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Africa Meeting Summary

South Africa's Response to Climate Change: Pressure and Potential

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INTRODUCTION

The following document provides a summary of a meeting held at Chatham House on 11 March 2013. The meeting looked at South Africa's response to climate change and the potential for international cooperation to develop a consensus that can produce swift results tackling this issue.

It is predicted that, as a result of climate change, South Africa will experience significant warming both of its coastal and interior regions, significant changes in rainfall patterns with attendant changes in water availability, and related impacts on farming, food production, biodiversity and health. Following this, South Africa, like many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, is under pressure to implement measures for adaptation and to move towards low carbon technology.

At this roundtable Ambassador Mxakato-Diseko discussed South Africa's policy responses to climate change, including on encouraging investment in renewable energy.

The meeting was held on the record. The following summary is intended to serve as an *aide-mémoire* for those who took part and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

Nozipho Joyce Mxakato-Diseko

Ambassador Mxakato-Diseko stated that the priority for South Africa in international negotiations over climate change is to help establish an effective and legally binding multilateral policy, after the disappointment of the Copenhagen Conference which failed to establish a binding deal on climate change. Developing countries were on opposite sides of the debate: some felt they could not continue being carriers of this system, but realized they had to be in agreement in order for progress to begin.

The Green Climate Fund that was formally established at the Cancún Conference was adopted at the Durban Conference, and the mission since then has been to re-establish multilateralism and a clear trajectory on climate action. The Kyoto Protocol was extended at the Durban Platform but the ambassador questioned the long-term implications for this agreement.

Ambassador Mxakato-Diseko noted that while Working Group 19 cleared the way for the Durban Platform for Enhanced Action to be adopted, a legally binding instrument signed by all still needs to be phased in. There needs to be an outcome that reconciles a negotiations structure and moves towards the 2020 goals. Now we can see an endgame on the second commitment period, and excess emissions allowances have been limited for Russia.

The clear challenge from Doha, Ambassador Mxakato-Diseko stated, has been that mutual trust between players is fragile. The Durban Platform had a positive outcome as the United States was bound to adhere to the Kyoto Protocol, whereas it did not ratify the protocol before. Ambassador Mxakato-Diseko expressed the concern that the Durban Platform must not be turned into a mix of old working groups.

One of the central challenges noted by Ambassador Mxakato-Diseko will be how to maintain interest in what needs to be done by everyone in regards to climate change. Developing countries want a legally binding agreement for all. Ambassador Mxakato-Diseko stated that one key issue will be how to balance the principles of this with the economic survival and development of poorer nations.

Ambassador Mxakato-Diseko also noted that it is very important to take into account political realities, such as infighting within the United States government on climate change issues, a cautious approach by China and the position of the BRICS countries as the negotiators between developing countries and the West.

The ideal outcome of the Durban Platform, according to Ambassador Mxakato-Diseko, would result in compliance with the opening paragraph of the Durban Platform document which refers to a universally binding protocol on climate change. Ambassador Mxakato-Diseko added that India fought to water down this crucial issue for least developed and small island countries.

However, Ambassador Mxakato-Diseko remarked that with appropriate management of negotiations, it should be possible to steer countries towards the best situation for all. While it has not been an easy time for Europe to make any major commitments towards finance for the Green Climate Fund, new opportunities are arising and progress has been made. Ambassador Mxakato-Diseko noted that President Barack Obama has publicly acknowledged climate change as a critical challenge and the West looks set to work with developing countries on this issue.

Ambassador Mxakato-Diseko commented on other issues of diplomacy, such as how to work with Chinese politicians under pressure to deal domestically with pollution. She concluded that dealing with a diverse range of developed and developing countries means that the ambition for financial redistribution is too low to incentivize at present. The United Kingdom has pledged financial assistance to developing countries to help deal with and adapt to climate change, but not all developed countries have agreed to this measure.

Ambassador Mxakato-Diseko noted concerns over the process of talks at the Doha Conference. Time was wasted on issues that could have easily been avoided: parties debated on principles, which according to her revealed an agenda that aimed to achieve less. Parties also wasted time on the 'applicable to all' definition, whereas the main concern is how to translate this definition into reality.

The focus now should be the question of ambition between now and 2015 for mitigation and finance, and how to achieve negotiations. Ambassador Mxakato-Diseko noted that, at this point, enough information has been obtained and now action must begin. As the two working groups have now closed, they can work together on the Durban Platform. The risk now is the reopening of discussions and the danger of more time-wasting. Work still needs to be done in regards to managing the dynamics of the Green Climate Fund in order to make it work. Europe is in a difficult position at present due to the economic situation but Ambassador Mxakato-Diseko stated the belief that parties have shown a readiness to tackle climate change that now needs to be translated into real work.

Ambassador Mxakato-Diseko concluded by pointing to South Africa's pledge to reduce emissions by 2020: 34 per cent, compared to the United State's pledge of 17 per cent. She noted that countries are finally taking climate change seriously, and that the outlook appears promising for the upcoming talks in Poland.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Question:

How can we raise political ambition on climate change, balanced with the need to rationalize it alongside other concerns such as the economic situation? What do you think the role of the United States in this can be? How can multilateralism work to ensure an eventual settlement on this issue?

As a country that is not known for climate awareness, what do you think of Poland holding the next climate talks?

