

Resistance and hope at a time of climate emergency

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International failure

- Overview, global emissions have risen by 36% since 1992 and show no signs of abating. In fact in 2010 they increased by a record amount despite a global recession.
- Independent scientific body [Climate Action Tracker](#) warns that the pledges for reductions that have been made – assuming they are even kept to - will lead to temperature increases of at least 3.5 degrees, by the end of the century
- At least [17 nations](#) will almost certainly break their modest commitment to 5% reduction pledges by 2012 made under the Kyoto Protocol. Countries like Canada, Turkey and Australia report massive increases in emissions.
- Even European countries, such as the UK and Germany, often painted as the good guys, are hiding announcements of emission cuts behind accounting tricks of ['hot air' credits](#), [outsourced emissions](#) and [carbon trading scams](#).

The Durban climate conference could act as a turning point. Are we willing to be truly honest about the failure of our political and economic system to tackle climate change and willing to exercise our power in shaping the world we want to live in?

“Without any doubt in my mind ... we have worked together to save tomorrow, today.” (South African Minister Maite Nkoana-Mashabane on conclusion of Durban UN climate conference, 11 December 2011)

While there were no shortage of lofty announcements at the UN climate talks, it took the words of a 21 year-old student from Maine to [speak the truth](#) about the climate crisis and puncture the bubble of deceit and delusion in the latest gathering in Durban, South Africa in December 2011. “You’ve been negotiating all my life,” Anjali Appadurai shouted out to negotiators who shifted uneasily in their seats. “In that time, you’ve failed to meet pledges, you’ve missed targets, and you’ve broken promises...Where is the courage in these rooms? Now is not the time for incremental action. In the long run, these will be seen as the defining moments of an era in which narrow self-interest prevailed over science, reason and common compassion.”

Appadurai's words could not be more apt. The UN climate gatherings should be one of the most important series of global conferences in history. Yet since the world's political leaders first pronounced their determination to tackle climate change the year after Appadurai was born, they have done the exact opposite and fuelled the climate crisis. Despite countless meetings, pledges and supposedly cast-iron commitments under the Kyoto Protocol, [greenhouse gas emissions have risen by 36% and the world has warmed by almost half a degree](#) since 1992.

As the scientific evidence has become ever more stark, governments' response has become ever weaker. In the last few years, industrialised countries, in collusion with emerging economies like China and India, have watered down any existing binding agreements and minimal pledges on reductions as carbon emissions have soared ever higher. This year, they went one step further and put off any binding cuts to at least 2020. This is five years after 2015, when the [International Energy Agency](#) and the Stern report warn that our emissions must peak if we are to have any chance of limiting global warming to less than two degrees Celsius.

The result has been that the annual UN climate gatherings have become deadly [Theatres of the Absurd](#), where no-one means what they say, and where reality is bizarrely distorted. It could be seen in the way the UN blankets the conference with materials stressing the dire urgency of climate change and the need for us to all act, yet couldn't even power its conference using only renewable energy. It could be heard whenever US climate envoy Todd Stern opened his mouth blaming every other country for inaction when the US as one of the biggest polluting nations has dogmatically refused to act. It was clear in the exhibition hall of the conference, which was dominated by some of the most environmentally destructive corporations and business networks. It was evident

even among campaign organisations this year that no longer talked about what needed to be done to tackle climate change but instead choreographed publicity stunts declaring their Love for Kyoto, an agreement signed 15 years ago that has patently failed to reduce emissions.

As an activist at the climate talks, it felt like there was an invisible collusion between many political actors in Durban, who all had different reasons to spin reality and avoid confronting the reality of our absolute failure to tackle climate change. Politicians spun nonsensical talk of progress or played childish blame games to hide from the public their failures or their caving into corporate interests. Campaign groups fixed on partial victories and spun positive in order to keep their supporters motivated. Journalists spun miniscule shifts into “dramatic developments” to bring drama to their day-by-day reporting. All of the actors gave the sense that progress was still possible within the UN if the right pressure was applied. They all suggested that tackling climate change is possible within the existing political and economic order.

It is an understandable argument - after all it is hard to imagine any fundamental redirection of our economy and society in the short-term – yet I think the reluctance to confront the utter failure of our political and economic system to tackle climate change leads to the surreal deceit and delusion that was so clear in Durban. The reality is that our political and economic system has completely failed, and will continue to fail, to meet the challenge posed by the climate crisis.

