

ClimateWire

NEGOTIATIONS: A call for alternative international climate forums

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Lisa Friedman, E&E reporter

A leading U.S climate change policy analyst is calling for countries to go beyond the United Nations to rein in harmful emissions.

In a new Council on Foreign Relations report, author Joshua Busby said last year's clamorous summit in Copenhagen, Denmark -- at which the United States and a handful of other countries hammered out a political agreement only to have it blocked by an even smaller handful enraged at being left out of the discussions -- underscored the weakness of global conferences in solving global problems.

"Moving forward, countries must diversify the institutions and instruments they use to pursue effective climate governance," wrote Busby, a professor at the University of Texas' Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs.

The U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) -- the body through which nearly 200 nations are trying to develop a new agreement to either beef up or replace the 1997 Kyoto Protocol -- should still be a key forum, Busby writes. But he warned against being "overly preoccupied with a single venue."

Instead, smaller venues and a "wider range of formal and informal, bilateral and multilateral institutions" should do the heavy lifting of international climate talks: coordinating policies; mobilizing and distributing money for poor countries; monitoring countries' mitigation compliance; and developing compatible international emissions-trading schemes.

"The UNFCCC will remain a critical policy hub, but in the coming months and years, other institutions and processes will also have an opportunity to show their worth," Busby wrote.

In the aftermath of Copenhagen, officials asked whether the United Nations was "broken" and questioned the long-cherished idea of a global consensus to tackle climate change. The line of questioning has come predominantly from developed country analysts and leaders. In March, Britain's climate change secretary, Ed Miliband, told Parliament that the UNFCCC would be more effective if it relied on smaller, representative groups of countries meeting periodically throughout the year.

The only reason leaders struck the deal now known as the Copenhagen Accord, he said, was "because we ended up with a small group of negotiators with a text that had been tabled. That only happened at Copenhagen at 3 o'clock in the morning" on the final day.

China, India and other developing countries both big and small have pushed back hard. They insist that because the UNFCCC offers equal representation to all countries, it is the only forum that poor countries most affected by climate change consider "legitimate." Finally in May, State Department climate envoy Todd Stern told a forum at the Brookings Institution that the United

States believes the United Nations "can and should" remain the "central agent for international progress and action" on climate change.

Meanwhile, nations have already been experimenting with different forums. The Group of 20 leading economies is discussing a phase-out of fossil fuel subsidies. The Major Economies Forum has met three times this year to informally discuss the negotiations. Last month, the United States hosted the first Clean Energy Ministerial to foster technology cooperation. And dozens of countries -- including the United States and China -- boast bilateral agreements to help bolster emissions reductions promises.

Busby argued that the top goals this year should be finding "institutional homes" for the \$100 billion in annual funding that developed nations promised to mobilize for vulnerable ones by 2020 and a structure for reporting and monitoring emission cuts.

But he also warned that little of it will matter without U.S. leadership. Without climate legislation, Busby said, the Obama administration could see "the new era ushered in by the Copenhagen Accord end as quickly as it began."

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