Good COP, Bad COP

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Like on any of the nighttime dramas, we watch time and time again how yet another police duo utilize the classic good cop/bad cop routine. Well, in my final blog from Durban, I leave you with my own good COP/bad COP. Let's play good COP first.

A Deal is Struck
The good news is that we have an agreement to create a legally binding deal by 2015, a Durban Platform for Advanced Action. Significantly, and thanks to our stalwart U.S. negotiators – Todd Stern and Jonathan Pershing – the framework for that agreement will include all countries. That is a significant departure from the old paradigm that created a firewall between developed and developing countries. This Durban agreement will now include all major emitters – like China, India and Brazil. On Sunday afternoon, following what was the longest COP in history, Pershing said it is "a major step forward on climate change." He continued, "It's the most constructive collective action in a decade." The bad news is that the details won't be finalized until 2015 (see below: A Commitment to Commit...)

The Green Climate Fund
The design for this critical funding mechanism was inked in Durban, too. The Germans are putting up $40 million to create the implementation infrastructure to get this fund off the ground. But apparently more headway was needed to figure out how countries are going to fund it and at how much. The promise of the fund in Copenhagen (COP15) was to grow it to $100 billion a year by 2020. UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon's urging that it "must not be an empty shell" has yet to be addressed with any actual money.

The Kyoto Protocol's Stay of Execution
For the past two weeks, many experts and pundits were suggesting that Durban would be the final resting place of the Kyoto Protocal, the 1997 global pact enforcing carbon reductions. The reports of its demise, using a Mark Twain expression, were highly exaggerated. Kyoto received a five to seven year extension taking it out to 2017 or 2020.

The Host City of Durban
With long hours spent tucked away in the recesses of a conference center, too few negotiators and delegates were able to see the glint of the sun sparkle off the waves crashing onto the shores of Durban, the beautiful South African host city facing the vast expanse of the Indian Ocean. In a country known for some of the wildest, most majestic places on Earth, I'm not sure anyone was prepared for the wave of discontent, discouragement and dismay that also swept through the city as action and agreement at COP17 seemed to be consistently trumped by delay and division. Through it all, the city was a gracious, friendly and hospitable host to more than 16,000 participants from more than 190 countries.

And now for the bad COP:

An Urgency Gap?
Your reason for coming to Durban was made quite clear from the outset. Upon arriving, negotiators and delegates saw banners and signs the host country placed all over the city announcing the conference's motto: "Working together to save tomorrow today." Echoing that sentiment, a variety of world leaders tried to put the global meeting in perspective, arguing that COP17 was about nothing less than negotiating the world's future. The exclamation point on that perspective came from several delegates from the world's small island states, who told us that failure to take global action soon would literally leave them under water and without a home. But even with scientific clarity around the devastating impacts of climate change, countries are responding with varying degrees of urgency, unsure about how to effectively and fairly balance the economic challenges of today with certain intensifying difficulties of tomorrow.

International Negotiations: Nasty, Brutish and Long
One of the best analogies to describe our climate future comes from James Hansen, a premier U.S. climate scientist, who famously referred to climate change as "a ticking time bomb." The analogy is simple: We can defuse the bomb if we act quickly or we'll be forced to pick up the pieces after it detonates. And one thing he says every chance he gets is that time is running out. But international negotiations are nasty, brutish and, this is the departure from Hobbes, long. It was somewhat encouraging as negotiators worked into the weekend to salvage some agreement in Durban, but many were left wondering if we're waiting too long.

A Commitment to Commit Later On...Maybe
When it comes to a Facebook relationship status for the world's countries working to craft a climate deal, they're still just "In a Relationship." There might now be an engagement, but there's certainly no marriage. Covering Durban was like trying to listen in on a couple talking about whether or not to get engaged...maybe.

Ultimately, the plan advanced during the final days in Durban to move on a legally binding carbon reduction plan is a commitment to commit later. Sure, it was what salvaged a deal and now all emitters will be held accountable. But climate change is accelerating and a finalized agreement by 2015 wouldn't go into effect until 2020. If I recall, the motto was "working together to save tomorrow today," not 2020.

For more photos from Jason's trip to COP17, browse our Dispatches from Durban album on Facebook.

Jason Hartke
Vice President, National Policy and Advocacy
U.S. Green Building Council

USGBC staff

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