As climate scientist, [Kevin Anderson of the UK Tyndall Center argues climate change requires large scale](#) and much more radical government actions than has ever been carried out before. Yet our political and economic system, as it currently exists, makes that radical action almost impossible. Politically, climate change is constantly relegated to an optional extra, because governments fear any radical changes could prevent re-election. Economically – and in spite of environmentalists arguing that 'going green' would be good for the pocketbook – tackling climate change is still seen largely as a cost and one that cannot even conceivably be imposed at the cost of economic growth or transnational company profits. (As an aside, it is worth noting that during the Durban conference, the world's media attention was all dedicated to the Euro crisis – an example if ever you needed it of the prioritisation of money over the environment in today's world). When these fundamental constraints on radical action are brought into the multilateral arena like the UN climate conference, the result is stalemate as every nation follows the same strategy of trying to push everyone else to act and put off making any commitments for as long as possible. It is a recipe for ecocide.

So what do we do in the face of this monumental failure of the political elites to tackle the gravest crisis humanity has faced? I think the first step is to be honest about their failure and to no longer prop up the myth that these political elites will solve the crisis for us – no matter how much pressure is applied. We need to articulate that politics and business as usual will not work to tackle the climate crisis. Then we need to exercise that power in the arenas we can transform – in some cases this will be local, other times regional and perhaps occasionally national where we can mobilise the political forces to undermine the corporate political structures that constrain any effective action on climate change.

Second I think we need to stop talking about climate change, and start talking about climate emergency. As Anderson makes clear we still have time and a moral imperative to act and must be much bolder and ambitious in our demands. We must remember that while the challenge is daunting, it is only a global minority that needs to change to make a difference. As the Occupy movements have drawn attention to the concentration of wealth by the one per cent, it is interesting to note that less than one per cent of the world population produce 50% of global emissions.

Third, we must pro-actively confront the corporations that have hijacked the political system and which ensure that politicians dare not take effective action. Fossil fuel and mining companies have raked in massive profits in recent years, with many companies like Shell and Exxon having revenues far higher than most nation states. These global power-brokers consistently block any progress on climate change, fund climate scepticism, and promote false solutions, such as carbon trading, in order to avoid any transition to a low-carbon economy. They are looking to extend this power at the Rio+20 conference in June 2012, where their influence has already been strongly felt in preparations and the [duplicious language of the “Green Economy”](#) which looks to extend privatisation of nature that started with carbon markets.

Fourth, we need to start preparing now for the ever more serious impacts of this climate emergency. We need to work out how to ensure a progressive and just adaptation. We can no longer pretend climate change can be averted. It is already happening: all we can control is limiting its impact by cutting emissions radically and preparing for the impacts that will happen as global temperatures increase. It is worrying that one of the only

state institutions to take our climate emergency seriously has been the military, particularly the US military-industrial complex. Their framing of the crisis in the language of security is increasingly shaping public policy in a regressive and reactionary direction related to many areas from food and water security to immigration policy. Corporations follow closely behind, seeking via security or climate adaptation funding or through exploiting increasing tensions over limited resources, to further profit a small few. While these military and corporate players are being realistic about the future, very few social movements are willing to give this thought.

Developing a progressive adaptation could include putting more energy into mechanisms – such as the Tobin Tax on financial transactions - that can redistribute wealth from unproductive sectors to supporting resilience in communities worldwide. It will need to examine how to develop sustainable and resilient communities that can adapt to climate change that have solidarity embedded within them so that we do not create a new climate apartheid of rich gated eco-communities on one side and vulnerable climate-impacted refugees on the other. It could involve thinking of an international legal enforceable framework that will recognise the climate debt caused by the rich few in order to protect the majority.

Both the fight for urgent action against climate change and preparation for its ever-increasing impact are not mutually exclusive. Actions we take to stop climate change such as localising our food and economies, ending reliance on unstable corporate monopolies, creating energy sovereignty, redistributing wealth and power, are also key to preparing for progressive adaptation. They will need to be combined with national actions that create the scale we need – such as the Keystone XI pipeline demonstrations – as well based on international solidarity. In 2011, people discovered in unprecedented numbers that it was possible to take back power, whether from corrupt dictators or corporate-backed politicians, and in doing so transform the political landscape. The Arab Spring and Occupy movements made what seemed radical initially something that was embraced by almost everyone. It also showed that there could be a progressive response to an economic crisis based on solidarity and justice rather than fear. As we face the gravest climate emergency, it is crucial that Durban marks an equally significant turning point – one in which we reject the delusions of corporate and political elites and embrace a liveable future based on values of justice, compassion, wellbeing, solidarity and harmony with our natural environment.

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