing an “ecological debt” to our neighbours may seem confronting, but Glendenning sees strong action from Australia on this issue as a “no brainer”, saying that “it is the only sensible thing to do”.

Alongside the issue of climate change is that of development, and Glendenning noted that we need to look at why countries such as Kiribati are struggling when a nation like Holland, which actually lies lower than Kiribati does, is managing to successfully fight the effects of global warming.

While the PCP offers their support to the people of low-lying Pacific islands, they have much to offer the PCP in return. When asked what he has learnt from his experiences working with communities through the PCP, Glendenning explained that the people he has met have taught him about “adaptation, resilience” and have helped him to “understand the value of family and community in working together to combat a common threat”.

For those who have never travelled to the low-lying islands of the Pacific Ocean these same lessons can be learnt from those who, like Phil Glendenning, fight tirelessly to make the voices of the world’s most vulnerable people heard. All those who work with the PCP demonstrate what it means to work together and display resilience in the face of political challenges.

Glendenning will travel to Copenhagen in December with over a dozen fellow PCP members. There they will continue their untiring efforts to have the dire situation of those living in vulnerable low-lying communities recognised. Until Copenhagen and beyond, the PCP will work to ensure that, international treaty or not, our Pacific neighbours are not forgotten.

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Conclusion

It is hard to adequately express the importance of the upcoming Copenhagen climate conference. For the people of the PCP and the islands they represent, the significance is all too clear. If our leaders can reach a strong international agreement to work together on climate change it will be one of the most important events of this century.

The Australian Government has committed to raising its emissions reduction target from 5-15% to 25% by 2020 if the Copenhagen agreements dictate that other industrialised nations take on significant emissions cuts.

With many national leaders under pressure from fossil-fuel industry lobbyists, few are willing to be the first to sign up to significant emissions reductions. Hopefully this stalemate will be broken during the negotiations, allowing leaders to confidently introduce changes without fear of being at an economic disadvantage on the global stage.

As Phil Glendenning observes, climate change is more than simply an economic or a political problem, it is fundamentally a human issue. It concerns the human rights of all, and particularly those who have a right to call their vulnerable low-lying islands home. Climate change is not just a matter of eco-justice but of social justice.

During the Copenhagen conference the world might seem to be in the hands of a powerful few, but the planet belongs to all of us. Just as the citizens of a country have rights and responsibilities, we as global citizens have a right to enjoy the beauty and material spoils of the land, but we also have a responsibility to care for it. We have a responsibility to ensure that our enjoyment does not impinge on others' rights to do the same.

Whether or not their leaders are behind them, thousands of people around the world have already committed to doing what they can to be more energy efficient and reduce their carbon footprint. In our quest to do the same we need only think of our Pacific island friends and the spirit of the "fair go" will guide our actions.

Let us hope that, in Copenhagen in December, the "fair go" does not get lost in translation.

Links and Ways to Help!

Official website of the Copenhagen conference – includes regular updates and opportunities to post your thoughts:

<http://en.cop15.dk>

Easy-to-read break-down of the Copenhagen conference:

http://www.acfonline.org.au/default.asp?section_id=299

Many ecological organisations are running Copenhagen campaigns. You can join in the Oxfam campaign here or use the template letter and send your own to PM Rudd:

<http://www.oxfam.org.au/act/take-action/climate-change/2009-11-ask-PM-to-get-serious>

Details on the 350ppm movement:

<http://www.350.org>

Faith-specific page:

<http://www.350.org/people/faith>

Edmund Rice Centre website, follow the links to more information about Phil Glendenning and the PCP:

<http://www.erc.org.au>

Members of Parliament contact details:

<http://www.aph.gov.au/whoswho/index.htm>

CLRI(NSW) Website:

<http://www.clrinsw.org>