Dispatches from Durban: Climate Talks Can Impact Green Building Worldwide

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This is the first in a series of blog entries covering the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP-17) taking place Nov. 28-Dec. 9, 2011, in Durban, South Africa.

Yes…domestic politics do have consequences and we all need to understand the implications of our own important national policy challenges. But no...it is not possible to ignore the larger global issues that are not discussed rationally in the narrow context of our domestic political debates.

The global community has never been as transparently interdependent as it is today. And I know that will be particularly clear for those of us in Durban, South Africa, for two weeks of international dialogue on a future pact to tackle global warming.

In fact, today marks the start of the Durban climate talks, sometimes referred to as "COP 17." Certainly, many issues under the banner of this UN system appear awfully bureaucratic, foreign and complex—and in fact they are. But some policy decisions under consideration have the potential to channel large-scale financing to green building, energy efficiency and other green technologies aimed at reducing emissions and adapting to climate change - and that's why USGBC is involved.

Issues I'll be Watching

One of the topics on the front burner of the Durban talks is the structure of a new system for how clean technology can be scaled up in developing and middle-income countries, such as China, India and Brazil. It's currently being negotiated to facilitate private-sector expertise and implementation. A lot is at stake here; the United States and other wealthy nations have committed to mobilizing $100 billion dollars per year by 2020 for this purpose. How this technology program is operationalized could provide opportunities for the global green building industry on a whole new scale– including companies in the United States.

Next, there is another tool that has been in place for years to stimulate clean technology projects using the international carbon market. This is another way to channel finance to private-sector companies involved in the energy efficiency and renewable energy sector. It's not perfect, but experts have been working for years to streamline the program, called the Clean Development Mechanism, to better address green buildings, energy efficiency projects and city-wide efforts. Institutions such as the World Bank, the UNEP Sustainable Buildings and Climate Initiative (UNEP-SBCI) and others have made progress on methodology to do just that – but this program's fate is wrapped up in yet another thick layer of negotiations which has the world split in two: do we continue with the Kyoto Protocol, or do we negotiate something new altogether to reduce greenhouse gas emissions?

USGBC will be joining the World Green Building Council and its delegation of GBC Australia, GBC South Africa and Jordan GBC on the ground for this historic conference. As chair of the advocacy committee for the United Nations Environment Programme's Sustainable Buildings and Climate Initiative (UNEP-SBCI), I will also be working closely with the public and private sector members of that organization. Durban may indeed present a "fork in the road" for multilateral efforts on climate change. While the Kyoto question looms large for delegates, our position is clear – that no matter what form it takes, delegates must work diligently and transparently to come to agreement on a path forward to reduce

emissions; one that incorporates mechanisms like the above to rapidly finance and bring to scale clean technology solutions like energy efficiency.

How I'll Be Participating

Of course, green buildings can and should be part of the solution. Along with Jason Hartke, USGBC's Vice President of National Policy, I will be in Durban to advocate that message and follow the progress of the Talks. This year is the largest GBC delegation to attend the UN Climate Conference, and we have a packed schedule of events, panel discussions, tours and meetings. These opportunities in Durban provide a platform for communicating our core messages on green building to an international audience of government, businesses, financiers and NGOs – and we plan on reporting back regularly throughout the end of the conference in our blog series, Dispatches from Durban.

Some places you can find us in Durban are...

- On panels with our colleagues at Johnson Controls, Ingersoll Rand, the World Business Council on Sustainable Development (WBCSD) and more.
- Conveying the business opportunity of energy efficiency at the World Climate Summit with Kateri Callahan of Alliance to Save Energy and Jane Henley of the WorldGBC.
- On the edge of our seats at the press conference for the WorldGBC Government Leadership Awards to see which cities won the award (U.S. cities Chicago, San Francisco and New York are up for consideration!)
- Filing up on optimism at the Cato Manor low-income green home retrofit tour, where the Green Building Council of South Africa has retrofitted an entire block of low-income homes as a COP-17 legacy project, demonstrating the ability of green building strategies to cut carbon emissions and improve lives.

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