



CLIMATE CHANGE CHALLENGE

Stop the Dialogue of the Deaf

By Mostafa K. Tolba

The remarkable film *An Inconvenient Truth* greatly increased international public awareness of the threat posed by global warming. Presented by former U.S. Vice President Al Gore, and directed by Davis Guggenheim, the film recorded dramatic scenes of ice melting at the North Pole, and strong storms and floods sweeping across our planet. Certainly, the critical issue of climate change is now firmly fixed on the agendas of international policy makers. Unfortunately, actual progress in addressing the challenge is too slow.

The outcome of the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Cancun, Mexico, last December proved once again that governments are not serious enough about the issue. Non-stop consultations between developed and developing countries must now take place and they should achieve tangible and effective compromises before the next climate change conference in Durban, South Africa, in November. We need to develop more scientific evidence, it is true. But we certainly know enough.

In 2006, as Gore's film was released, another important contribution to tackling the problem came in the Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change. Established by British Prime Minister Tony Blair and headed by Sir Nicholas Stern, a former chief economist at the World Bank, the group embarked on discussions with experts from all over the world. The review made three telling findings.

It said that actions taken today to mitigate climate change cost 1 percent of global gross domestic product (GDP), but dealing with its impact later will cost 5 percent of global GDP. The review found that spending in the next twenty years on actions to mitigate climate change will have a positive effect only after 2050 because of the life spans of greenhouse gases (GHGs). And the group said that the average global temperature will continue to increase for the next twenty years even if emissions are stopped today, again

◁ **Melting icebergs, Ilulissat Kangerlua Glacier, Disko Bay, Greenland, July 31, 2006. Paul Souders/Corbis**

because of the lifespans of GHGs. The Stern Review had a great impact. Blair sent his foreign minister to present the issue to the United Nations Security Council for the first time in history not as global environmental problem but as a global security problem.

Further valuable recognition of the issue came when Gore and the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007. In its fourth assessment report, issued in November of that year, the IPCC departed from the usual cautious language of scientists in making a categorical statement about the threat. The report said: "Warming of the climate system is unequivocal, as is now evident from observations of increases in global average air and ocean temperatures, widespread melting of snow and ice and rising global average sea level." The IPCC report added that most of the observed increases in global average temperatures since the mid-twentieth century are very likely due to the observed increase in anthropogenic GHG concentrations.

The IPCC report contained disturbing news for Africa. It said that by 2020, between seventy-five and two hundred and fifty million people in Africa may be exposed to increased water stress due to climate change. It estimated that in some African countries, including those in North Africa, yields from rain-fed agriculture could be reduced by up to 50 percent. Thus, agricultural production may be severely compromised, further exacerbating malnutrition. The IPCC said that the area of arid and semi-arid land in Africa could increase 5–8 percent.

The IPCC based its emphatic conclusions on a number of facts, which it presented in its 2007 report: CO₂ atmospheric concentration increased from 280 PPM (parts per million) in 1950 to 379 PPM in 2005. The average concentration for the last three hundred and sixty-five thousand years was 300 PPM. Eleven out of the previous twelve years (1994–2005) were the hottest years on record. The number of cold days and nights, hot days and nights, as well as heat waves, increased in the last fifty years. The average sea level rise was 3.1 mm/year between 1993 and 2003, compared to an average of 1.8 mm/year during the period 1961–2003. There is up to 97 percent confidence within the IPCC that the average global temperature will increase by two degrees Celsius by 2050—though this could happen as early as the year 2035. The IPCC had more than 50 percent confidence that the average global temperature would increase in the twenty-first century by five to six degrees Celsius—a development never before faced by human beings.

These disturbing facts were further stressed and accentuated by the UN Environmental Programme's 2007 State of the Environment Report (SOE) and the UN Development Programme's 2007 Human Development Report, both devoted entirely to the issue of climate change. Additional reports by the World Bank, the European Union (EU), the Organization for Economic Cooperation for Development (OECD), the U.S. National Science Foundation, and others, were published in 2008 and 2009 stressing the negative global impacts of climate change.

At a meeting in Indonesia in 2007, there was new hope for positive movement. The Bali Action Plan, launching a process for long-term action, was adopted by a meeting of the conference of the parties to the Climate Change Framework Convention (UNFCCC) and the Kyoto Protocol. The Bali Action Plan called for a comprehensive process to enable the full, effective and sustained implementation of the Convention through long-term cooperative action, now, up to and beyond 2012, in order to reach an agreed outcome and adopt a decision at its fifteenth session in Copenhagen, by addressing, inter alia:

- (a) A shared vision for long-term cooperative action, including a long-term global goal for emission reductions.
- (b) Enhanced national/international action on mitigation of climate change, including, inter alia, consideration of:
 - (i) measurable, reportable and verifiable nationally appropriate mitigation commitments or actions, including quantified emission limitation and reduction objectives, by all developed country parties.
 - (ii) Nationally appropriate mitigation actions by developing country parties in the context of sustainable development, supported and enabled by technology, financing and capacity-building, in a measurable, reportable and verifiable manner.
- (c) Enhanced action on adaptation, including, inter alia, consideration of international cooperation to support urgent implementation of adaptation actions.
- (d) Enhanced action on technology development and transfer to support action on mitigation and adaptation, including, inter alia, consideration of:
 - (i) effective mechanisms and enhanced means for the removal of obstacles to, and provision of financial and other incentives for, scaling up of the development and transfer of technology to developing country parties in order to promote access to affordable environmentally sound technologies.
 - (ii) ways to accelerate deployment, diffusion and transfer of affordable environmentally sound technologies.
- (e) Enhanced action on the provision of financial resources and investment to support action on mitigation and adaptation and technology cooperation.