Ambassador Nozipho Joyce Mxakato-Diseko:

Because this is a party-driven process, failure is very public; therefore failure is a big incentive. The process cannot be managed through the state level, or using institutions such as the African Union, but cooperation is needed at all levels. While it is difficult to see what the EU's stance on climate change will be, Poland may well follow the pattern of the EU in these talks. The chance of moving things forward is higher through this party system; although it is important that everybody comes out with a sense of responsibility for climate change.

At Qatar, they were prepared to question domestically what action was being taken on climate change within the country; the failure to achieve any real progress in the Qatar rounds was not due to the host country but the failure of states to unite in responsibility.

The biggest issue for developing countries has been the issue of finance, which was not resolved at these talks. After the Copenhagen failure, it is important to re-establish multilateralism and create a common stance on tackling climate change. At Durban, the heads of the countries met with each other under the guidance of the president, although it does complicate the process when everyone is a negotiator.

Question

Can you give an impression of the sense of urgency that South Africa feels towards tackling climate change: is it a priority? How has climate change affected the region of Southern Africa?

Ambassador Nozipho Joyce Mxakato-Diseko:

Climate change is a very real issue for poor people. Recent floods in Mozambique have demonstrated the devastating effects of climate change. It is important to note that climate change affects mostly women; especially those who rely on growing their own crops for their families. Seasonal change which is disrupted by climate change can destroy this self-sufficiency. The irony is that constitutional changes made in South Africa to benefit women have been eroded by climate change.

The government sent representatives to rural areas in order to educate local people, especially women, on the effects of climate change and how to adapt to these; but the people there told us they already knew about this. They told us that they need assistance from the capital in order to adapt. In South Africa, we lost industrial areas on the shoreline; fisheries have been depleted and thus communities have lost their livelihoods. In other countries, such as small island states, the effects are felt too. For example, in Kiribati, high tides at low islands threaten to destroy homes and infrastructure, putting lives in danger; this is also happening in Africa.

We need to become explicit on what we are going to do to build on the Millennium Development Goals on environment and climate change, and we must support each other to ensure that these goals are met.

Questions

How will South Africa respond to domestic pressure on the issue of decarbonizing economies? How will the move from cheap forms of energy such as coal to more expensive ones play out?

Has the failure at Copenhagen created an incentive for risk aversion in future talks in order to avoid further failure; if so, how can this be managed?

Ambassador Nozipho Joyce Mxakato-Diseko:

We could have taken a risk-aversion route in South Africa, but this would have left the bigger questions unanswered, such as how to make a legally binding document for all. When you manage the climate talks, you realize that you need to keep things going, despite the risks. The hope is that at each round of talks, previous agreements will be improved upon.

South Africa tried to establish a transparent system, although it has not always been as efficient as at other talks and this does not help to foster

mutual trust. It is something that it being improved upon, but this takes times. South Africa has always worked well with developing countries, but unfortunately an opportunity was missed with the United States when the Green Climate Fund was not adopted.

On the question of establishing a low carbon economy for South Africa, the issue of financial implementation emerges. The legacy of poverty that has followed the apartheid system in South Africa needs to be managed in a way that both builds on the environment but sustains development and equality. There needs to be a balance between funding for implementation, and for mitigation.

The whole issue of finance is tricky. While some countries such as China have stated that they are not averse to the principle of a legally binding Green Fund document, there is little finance for developing countries for adaptation at present.

Questions:

You mentioned that there needs to be a global, multilateral dialogue on climate change. However, is there a dialogue between governments, and citizens? Is there a need to explain the effect and impact of global warming developments and contingency plans to the communities?

Given that South Africa is so coal-rich, what implications would reducing coal usage have on the economy, particularly when it comes to pensions in South Africa which are heavily tied to the mining industry? Do you think perhaps it is time for the public electricity company Eskom to be decentralized in order to find new forms of cheaper energy?

To what extent is the national action that South Africa is taking – for example proposing a carbon tax – an attempt to motivate and influence other developing countries and their approaches to climate change?

You stated that South African citizens are aware of the impact of climate change, but is this awareness shared by industrial workers? Does the government have any plans for cooperation with the industrial sector on the issue of climate change? Finally, do you think that the media should communicate these issues to the wider public in a more effective and frank manner?

Ambassador Nozipho Joyce Mxakato-Diseko:

The South African government has been pulled into negotiations with Eskom; there are high level managers who have expressed concern on the availability of energy for poor people. In the context of this debate, these issues of appropriate energy use in terms of balancing emissions must be harmonized with the need to overcome racial poverty.

The minister for energy has opened up the debate with the private sector on how energy efficiency can be improved upon. The private sector will need to change its approach to the supply of power to the poor; and other providers can step in where the government fails. Coming from apartheid, there is no tradition of communalism in South Africa; so it will be interesting to see how this manifesto turns out. We need to work out how to decentralize Eskom in a practical way that does not lead to price rises.

The South African approach has not been about influencing other countries. There needs to be a sustainable South Africa for future generations to enjoy the dividends of democracy. The country is seeking the best result possible for mitigating emissions, as are other countries including Mexico and China.

This debate feeds into the platform of public dialogue. Civil society is very important in the debate over climate change, because groups are able to push the boundaries and demand more from the government, and offer suggestions. The difficulty is when civil society groups become embroiled within negotiations, becoming a part of the process themselves and therefore reducing accountability. Civil society groups play a very important part of this process and can push for a higher level of ambition from parliament and shame global leaders who fail to fulfil expectations. They have a flexibility that government does not have. Civil society groups in the developing world have different concerns to those from the developed nations, and so there needs to be a convergence within the parameters of the discussion on climate change between these disparate groups.