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Climate change negotiations: Time for a change

Why is the US so influential in climate negotiations? A report from the international climate negotiations in Buenos Aires, December 2004.

By Chris Lang. Published in [WRM bulletin 90](#) January 2005.

By the time the international negotiations on climate change in Buenos Aires ended on Saturday 18 December 2004, workers had already started dismantling the conference facilities. Yet after two weeks of negotiations, the best that the more than 6,000 participants could achieve was an agreement to hold another meeting.

The Buenos Aires meeting was supposed to discuss what the world should do about climate change after 2012 when the Kyoto Protocol runs out. “Quite frankly, we don’t believe it’s time to address the post-2012 time frame”, said Harlan L. Watson, the USA’s lead climate negotiator, on the second day of the meeting. 2012 would be plenty soon enough, according to Watson.

The USA has not signed the Kyoto Protocol, and has no intention of doing so. But as Michael Zammit Cutajar, the ex-Executive Secretary of the UNFCCC Secretariat, explained recently: “The Kyoto Protocol[’s] . . . market orientation was largely inspired by the USA [and] largely instigated by the negotiating positions of the USA.”

This “market orientation” creates a new commodity – carbon cycling capacity. Carbon trading “turns the earth’s carbon-cycling capacity into property to be bought or sold in a global market,” states the Durban Declaration on Carbon Trading, which has been signed by more than 100 organisations.

On the afternoon of 14 December 2004 I sat at the back of the meeting room in Buenos Aires and listened to some of the issues being debated. Sure enough, the USA negotiators were rarely silent.



COP-10 meeting, Buenos Aires

When I arrived, the item under discussion was L.20, which concerned the level of emissions for the base year of Croatia. The item read as follows: “The Subsidiary Body for Implementation did not complete its consideration of this agenda item. It agreed to continue its consideration of this item at a future session.” Not much controversy there, I thought.

But the USA team felt they could not consider this item without seeing it in black and white. Negotiations stopped while hundreds of photocopies were run off, one for everyone in the room. The USA suggested that the Subsidiary Body for Implementation should consider Croatia’s emissions for the base year at “its next session, on the grounds that a future session may be SBI 63”.

Saudi Arabia promptly opposed the USA’s amendment, without giving any reason. The Netherlands supported the amendment and asked why Saudi Arabia opposed it. The USA suggested that because the USA did not agree with the text of the informal consultations which had taken place about Croatia’s base year emissions and because Saudi Arabia disagreed with the USA’s proposed amendment that “we should set up a contact group” to discuss the matter further.

After a pause Saudi Arabia decided that it did, after all, agree with the USA’s proposed amendment.

Next up was item L.21. This looked much more complicated: The report of the Global Environment Facility to the Conference of Parties. Agreeing a two sentence statement about Croatia had taken 10 minutes. I imagined it could take several days to agree a 12 paragraph global statement. Surprisingly however, the statement was accepted, apart from paragraph 11, which mentioned “methodologies, indicators and data”. Argentina and China suggested amending the text. The USA and Japan disagreed with the suggested amendments. The discussion ran aground.

Daniela Stoycheva of Bulgaria had the unenviable job of chairing the meeting. She asked representatives from several countries, including the USA, the Netherlands, South Africa, Saudi Arabia, Argentina and Brazil to join her on the podium. They huddled together at the front of the meeting room. After around 15 minutes of private discussion, Stoycheva announced that “the parties were able to agree”. The words “methodologies, indicators and data” were removed from the report. Presumably the Global Environment Facility is to continue its operations without the drawback of having to consider anything as awkward as methodologies, indicators or data.



The entrance to the conference centre:

Greenpeace, Coca Cola, UNFCCC

When the meeting closed I headed out of the conference centre, past the little Ark that Greenpeace had built under a giant billboard advertising Coca Cola. Looking back at the entrance to the conference area I read the sign announcing the Climate Change Convention meeting: “To prevent the climate change, we have to change”. From the discussions that I’d listened to, I could only agree. A good start might be to change the way governments negotiate what they plan to do (or not to do) about climate change.

The participants at the next international climate change meeting, which is to be held in Germany in May, will not be allowed to discuss anything which might lead to new commitments. The US had refused to agree to a meeting focussing on compulsory reduction of emissions. Harlan Watson, the USA’s lead climate negotiator, told the BBC, “It is a give-and-take exercise and I think on balance we are very pleased with the outcome.”

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