Implementation of the Bali Action Plan has been disappointing, to say the least. The UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in 2009 was attended by over one hundred heads of state and government. Despite the growing body of disturbing facts, and high expectations that the assembled leaders would take action, the Copenhagen conference concluded with a modest accord including very few concrete commitments.

The first three paragraphs of the Copenhagen Accord adopted by heads of state and governments, ministers, and other heads of delegations attending the conference, stated:

1. We underline that climate change is one of the greatest challenges of our time. We emphasize our strong political will to urgently combat climate change in accordance with the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities.
2. We should cooperate in achieving the peaking of global and national emissions as soon as possible, recognizing that the time frame for peaking will be longer in developing countries and bearing in mind that social and economic development and poverty eradication are the first and overriding priorities of developing countries.
3. We agree that developed countries shall provide adequate, predictable and sustainable financial resources, technology and capacity-building to support the implementation of adaptation action in developing countries.

Such general statements had been adopted in dozens of previous conferences, starting with the first international conference on climate change in 1979, in Geneva by the World Meteorological Organization and UNEP in co-operation with UNESCO, the World Health Organization, and the Food and Agriculture Organization. Only three paragraphs came close to commitments, but none went beyond mere intentions or contained specific details on how they would be implemented:

1. The collective commitment by developed countries is to provide new and additional resources, including forestry and investments through international institutions, approaching \$30 billion for the period 2010–2012 with balanced allocation between adaptation and mitigation... In the context of meaningful mitigation actions and transparency on implementation, developed countries commit to a goal of mobilizing jointly \$100 billion a year by 2020 to address the needs of developing countries.
2. We decide that the Copenhagen Green Climate Fund shall be established as an operating entity of the financial mechanism of the Convention to support projects, programmes, policies and other activities in developing countries related to mitigation including REDD-plus, adaptation, capacity-building, technology development and transfer.
3. In order to enhance action on development and transfer of technology we decide to establish a Technology Mechanism to accelerate technology development and transfer in support of action on adaptation and mitigation that will be guided by a country-driven approach and be based on national circumstances and priorities.”

So the Cancun conference, albeit with reduced expectations after Copenhagen’s disappointing results, became a litmus test of whether we were serious or not. Unfortunately, Cancun ended with another modest accord, indicating that we are not so serious. The

Cancun agreements, though not legally binding, perhaps did give a boost to the process of negotiations. They give the more than one hundred and ninety countries participating in the conference another year to decide whether to extend the frayed Kyoto Protocol. This at least allows the process to result in a more robust accord at the next conference in Durban. The agreements set up a new fund to help poor countries adapt to climate changes, create new mechanisms for the transfer of clean energy technology, provide compensation for the preservation of tropical forests, and strengthen the emissions reduction pledges that came out of the Copenhagen conference.

A vital point that had been stressed by the Copenhagen conference declaration remains a source of major differences between developed and developing countries: the principle of “common but differentiated” responsibilities. Developing countries insist that developed ones have a historical responsibility and should cut emissions and provide developing countries with finance and technology to do their part. Developed countries, on the other hand, ask about the growing contribution of developing nations to global warming.

If we are to save our planet there must be a real willingness to cooperate, with developing countries accepting part of the responsibility for current and future emissions, and developed countries taking full responsibility for past emissions. This cannot be achieved without frank and open discussions between the two sides, talking to, rather than past, one another. Developing countries must realize that the total CO₂ emissions by China in 2009 surpassed those of the United States, the biggest emitter; and that emissions by India are similar to those of Japan or Russia. We must immediately begin a series of non-stop informal consultations between the leading countries in both camps with a view to achieving compromises before Durban. The UN must play the role of a global body concerned about serious global problems. It should offer a neutral forum, but work to produce meaningful compromise formulations that bring together opposing views. Too much is at stake to allow such useless negotiations to continue forever.

Governments have no option but to halt the dialogue of the deaf and agree on four basic points if Durban is to be a success. These are: agreement on the verification of emission reductions; agreement between developed and developing countries on the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities; specific targets for the GHG emissions in developed and developing countries; and finally, developing countries need to be offered a grace period before applying the reductions required by a new treaty. Advanced developing countries (China, India, Brazil, South Korea, Malaysia, etc.) may have a shorter grace period than other developing countries—certainly shorter than those for least developed countries and small island states. As per the Copenhagen agreements, parties need to define specific figures for financing a climate change adaptation fund, and to establish the details of the technology transfer mechanism. The most affected countries should be supported urgently.