



Q&A: UN Climate Change Conference in Poznan, Poland

What is the focus of the Poznan conference?

The Bali Action Plan, adopted by more than 180 countries in December 2007, set an ambitious goal of achieving a new global climate agreement in December 2009 in Copenhagen. The Poznan conference represents the midpoint between Bali and Copenhagen. Governments are taking stock of the progress made since Bali, discussing the proposals that have come forward this year, and adopting a work plan for the coming year. No major formal outcomes are expected. On a more political level, Poznan is a final round of positioning by governments before heading into what is expected to be a period of intense negotiations. Governments will be setting their expectations for what needs to happen next year in Copenhagen.

What are the major issues under discussion?

The Bali Action Plan lays out the key issues to be addressed in a new agreement: mitigation (reducing emissions), adaptation, technology, and finance. Among these, some of the most central issues include: the emission reduction targets to be adopted by developed countries; the types of mitigation actions to be undertaken by developing countries, particularly China, India and other major emerging economies; and the types and level of support to be provided to developing countries for both mitigation and adaptation.

How will the election of a new U.S. president affect the negotiations?

Without the United States at the table and prepared to negotiate, a new international agreement is very unlikely. President-elect Obama has said that when he takes office "the United States will once again engage vigorously in these negotiations, and help lead the world toward a new era of global cooperation on climate change." The new administration's ability to negotiate an agreement will depend heavily, however, on how quickly the new President and Congress can enact legislation to reduce U.S. emissions. President-elect Obama is calling for a federal cap-and-trade system to reduce emissions to 1990 levels in 2020 and another 80% by 2050.

What role will the U.S. Congress play in reaching a new global agreement?

Congress plays two critical roles. Congress must enact the mandatory climate legislation that will enable the United States to commit to an international emissions target. And any binding new international agreement must be ratified by the Senate. For those reasons, it will be important for the new Administration to consult closely with the Congress in shaping its negotiating positions.

What are realistic expectations for Copenhagen in 2009?

While there is a strong chance that climate legislation will begin moving through Congress in 2009, final enactment is not likely, which would make it difficult for the new Administration to commit to a specific emissions target in Copenhagen. In that case, Copenhagen is unlikely to produce a full and final agreement that could be submitted to governments for ratification. A more realistic outcome may be an agreement on the basic architecture of the post-2012 climate framework – for instance, binding economy-wide targets for developed countries, policy commitments for the major emerging economies, and support mechanisms for technology, finance, and adaptation in developing countries. This intermediary agreement could then serve as the basis for further negotiations in 2010 on specific commitments in a full and final agreement.