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Beyond Copenhagen: Searching for climate resilient development paths

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Nobody was surprised by the February 19 announcement of the [resignation of Yvo de Boer](#) as head of the UN's climate talks. In Copenhagen, De Boer presided over the most chaotic, costly and in the end, fruitless attempt to negotiate a multilateral treaty in the history of global environmental governance.

In the wake of Copenhagen, climate activists, experts and leaders alike are asking "what way forward"? Some, like the South Centre's [Martin Khor](#), are gearing up for the next round of global talks, which will be held in Mexico in July. Others are refocusing energies on national or state level climate policy, including key states like [California](#). Evo Morales, the president of Bolivia, is hosting an [alternative climate conference](#) in April to build political support for the concept of "climate debt" and to press for a "declaration of the rights of mother nature." De Boer himself has thrown in his lot with business—he will join KPMG as an advisor on global climate and sustainability.

While the global climate talks are in crisis, the climate crisis is unfolding. In a [review of recent scientific studies](#), a team of Sydney-based climate scientists found that signs of global warming are accelerating faster than predicted, including melting of Arctic sea-ice, glaciers, and ice sheets. Sea level rise in 2009 was 80 percent greater than predicted by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) just two years before. Over the past 25 years, temperatures have increased at an average rate of 0.19 degrees centigrade per decade. A [September 2009 conference of climate scientists](#) at Oxford University found that "since the late 1990s, greenhouse gas emissions have increased at close to the most extreme IPCC scenarios" and there is a significant possibility of 4 degrees warming before the end of the century.

What this means is that not just our children or grandchildren but we ourselves will be living with and adapting to increasing climate instability, with attendant impacts on our physical, social and economic lives and livelihoods.

The poorest among us, both globally and in our own communities, are the most vulnerable on two counts. First is bio-physical risk. Regions and locales are differentially vulnerable to the changing patterns of rainfall, extreme weather events, and sea level rise that climate instability will bring. Many of the areas expected to be hardest hit—for example, west and central Africa, South Asia, the Andes—are home to some of the poorest people on the planet.

Second, however, is socio-economic risk. The capacity to mitigate and manage climate hazards and their impacts on ecosystems depends on economic and social assets, such as income, health, infrastructure, knowledge, and institutions. Based on a composite Climate Change Vulnerability Index of 33 indicators, the Canadian risk analysis group [Maplecroft](#) found that countries most vulnerable to “extreme risk” were extremely poor. Topping the list were Somalia, Haiti, Afghanistan, Sierra Leone and Burundi, followed by Guinea, Rwanda, The Gambia, Chad and Nigeria. All of the regions facing “high” to “extreme” risk [are in developing countries](#), including China and India.

The “[climate justice](#)” agenda, which exploded in Copenhagen, stems from the recognition that the poorest are at once the most vulnerable to climate change and the least historically responsible for it. Not only are per capita carbon emissions much lower in “emerging” economies like China which are now large absolute emitters, but some 2.5 billion people in the poorest countries rely on biomass resources for basic energy needs and 1.6 billion lack access to electricity.

At the heart of the global climate crisis—and the crisis in global climate talks—is an unsustainable model of economic development. Premised on unlimited economic growth propelled by global market forces and powered by fossil fuels, the neo-liberal development model has not only led to the brink of ecological catastrophe; it has created a wide chasm between the global rich and poor.

The climate crisis is thus a development crisis in two senses. First, economic development is urgently needed to reduce the vulnerability of the poor to climate change. Second, the current model of economic development will exacerbate rather than mitigate the climate problem. Responding to the climate imperative—the urgent need to both mitigate and adapt to climate change—requires the articulation and implementation of new models of climate resilient development.

Both the theory and praxis of such models are in early stages. Some are focusing on a shift to [low-carbon growth](#) as the central development challenge. While necessary, low-carbon growth does not sufficiently address the deeper roots of the climate imperative. As I argue in my new GDAE Working Paper “[Climate-Resilient Industrial Development Paths: Design Principles and Alternative Models](#),” a good starting point is to define sustainable livelihoods, rather than growth, as the overarching objective of economic development.

A development model based on sustainable livelihoods implies a very different set of design principles and mix of macro-economic and industry policies, as well as global trade and investment rules, than those which have nurtured the neo-liberal model. It also requires a massive mobilization of investment, both public and private.

Beyond Copenhagen, the search is on for climate resilient development paths. Stay tuned to this blog for updates.