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A brief history: the UN climate change conference

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Eco Catholic

Fr. Seán McDonagh is in Durban, South Africa, reporting on the UN Climate Change Conference 2011. He will be providing updates throughout the conference.

One of the pitfalls that many of us who have attended the United Nations Climate Change Conference for years fall into is that we assume that the general reader has a good grasp of the history of these conferences and the issues that have been thrashed about during the past 20 years. On this, the third day of the Durban conference, a brief history might be helpful.

Countries from across the globe began to address the problems associated with global warming and climate change at the Earth Summit, in Rio de Janeiro, in June 1990. At that meeting it was agreed to set up a United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

This body was tasked with setting out a framework for action aimed at stabilizing atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases to avoid "dangerous anthropogenic (human-induced) interference with the climate system." Unfortunately, due mostly to the intervention of the United States under former President George H. W. Bush, no target dates or timelines were set. The Convention came into force in March 1994.

The next significant milestone took place at the December 1997 UNFCCC Conference (COP 3) in Kyoto, Japan. The delegates agreed to a Protocol that committed industrialized countries to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. The target was set for a reduction between 5.2 percent and 7 percent below their 1990 levels, in the period between 2008 and 2012. What became known as the Kyoto Protocol came into force on Feb. 16, 2005. It expires in December 2012.

In the run-up to the Kyoto Conference, a group of industries known as the Carbon Club ran

advertisements in the U.S. media, aimed at blocking the U.S. from signing the Kyoto Protocol. Many of these companies, especially those involved in the energy sector, were afraid that their profits would plummet if there was a drop in fossil fuel consumption.

Among them were household names such as Exxon Mobil, Shell, Ford and General Motors. They used all kinds of tactics ? corporate PR, psychology, mass media manipulation techniques and political muscle ? to force the Clinton administration to do their will.

Even though the U.S. delegation, led by then-Vice President Al Gore, signed the Kyoto Protocol, the Byrd-Hagel resolution, which claimed that the Protocol would damage the U.S. economy, was passed by the U.S. Senate by an overwhelming 95 votes to 0 votes.

Within a few months of being elected president, George W. Bush repudiated the Kyoto Protocol. Documents leaked to the press at the time of the Gleneagles, Scotland, meeting of the G-8 in July 2005 made it clear that Bush's decision was due in part to the pressure from Exxon Mobil.

As the work of the UNFCCC and the Kyoto Protocol process became more intricate, subsidiary bodies were set up to help those involved in various aspects of the negotiations. These included the Ad-Hoc Working Group on Long-term Cooperative Action (AWG-LCA) and the Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice (SBSTA).

These and scores of other acronyms are used constantly in negotiations and discussions to the point that even veteran attendees of UNFCCC meetings need a glossary to understand what is being said!

The next most significant UNFCCC took place in December 2007, on the beautiful island of Bali, in Indonesia. The result of that meeting became known as the Bali Road Map. It put the spotlight on the three areas needed to be addressed in any climate treaty.

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Given the dire consequences of a significant increase in global temperature, the primary focus of the UNFCCC is to reduce greenhouse gas emissions as quickly as possible. In the language of the UNFCCC, this is called mitigation.

Secondly, the plight of those who are already being affected by climate change must be addressed. Many of the countries that did the least to cause climate change will be most affected by it. One has only to think what will happen to the water supply of Lima, Peru, if the glaciers on the Andes disappear? Responding to this is referred to as Adaptations.

The final plank in the strategy is called Clean Development Mechanisms (CDM). During the past 200 years the prosperity of rich countries was based on having cheap fossil fuel readily available. China and India are now following the same pathway.

Poor countries have a right to develop, but if they opt for the fossil fuel route, it will be a disaster for everyone. To avoid this happening, rich countries must make clean energy technologies available to poor countries.

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