

# Parliament for humanity

A world assembly on climate change could free up the process, **ANDREAS BUMMEL** and **DUNCAN KERR** write

**T**ime is getting short to secure a new deal on climate change mitigation. The Kyoto Protocol that placed carbon emissions caps on around 40 developed countries will expire in 2012 but a successor agreement increasingly seems to recede into the distance. One of the continuing divisions is over new emissions reductions targets, and who should bear the brunt of emissions cuts. Many doubt that the next UN talks scheduled for November in Mexico will achieve a breakthrough.

The deadlocked situation is complicated by the requirement that a formal decision on a new protocol has to be taken by consensus. This means that even a single country (out of 193) is able to put in a veto and to prevent decisions from being taken. This places a heavy strain on negotiators to satisfy and harmonise the suggestions of all involved parties as best as possible. That this is unwieldy and flawed finally became apparent when the opposition of five countries – Bolivia, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Sudan and Saudi Arabia – prevented the Copenhagen summit last year from adopting the Copenhagen accord. Instead, it was merely “taken note of”.

While the accord surely fell short of expectations of a new, legally binding agreement, it probably still was the best possible outcome at that point. At least, among other things, the accord includes a target of limiting the rise of global temperatures at two degrees Celsius. The fact that this small minority was able to embarrass the main negotiators has provoked appeals for reaching an agreement outside the framework of the United Nations.

Some are quick to blame the UN for the feeling of futility at Copenhagen, although as the meeting place for the nations of the world, it can hardly be blamed for the recalcitrance of any of its members.

As a consequence, however, it is clearly necessary to address the UN’s flawed consensus rule. One option now being discussed is to broker a new deal as an amendment of the existing Kyoto Protocol. If no consensus can be reached, setting new targets then would be possible if at least 143 countries, or three-quarters of the pact’s parties, agree.

We believe that, while this could be a contingency option to save the day, a bold approach is needed in the long run to fundamentally revive the UN’s negotiation process. The establishment of a forum of elected representatives – a global parliamentary assembly, linked with open discussion and majority votes – should be considered. As Jo Leinen, the head of the European Parliament’s delegation at the Copenhagen summit, said, it is “the purpose of national governments to defend, first of all, what they consider to be in the national interest. By contrast, a world parliament would be free to



introduce a complementary view, namely the interest of humanity as a whole.”

Composed of national legislators, the basic purpose of this parliamentary assembly would be to represent the world’s citizens in global negotiations on climate change mitigation. The assembly could build pressure on governments to reach an agreement and the close involvement of national legislators could also speed up the process of ratification that would have to follow after a new deal is achieved – it took eight years for the Kyoto Protocol to enter into force.

Being a parliamentary body, the membership of the assembly would not be state-based, but instead be composed of delegates from major political groups in national parliaments. Delegates would have to be able to vote individually according to their personal judgment and be bound only by their conscience, not by the instructions of their governments. Only in this way can they act as immediate democratic representatives of their

constituencies. Proposals for a world parliament have a long tradition and can be traced back to the early 19th century, and the suggestion of adding a parliamentary assembly to the UN is as old as the organisation itself.

Fuelled by a growing perception of a democratic deficit in global governance, efforts to establish a United Nations Parliamentary Assembly have gained momentum over the past years. By now, more than 600 members of parliament from over 80 countries, for example, have endorsed an international appeal that was originally published in 2007.

According to this appeal, “a Parliamentary Assembly at the United Nations could initially be composed of national parliamentarians. Step by step, it should be provided with genuine rights of information, participation and control vis-à-vis the UN and the organisations of the UN system. In a later stage, the assembly could be directly elected.”

Creating a global parliamentary forum that deals with climate change

might be a reasonable, intermediate step. However, is the pursuit of a UNPA a realistic attempt to break the deadlock over global action on climate change in the long run?

We believe it is. Reaching a reasonable compromise on the mode of decision-making might be more appealing to the state parties than risking a total breakdown of the UN process. One of the key features of a parliamentary assembly would have to be that the distribution of seats in the body reflects the actual weight of countries. The number of seats allocated to each country could be based on criteria such as population size, economic size and other factors. In addition, the assembly of course would not replace the existing intergovernmental mechanisms, but supplement them. A provision could exist that, if consensus is not reached, a qualified majority of both the conference of state parties and the parliamentary assembly is needed.

Adding a new player to the negotiations would not necessarily make the process more ineffective

than it already is. Quite the contrary. A new climate change protocol approved by a global parliamentary assembly would have a legitimacy that would exert moral pressure on countries to sign and help secure compliance on a continuing basis. Furthermore, government officials have restraints on what is possible for them to say without damage to their relationships to allies or neighbouring nations, and pressure from members of a UNPA not subject to those limitations would allow them to reach an agreement without causing undue prejudice to those relationships.

While a UNPA is not, of course, a magical solution to global climate change, the UNPA’s capacity to develop recommendations on this and possibly other global issues in an inclusive, open, transparent and democratic way would be an extraordinary step forward.

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