

ICTSD

International Centre for
Trade and Sustainable Development

Bridges Trade BioRes • Volume 9 • Number 4 • 6th March 2009

South African Climate Summit Yields Pessimism on Copenhagen

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South African officials meeting at a major summit on climate change in Johannesburg say that a reaching comprehensive climate change deal in Copenhagen is unlikely, citing the continued developed-developing country divide on the issue and diverging interests within the two groups.

The conference, held from 3-6 March, was launched amid optimism with Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism Marthinus van Schalkwyk reminding participants that they should not rule out the possibility of inking a successor to the Kyoto Protocol by the end of the year. "We want an agreement in Copenhagen, we want the agreement to be legally binding, we want decisions on finance and technology transfer to be binding - I believe it is still within our reach," van Schalkwyk said on Tuesday.

But negativity on the issue, driven in part by participants' concern over the lack of a clear US position on climate change, led to more attention being placed on a preference for a national approach to climate change.

When countries meet in Copenhagen in December, delegates will attempt to hammer out a comprehensive successor to the Kyoto Accord. However, many observers say that establishing commitments from larger developing countries and the United States could be difficult.

While the Kyoto Accord calls for no binding commitments from developing countries, the US has said in the past that its commitment to a climate deal would require participation from larger economies in the developing world, such as China and India. In turn, developing countries say they cannot commit to reducing emissions without significant technology transfer commitments from developed countries.

As Africa's largest economy and most significant carbon dioxide emitter, South Africa strongly opposes any climate change deal that would further categorise developing countries. Instead, the country says it would like to see absolute emission targets against a fixed base year for the developed world.

South Africa is often commended for its initiative as a leading developing country on fighting climate change. But officials meeting in Johannesburg say that they would like to continue in this direction on their own, rather than accepting an agenda that is forced upon them through a Copenhagen agreement.

"It is prudent to adjust our sails given our own energy needs to a more sustainable and environmentally friendly developmental path without compromising our immediate requirements for poverty alleviation and development," Deputy Foreign Affairs Director General Sandea de Wet said at the conference.

Officials at the meeting suggested that the lack of a clear position on climate change from the Obama administration - despite early signals indicating a proactive American approach on the issue - is placing a Copenhagen deal in jeopardy because many countries are waiting to see the extent of US commitments before formulating their own positions.

Thus, South Africa is suggesting a compromise that would modify the current agreement. "If we can get away with an amendment to Kyoto, that would be the best that would happen, but I don't think the EU would agree to that without firm commitments from the US," de Wet said.

"South Africa sees agreement at Copenhagen climate talks," REUTERS, 3 March 2009; "South Africa doubts full-scale international climate deal," REUTERS, 5 March 2009; "South Africa sees binding climate change policy in 3 years," REUTERS, 3 March 2009.

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