

Environment: Interview

## Durban redraws world map of climate politics

The Durban climate talks turned climate diplomacy on its head, says Hans Joachim Schellnhuber, head of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact.



December 20, 2011

### Allianz Knowledge: The host South Africa called the negotiations a "historic breakthrough". Do you agree?

Hans Joachim Schellnhuber: Of course the negotiations were no real breakthrough for climate protection. But the results can be seen as a gambit leading to a comprehensive climate agreement, a world climate treaty, even though no solid foundations for it were laid.

Nevertheless, against all expectations we will get an "end game" for international climate protection in 2015. From a scientific perspective this step has come very late, almost too late. Worldwide emissions must start falling by 2020 if we wish to avoid dangerous climate change. But I would describe the fact that the diplomatic world map on climate policy has fundamentally changed as a "historic milestone".

### To what extent have climate politics changed?

It has almost always been the Europeans who have bravely but unsuccessfully called for climate responsibility. They were rebuffed not only by the other industrialized states such as the USA, Canada and Australia, but also by the G77 bloc, the group of developing countries. Unfortunately, those developing countries the Europeans wanted to support have always chosen China as their advocate.

This highly embarrassing situation for the Europeans culminated in Copenhagen in 2009, when they were sidelined by the BASIC [Brazil, South Africa, India and China] states and the USA. This balance of power changed fundamentally in Durban.



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### What did Europe do differently this time?

The Europeans were extremely resolute and presented good arguments. I've never seen Connie Hedegaard, the EU Commissioner for Climate Protection, so feisty. When I talked to her she told me that there was no question of being made to stand in the corner again.

In the end, many developing countries, the island states as well as others such as South Africa supported the Europeans. Brazil also leaned towards the Europeans. As a result the world has been redrawn.

From a scientific point of view that's not enough by a long shot, but it does show that a new alliance can emerge. Especially in view of the Europe-Africa axis, a new partnership between the industrialized and developing worlds could be forged to produce sustainable growth, independent of the USA.

### Has this new alliance been formed because more and more countries are beginning to feel the effects of climate change?

On balance it is often not scientifically possible to attribute isolated events unequivocally to climate change. But research clearly shows that global warming alters global trends. The intensity of extreme events, for example, is increasing.

What is clear is that if the main polluters – the USA, China and India – carry on as before, it will lead to climate destabilization. It is therefore all the more important to seize this opportunity to achieve geopolitical changes.

The world will probably fall into two camps: in one camp the countries with old industries and old economies based on fossil-nuclear power with high consumption of resources and low efficiency; in the other camp those countries that, either out of necessity or insight, embrace a new, sustainable economic strategy.

I'm convinced that this latter system will prevail, because it will prove to be economically superior.

### If the economy has such a huge impact, was the scientific community's choice of the UN as the key partner in its fight against climate change misguided?

I described the UN somewhat provocatively as a great dream factory. But dreams can indeed have an effect on reality. The UN has a positive global history and establishes legitimacy, but it is up to the individual states to do the spade work. This involves the economies of each country. And major companies like Allianz are also responsible for fleshing out government policy.



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### This spade work also means developing low-carbon technology. Four years ago you told Allianz Knowledge we need a third industrial revolution. Can Germany, for instance, meet such expectations after phasing out nuclear power?

It is well known that the German energy transition does not arise from any key strategy. It is an accident of history triggered by the events in Fukushima. Nevertheless, the country's decision to move away from fossil and nuclear power and to embrace a renewable, efficient economy is well justified.

This experiment by one of the world's leading industrial nations has created an international stir. I am reminded of this repeatedly during my trips abroad. In Durban, for instance, British MPs asked to talk to me because they intend to align themselves with the German energy transition in their constituencies – against the interests of the nuclear industry in the UK.

Germany's decision entails a huge responsibility, not only for the country itself but also internationally. Germany has become a beacon in terms of its energy policy. But of course the same thing applies: plans are of little use, it's the implementation that counts.

If we're going to take climate protection seriously, the decommissioned nuclear reactors can't be replaced by high-emission coal-fired power plants. But it is wrong to assume that the German energy transition is part of the problem; it is actually part of the solution.

### Can global warming be limited to the two-degree target science demands?

That will now be very difficult. According to the research results of the PIK we're heading for an increase in atmospheric warming of 3 to 4 degrees Celsius this century. But global warming will not stop there. We've developed scenarios even up to 2300 according to which this trend will lead to an increase of 6 to 8 degrees Celsius.

We would be living in a completely new, risk-ridden world. As important as the two-degree target is from a scientific viewpoint, it is also clear that any attempt to prevent a further increase in global average temperature beyond this target is worthwhile. Every tenth of a degree counts.

In point of fact, hope rests on the proposed world climate treaty. Scientists will support the decisionmakers with advice, but in the end, perhaps, emission reductions can only be accelerated by transforming energy systems.

The world climate treaty will not require us to shower with cold water from now on. It will be concluded because the transformation of energy and economic structures will make it possible to protect the climate while maintaining and improving our standard of living. I think this is how the energy train will overtake the climate train at some point along the way – hopefully before 2020.

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- dev dongol:**  
22.12.2011, 04:09

CC problems are all related to water and rain cycle. We need water for forests, agriculture, snow (frozen water) fall for snow on mountains, snow on mountains must keep on melting (stopping means no rivers) for rivers to originate, glacial melting is not due to GW but pressure of the snow against the rock on which it is deposited. Temperature on the glacial regions has never been more than 0oC; it is still subzero. Please visit devbahadurdongol.blogspot.com for details on the causes and solutions to climate change.
- Raghava Rao Karavadi:**  
21.12.2011, 17:41

First forests Destruction must be stepped hereafter... That will increase Oxygen in the Atmosphere.. Also the Himalayan Ranges and other Nature Bounty Places must be protected. That may prevent the melting of Glaciers in Himalayas an other mountains in the world.

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