



Why Bolivia stood alone in opposing the Cancun climate agreement

Pablo Solón

Diplomacy is traditionally a game of alliances and compromise. Yet, in the early hours of Saturday 11 December 2010, Bolivia found itself alone against the world: the only nation to oppose the outcome of the United Nations climate change summit in Cancun. We were accused of being obstructionist, obstinate and unrealistic. But in truth we did not feel alone, nor were we offended by the attacks. Instead we saw an immense obligation to set aside diplomacy and tell the truth.

The ‘Cancun accord’ was presented late Friday afternoon (10 December) and we were given two hours to read it. Despite pressure to sign something – anything – Bolivia requested further deliberations. This text, we said, would be a sad conclusion to the negotiations. After we were denied any opportunity to discuss the text, despite a lack of consensus, the president banged her gavel to approve the document.

Many commentators have called the Cancun accord a ‘step in the right direction’. We disagree. It is a giant step that replaces binding mechanisms for reducing greenhouse gas emissions with voluntary pledges that are wholly insufficient. These pledges contradict the stated goal of capping the rise in temperature at 2°C, instead guiding us to 4°C or more. The text is full of loopholes for polluters, opportunities for expanding carbon markets and similar mechanisms – such as the forestry scheme called REDD – which reduce the obligation of the developed countries to act.

Bolivia may have been the only country to speak out against these failures, but several negotiators told us privately that they supported us. Anyone who has seen the science on climate change knows that the Cancun agreement was irresponsible.

In addition to having science on our side, another reason we did not feel alone in opposing an unbalanced text at Cancun is that we received thousands of messages of support from women, men and young people of social movements that have stood by us and helped inform our positions. It is out of respect for them, and humanity as a whole, that we feel a deep responsibility not to sign off on any paper that threatens millions of lives.

Some claim that the best thing is to be realistic and recognise that, at the very least, the agreement saved the UN system from collapse.

Unfortunately, a convenient realism has become all that the powerful nations are willing to offer, while they ignore scientists' exhortations to act radically now. The UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has found that in order to have a 50 per cent chance of keeping the rise in temperature below 1.5°, emissions must peak by 2015. The attempt in Cancun to delay critical decisions until next year could have catastrophic consequences.



Michael Oko, World Resources Institute

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Bolivia is a small country. We are among the most vulnerable nations when it comes to climate change, but with the least responsibility for causing the problem. Studies indicate that our capital, La Paz, could become a desert in 30 years. What we do have is the privilege of being able to stand by our ideals, of not letting partisan agendas obscure our principal aim to defend life and the Earth. We are not desperate for money; the US has already cut our climate funding. We are not beholden to the World Bank, as so many of us in the South once were. We can act freely and do what is right.

Bolivia may have acted unusually by upsetting the established way of dealing with things. But we face an unprecedented crisis, and false victories won't save the planet. We must all stand up and demand a climate agreement strong enough to match the crisis we confront.