

Editorial

Coming of Age in Durban

In many societies worldwide, the seventeenth year of life marks an important coming of age, where, for example, in England, a youth can begin to drive a car; in the United States, one gains the independent right to do a variety of things, depending on the State of residence, including, renting R-rated videos, donating blood, and consenting to adult-only activities; and a seventeen year old can apply for aircraft pilot license.

This year marks the seventeenth year of life for one of the most pivotal international conventions in history, and as a teenager, one hopes that the convention gains independent rights of existence, charting a more straightforward trajectory. From November 28th to December 9th, 2011, The 17th Conference of the Parties (COP17) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the 7th Session of the Conference of the Parties serving as the Meeting of the Parties (CMP7) to the Kyoto Protocol, will be held in Durban, South Africa¹.

There are now 194 country parties to the UNFCCC, who have expressed commitment (1) to collect and share information on the potential causes of abrupt climate change, including emissions of greenhouse gases; (2) to develop national strategies to curb greenhouse gas emissions; and (3) to cooperate in preparing for adaptation to the impacts of climate change. To say the least, previous meetings of the convention have not produced encouraging results. Greenhouse gas emissions are at all time high levels, as industrial productivity in large countries such as China and India speed up, and the American public and politicians remain reluctant to act, despite former Vice President Al Gore's Nobel Prize for "An Inconvenient Truth."

There is a lot of hope riding on the 17th COP in Durban – that the UNFCCC will break free of the hegemonies of affluence. In particular, African countries, among the most vulnerable to the consequences of drastic climate change must ensure that their economies are not stifled while at the same time they encourage the world to support adaptation strategies that reduce vulnerability, especially in the health sector. In a study that I published in 2003, I remarked that:

*"The reconciliation of national development plans with global priority to mitigate environmental change remains an intractable policy controversy. In Africa, its resolution requires integrating local knowledge into impact assessments without compromising the scientific integrity of the assessment process. This requires better understanding of the communication pathways involved in progressing from frame construction to political action on various environmental issues. The impacts of environmental factors on human health are a common concern in Africa, and it is examined here as a platform for negotiating controversies surrounding the arrogation of global support for local assessments of vulnerability and mitigation."*²

Nearly ten years after writing the statement above, I wish I could affirm that we now know better and the COP-17 will build on major successes in negotiating climate change. But evidence would contradict such an affirmation. New studies suggest that health impacts in coastal cities will be broader than previously conceived³. Still, we hope for a coming of age in beautiful Durban,

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¹ United Nations - COP17/CMP17 – "Working Together, Saving Tomorrow Today" - <http://www.cop17-cmp7durban.com/>

² Ogunseitan, O.A. 2003. Framing environmental change in Africa: Cross-scale institutional constraints on progressing from rhetoric to action against vulnerability. *Global Environmental Change* 13:101-111.

³ Hipp, J.A. and Ogunseitan, O.A. 2011. Effect of Environmental Conditions on Perceived Psychological Restorativeness of Coastal Parks. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 31: 421 – 429.