

# Cancún: Changing the Climate Conversation

Seven years ago, activists in Cancún started a powerful international movement. How can today's climate justice advocates have the same impact?

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Seven years ago, in Cancún, Mexico—where representatives of 193 countries recently gathered to negotiate a global response to climate change—another international drama unfolded. The estimated 10,000 people **who marched in Cancún** outside the 2003 meeting of the World Trade Organization contributed to the collapse of the entire WTO negotiation process, a victory against corporate power in the eyes of many activists. The protests made bigger headlines and were more sensationalized than this year's climate meetings. When a Korean farmer tragically committed suicide during the protest, the news shocked the world.

But global demonstrations against the WTO also heralded one of the most diverse and international grassroots movements anybody had ever seen, the global justice movement. Labor unions, businesses, politicians, religious leaders, and environmentalists took to the streets in New York City, **Seattle**, Geneva, and elsewhere. Millions around the world protested the Iraq War, helping dissuade many leaders from supporting George W. Bush's foreign policy.

It was a moment when many people around the world felt united in a common economic struggle—when the New York Times named the world public the “second superpower.” Now global justice activists see such a moment coming again—and they're redefining climate change not just as an environmental issue but as a fight for the basic rights to security, health, and livelihood.

Around the world, millions have already mobilized to demand a fair, ambitious, and binding treaty. So far, it hasn't been enough to keep the world's largest polluters from dragging their feet. Last year in **Copenhagen** and this past weekend in Cancún, the world's governments reached modest agreements that experts say are inadequate to stem the worst of climate change.

But, like the global justice movement before it, climate activism is beginning to find its most powerful voice.

## Big Money and Big Governments, Again

The United Nations process carries far more respect among developing nations and the grassroots than the WTO. The activists who gathered in Cancún over the last few weeks weren't trying to shut the meetings down, but to push negotiators to come up with a strong and equitable treaty to reduce carbon emissions. “I want to be really clear that I think [the U.N. negotiations are] the only legitimate process we have,” Canadian author and activist **Maude Barlow told me last week**.

But the U.N. process has similar flaws as trade negotiations, and some grassroots groups are losing their faith in the U.N.'s capacity to produce meaningful results. After the United Nations expelled Native American leader Tom Goldtooth from the meeting last week, the Indigenous Environmental Network called the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change “the WTO of the sky.”

As they did in the WTO, big, Western governments are muscling developing nations into agreements that jeopardize their own interests. A statement from Bolivia contends that, at these last talks, “proposals by powerful countries like the U.S. were sacrosanct, while ours were disposable.” Bolivia stood alone in its refusal to accept the Cancún agreements. But several developing countries pleaded with U.N. negotiators last Friday to adopt stronger limits on fossil-fuel emissions. “Our countries are already fighting for survival,” said Bruno Sekoli, a negotiator representing a block of developing nations, in a statement to press.

Largely because of resistance from developed nations, the agreements made in Cancún also don't ask countries to get ambitious about cutting back on fossil fuels. As Kate Horner of Friends of the Earth told Democracy Now!, the Cancún agreements rely on “a pledge-based paradigm with rich countries polluting however much they like.” And to the alarm of many in developing countries, they create a role for the World Bank, which has historically funded many environmentally destructive projects, in administering climate adaptation funds to nations suffering from climate impacts.

Finally, big money has hidden influence in the U.N. Many of the proposals for financing and regulating climate are designed to earn profits for the same banks that brought the global economy to its knees.

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Goldman Sachs and JPMorgan Chase have been vying for a stake in the global carbon offset trade—a proposed economic model for cutting emissions around the world. Many global-justice activists feel that climate change can't be resolved by an industry that's difficult to regulate, has a track record of fraud and speculation, and is driven by profit, rather than by an actual motive to solve the climate problem.

## Fighting for Rights

Global-justice activists took a major role in grassroots activities outside the climate meetings. La Via Campesina, an international farmers' organization that battled against the WTO in 2003, led an alternative forum in Cancún and **organized thousands into a street protest**. The organization was joined by labor unions, indigenous leaders, civil-rights and racial-justice groups from black, Latino, and Asian communities in the U.S., and longtime anti-globalization advocates.

Such groups may not wield the same resources and influence on climate change as groups like the Sierra Club or the Natural Resources Defense Council. But they include voices that are at once more radical and more representative than many U.S.-based environmental and conservation groups. And they talk about climate in terms of democracy and economics as much as environment. "The [global justice] struggle has just taken different forms. Climate and U.S. imperialism are the new battlegrounds," says Michael Leon Guerrero, national coordinator of the Grassroots Global Justice Alliance.

Now many of these activists are rallying behind legal frameworks used to fight "corporate personhood," the idea that corporations have the same rights as people. These new laws define environmental regulation not in terms of limits or offsets, **but through declarations of rights**. They say that ecosystems have a right to exist and people have a right to a clean environment. Such legal principles have been adopted by Ecuador, and also by the city of Pittsburgh and small towns in Maine, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, and Virginia, in their efforts to stop water withdrawals and natural-gas drilling. These legal principles guided Bolivia when it drafted the "Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth," and Bolivian President Evo Morales has been urging the United Nations to recognize environmental rights.

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There's something far more compelling about the idea of fundamental rights than about backroom finagling over targets and offsets. Rights have been the basis for nearly every liberation movement in history, from abolition to Gandhi's independence movement, and that may be why the Declaration looms large in the imaginations of many activists who gathered in Cancún. South African lawyer and former anti-apartheid activist Cormac Cullinan, who helped draft the Declaration, says, "The text ... is like the DNA of a new society that wouldn't produce climate change ... [but] it won't go through the U.N. system unless it's got a groundswell of support behind it and there's pressure on individual countries to push it through."

What will it take to create that groundswell? In part, it will take the kind of energy and inclusiveness that has marked the global justice movement—from people who understand that there are policies at stake that will define their lives for years to come.