Can This Planet Be Helped?

The latest Conference of the Parties (COP) in Warsaw didn't make headlines — more like footnotes. Two things have become clear. First, the formal UN negotiations are only part of the transnational development of climate policy. And second, the UN negotiations are moving slowly and fitfully, but they are making progress. Neither of these things should be surprising. The UN mechanism is very cumbersome, and it would be crazy to put all our faith in that one channel for making policy. And it's also understandable that progress is slow — climate change is a very tough collection action problem, requiring agreement by many nations with diverse interests and perspectives. This is extremely frustrating given the urgency of the issue, but at the same time it's not surprising.

In terms of energy-related issues, the key players are the developed countries plus India and China. The two Asian giants find themselves at odds both with the developed countries and with other developing countries, both of whom see the need to restrict emissions from these emerging economies. India and Asia succeeded in a last-minute wording change that requires that they "contribute" to restricting emissions rather than "committing" to do doing so. The change angered developing countries like Bangladesh, but at least it was better than the language China and India had originally proposed. It seems clear that the Kyoto division between developed and developing counties has broken down, for the obvious reason that emerging economies like China and India no longer fit either camp and are a major part of the emissions problem.

There seems to have been more tangible progress in terms of forestry emissions (the so-called REDD+ agreement), and it increasingly looks like the model for a new international agreement will be the informal agreement reached at Copenhagen.

Despite arguments by some American scholars that the issue of climate justice is a red herring, it is clear that this issue is not going to go away. Climate justice was given some recognition through endorsement of the Warsaw Mechanism for Loss and Damage, although it falls well short of the compensation commitment sought by developing countries. For now, this "mechanism" is placed under the umbrella of the adaptation fund, and it remains to be seen whether it will attain independent standing. Despite U.S. opposition, there is eventually going to have to be some kind of compromise on this issue.

The bottom line: it’s going to take an enormous effort to forge global cooperation to mitigate climate change, and the results will almost certainly fall short of the carbon reductions that we really need. But it’s critical to continue the effort.