

Outcomes of Bonn UNFCCC Climate Change Conference: Prospect for agreement in Durban

An IISD Commentary

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The most recent UN climate change negotiations were held in Bonn, Germany June 6–17, 2011. The meeting included proceedings of the second part of the 14th session of the Ad-Hoc Working Group on Long-Term Cooperative Action (AWG-LCA), the second meeting of the 16th session of the Ad-Hoc Working Group on the Kyoto Protocol (AWG-KP), the 34th sessions of the Subsidiary Body on Implementation (SBI) and the Subsidiary Body on Scientific and Technological Advice (SBSTA), as well as workshops pursuant to the Cancun Agreements.

Given the underwhelming nature of the preceding talks in Bangkok, there was considerable pressure for the June session in Bonn to deliver some progress on key architectural elements of the Cancun Agreements before the 17th Conference of the Parties (COP) in Durban, South Africa. This sense of urgency was compounded by uncertainty as to whether a fall negotiating session of the AWGs would be held before Durban due to lack of funds. Many developed countries have stated that they could not justify supporting a fall meeting unless the two weeks in Bonn were productive.

Movement during the first week in Bonn was stalled as a result of disagreements over the agendas for the meetings of the Subsidiary Bodies, largely reflecting continued developing country discomfort with the Cancun Agreements as a basis for negotiation. The second week in Bonn was decidedly more productive with certain agenda items making considerable progress, including in the areas of adaptation and technology transfer.

However, while the talks in Bonn yielded some progress on architectural elements of the Cancun Agreements, key issues relating to a post-2012 climate change regime remain extremely protracted in nature, including the resolution of the two tracks of the negotiations, the legal form of a post-2012 agreement in the AWG-LCA, mitigation, and financing. As in past negotiating sessions, the contentious nature of these and other agenda items revolved around the “numbers versus rules” debate. In a nutshell, developing countries want developed countries to make further mitigation commitments, while developed countries refuse to do so until the rules surrounding these commitments are made clear—including the establishment of a binding post-2012 agreement covering all major emitters, a term that developing countries continue to oppose.

This round of negotiations revealed a clear need to transition to technical discussions on issues where agreement is actually possible. However, progress in technical areas continues to be held up by the political nature of many elements of the negotiations, reflecting the “all or nothing” nature of these talks to date. What differed was that this had been a well-used tactic of developing countries in pushing for deeper Annex I targets, now that the US was also using it as a way to push for stronger measuring, reporting and verification. In Bonn, the circular nature of negotiations on key issues caused many people to muse that certain items are beyond the scope of what negotiators can reasonably achieve with a clear need for higher-level political engagement leading up to Durban.

Bonn provided an opportunity for South Africa to clarify a vision for its COP presidency, including an ambitious agenda comprising both ministerial meetings and technical workshops leading up to Durban. This agenda, combined with a confirmed plan for fall meetings of the AWGs (location to be determined), allows some room for cautious optimism concerning the operationalization of elements of the Cancun Agreements. However, prospects for movement on key negotiating issues in Durban critically depend on whether political discussions can unlock the many protracted issues within the negotiations. With the near-term success of the negotiations largely resting in the hands of political leaders—and the immovable domestic political situation of critical players—many left Bonn pessimistic about the ability of this multilateral process to yield a comprehensive, legally binding agreement in the near future. As a result, there are low expectations for Durban (as there were before the Bonn session). There are increasing indications that we will be looking at a bottom-up pledge and review system of national pledges with an unclear legal status. This appears to be the only option many major emitters from both developed and developing countries may be willing to accept.

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