

THE MAYORS CLIMATE CHANGE SUMMIT – A REFLECTION

Frederick Baffour Opoku
Accra, Ghana

At the United Nations Climate Change Conference in December, national governments will be negotiating for a new global climate agreement.

At the same time, cities will present solutions needed to combat climate change at a Copenhagen Climate Summit for Mayors. The summit to be held from December 14, to 17 at the Copenhagen City hall, is being hosted and organized by the City of Copenhagen in special cooperation with C40 and ICLEI.

The theme for the summit is “The Copenhagen Climate Summit for Mayors – supporting an ambitious and relevant climate agreement. Change your globe”

The main programme outline is as follows: Monday December 14, – kick off and study tours, Tuesday December 15, – Mayors Tuesday theme “Cities Act!” Wednesday December 16 - Partnership and Dialogue, Research and Barriers. Activities lined up include press conference, round table talks, presentation of research, various events, and official dinner with key speakers on Tuesday night, the city’s public celebration. On Wednesday December 17, there will be study tours of climate solutions in Copenhagen.

According to Ritt Bjerregaard, Lord Mayor of City of Copenhagen, the mayors’ climate change summit will put cities on top of the global climate agenda and send the message to the heads of state, the media and citizens that “cities act – we must, we can and we will”.

In a statement issued on behalf of the Copenhagen City Council contained in the prelude to the publication, ‘**CLIMATE SUMMIT FOR MAYORS, COPENHAGEN 2009 – cities act (December 14th to 17th)**’ the Lord Mayor observes that half the world’s population is now living in cities and the number is rapidly growing; adding cities of the world are responsible for up to 80 percent of global carbon dioxide emissions as a result.

Hence, “any solution to the climate crisis therefore, has to involve active participation from the cities”, he says.

The City of Copenhagen, the Lord Mayor points out, is therefore looking up to welcome mayors from all over the world to the climate summit for the mayors, come December.

Message:

The mayors will strongly urge the heads of states to commit themselves to ambitious emissions targets, and that targets and strategies must be followed by action in order to impact.

This is because the mayors hold the strong conviction that the cities are in a unique position to curb carbon emissions and for this reason, governments should recognize the role of cities and local authorities and involve them in the global climate cooperation.

The City of Copenhagen, according to the publication, has dedicated its main square as stage for involving citizens in the fight against global warming. Projections thrown onto the surface of a giant globe set up on the square will change its appearance, thus displaying the consequences of action or inaction in the climate arena

This prominent landmark in the fight against climate change will also be a platform for the participating mayors to show how cities can lead the way in combating climate change.

A main stage on the square will feature artists and selected international speakers, while local artists from participating cities have been invited to perform in order to increase popular support for the fight against global warming.

Task:

Cities are confronted with a huge task in the global efforts at reducing CO₂ emissions, in view of the observation that they contribute to about 80 percent of global CO₂ emissions.

The call by the Lord Mayor of Copenhagen, to the effect that any solution to the climate crises requires the active involvement of cities is not only timely but in the right direction.

In an article, '**Climate Change and Urban Areas**', the author, Professor Roberto Sanchez Rodriguez says where as climate change is more than an environmental problem; it is also a major development challenge for urban areas.

This article which is featured in the '**Synthesis Report on Climate Change – Global Risks, Challenges and Decisions**' co – authored by 12 distinguished scientists, under the auspices of University of Copenhagen, notes that urban areas or cities are highly vulnerable to crises and disasters associated with climate variability and climate change.

Their cumulative impacts, according to Professor Rodriguez have severe economic and human costs, which quickly lead to serious bottlenecks or emergencies in the supply of key resources such as water, energy and food and affect the living conditions of the vast number of people.

Providing statistics, he contends that the United Nations estimates that a total of 2.5 billion people were affected by disasters between 1995 and 2004, 75 percent of which were related to weather extremes.

Maintaining social and urban vulnerability and enhancing adaptation to the impacts of climate change, Professor Rodriguez maintains, offer extended social, economic, health and environmental benefits for local and national governments.

Observing that important elements in adaptation strategies include poverty alleviation, improvement of livelihood strategies, building human capital, protection of environmental areas, enhancing public health and creating opportunities for social development, Professor Rodriguez points out that there is the urgent need to incorporate adaptative criteria in the design and planning of the built environment – urban infrastructure, building, and transportation.

