



Q&A with UNFCCC Executive Secretary Christiana Figueres: The UNFCCC and the UN Climate Change Conference in Durban, November 2011 (for quotation)

What is the UNFCCC?

The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change was established in 1992 to tackle the defining challenge of our time. The Convention has near universal membership, with 194 signatory countries plus the European Union, as a signatory in its own right. The ultimate goal of the Convention is to stabilize the level of greenhouse gas emissions in the world's atmosphere at a level which would prevent dangerous climate change. But the UN Climate Convention also deals with the central issue of enabling people to adapt to the inevitable effects of climate change, along with a host of other issues.

What makes the UNFCCC different to other environmental agreements?

The UNFCCC is not fundamentally different from other environmental agreements. But climate change does present a complex challenge, impacting all areas of society and the way the entire global economy works. So it is important to keep in mind that climate change will not be solved in a day, and all countries need to continuously raise the collective global level of ambition to deal with it, step by inexorable step. On the other hand, we are also confronted with the hard physics of climate change, and the international scientific community has very clearly indicated that there is a window of opportunity the world must use now if it is to prevent the worst ravages of climate change. Fortunately, there is a sense amongst governments that the speed and scale of action to respond to the challenge must be rapidly increased. So governments need to take the next big step in Durban at this year's UN Climate Conference.

How is climate change affecting the health of people around the world, particularly the poor and vulnerable and, above all, in Africa?

Climate change is already a grim reality, and increasingly so. The effects of climate change are clearly visible in the form of ever more frequent and extreme weather events, such as storms and droughts and rising sea levels. Obviously, Africa is one of the regions most affected by climate change. The increase in temperatures has already allowed the spread of diseases such as malaria and dengue fever to areas and cities which were until quite recently protected from them, due to their geographical locations or altitude. The vast majority of African farmers depend entirely on rainfall for their crops, so any increase in temperature can have dramatic effects on crop production. The nexus of food, water and climate is fragile and currently under threat.



What is the UN hoping to get out of the UN Climate Change Conference in Durban?

There are two main tasks that the conference can accomplish. One relates to building the institutions that will help support the developing country response to climate change. At the UN Climate Change Conference in Cancun at the end of last year, governments agreed the most comprehensive package ever to help developing countries build their own clean energy futures and also adapt to climate change. These institutions comprise a Technology Mechanism to promote clean energy and adaptation-related technologies, an Adaptation Framework to coordinate international cooperation to help developing countries better protect themselves from climate change impacts, and a Green Climate Fund. The Technology Mechanism and the Adaptation Committee need to be established so that they can start working in 2012, and the first phase of the design of the Green Climate Fund needs to be completed. The second pressing task for governments is to answer the question of how they will move forward together to achieve their agreed goal to limit the average global temperature rise to 2 degrees Celsius, and how to review progress towards that goal between 2013 and 2015. In Cancun, governments agreed to make this Review as a reality check both on their progress to cut emissions and on whether an even lower global temperature rise target would have to be considered in light of emerging science.

What role will the Kyoto Protocol play in Durban?

A decision on the future of the Kyoto Protocol will be a central part of the Durban outcome. The Kyoto Protocol is the only legally binding treaty the world presently has to combat climate change, and it is important that governments safeguard what they had worked on so long to agree and develop, and what has proven effective. This includes, for example, the rules that guarantee transparency of effort to reduce greenhouse gases and market mechanisms that allow industrialized countries to partly achieve their emission reduction goals by investing in clean technology in developing countries. At the same time, a global climate change framework under the broader Convention - which includes all signatories - is evolving but needs more time before it can be fully operational. Resolving this involves creating robust and transparent accounting and reporting of national efforts but the decision at a policy level of when and how to participate is a political decision and that requires clear leadership from a high level. I believe that common ground can be found and the right political decisions can be made.

Realistically, what potential is there to reduce greenhouse gas emissions over the coming decades?



United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

I am confident that the world can make enormous strides in reducing greenhouse gas emissions over the next years. Most of the technology we need is already there; the private sector is increasingly engaged and needs to take on a key role in applying those technologies. The renewable energy sectors of almost all countries have seen rapid growth, and there is a major trend towards energy efficiency. There is a growing understanding that going green is a motor for new jobs and that whoever invests in clean technology now will have a competitive advantage over others. It isn't exaggerated to say that the world is at the beginning of a new industrial revolution and poised to shift dramatically towards a low-carbon economy. But that revolution will go faster if governments and the private sector work hand-in-hand to build climate policies that support environmentally sound business goals, and vice-versa. Because of this, I am looking forward to showcasing successful public-private partnerships in Durban, many of which have benefitted the urban poor, not least in Africa.