He urges that incorporating multidimensional adaptative strategies into current urban development strategies will make an efficient use of scarce financial, technical, human and natural resources, particularly in poor countries and emerging economies.

A critical step in this direction is assisting policy makers, urban planners and stake holders to incorporate adaptative strategies and define alternative and sustainable paths of urban growth.

Professor Rodriguez maintains that there is a tremendous opportunity to integrate development, mitigation and adaptation strategies to create more resilient urban areas.

Furthermore, delays in developing and implementing adaptative strategies will have several consequences for millions of urban inhabitants, and ultimately local and national economies, he warns.

Co-authors of '**Synthesis Report on Climate Change – Global Risks, Challenges and Decisions**', also state that water resources are a growing problem for urban areas.

The authors observe that clean water in most of the new mega-cities, where tens of millions of people or more, often poor, inhabitants live is already an issue of serious concern.

They note that in many cases, pressure on water supply is exacerbated by changes in rainfall patterns and water availability resulting from climate change.

A continuing flux of people into these new mega-cities, some of whom are escaping dying areas in the surrounding regions, adds further to water stress, the authors say.

Low carbon energy:

For cities to reduce CO₂ emissions, they can also resort to low carbon energy efficient strategies outlined in the summary and recommendation segment in the Seventh Report of the Denmark based National Laboratory for Sustainable Energy (RISO), which takes as its point of reference the recommendations of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 2007.

The report presents state-of-the-art and development perspectives for energy supply technologies, new energy systems, end-use energy efficient improvements and new policy measures.

It also includes estimate of the CO₂ reduction potentials for different technologies. The technologies are characterized with regard to their ability to contribute either to ensuring a peak in CO₂ emissions within 10 to 15 years, or to long term CO₂ reductions.

The RISO report notes that it is important to expand the use of instruments like the **Clean Development Mechanism** (CDM) to further the development and implementation of low carbon energy systems especially in developing countries.

It says stimulating cooperation between existing regional power pools in developing countries will be essential in exploiting large but regionally-diverse resources such as hydro, coal, and natural gas needed to provide electricity to meet increasing urban demand. Rural electrification will also depend on options for affordable grid based electricity, the report emphasizes.

It also recommends that intensified research and demonstration for new energy technologies, particularly, systems adapted to the specific needs of different regions of the world, and preferably in international collaboration must be stimulated locally, regionally and globally.

Furthermore, educating the next generation of energy specialists, engineers and policy makers world wide, the report suggests, is important to the development and use of new energy technologies at locally, regionally and globally.

Way forward:

For developing countries in particular, the issue of uneven development of communities and equitable distribution resources, has resulted in the rural urban drift with the flux of many people into cities and towns, which has brought enormous pressure to bear on them in respect of the use of infrastructure, natural resources, etc, being over stretch beyond limits.

The consequential effects of such actions include the indiscriminate dissipation and pollution of natural resources, sometimes for selfish gains, acts of environmental degradation, and deforestation, among other negative practices which contribute to climate change.

Prevailing energy systems in cities which do not conform to energy efficient practices, need to be modernized

to incorporate low carbon energy systems in conformity with the desire of developing countries to institute adaptation projects to offset the global effects of climate change facing them.

To these countries, the importance and usefulness of the platform which the impending mayors' climate summit will serve in helping to address the numerous problems facing their cities, in that regard cannot be underestimated.

From the foregoing, it becomes obvious that cities are saddled with an enormous task to contend with and can thus play a positive complimentary role in the global efforts at reducing CO2 emissions.

It is within this context that the mayors' climate summit will serve not only as a useful platform but also the rallying point for them for cities to share progressive ideas and adopt strategies towards the attainment of such a noble objective of reducing CO2 emissions.

That is why knowledge sharing and follow up action should be a necessary approach and on a continual basis even in the aftermath of this important summit to keep the cities united for useful cause in the long term.

Interestingly, summit host, City of Copenhagen, itself is known to be adopting series of comprehensive policies and measures designed to make the city CO2 neutral by 2015, and thus become the climate capital of the world. Already, Copenhagen prides itself as the Environmental city of Europe, which is reflected in the numerous projects and programmes it has been implementing over the years aimed at reducing CO2 emissions in the city.

On June 29TH, Journalists attending the capacitation course in connection with the coverage of the upcoming United Nations Climate Change Summit had the opportunity to be briefed by city officials at the Copenhagen Town Hall on preparations towards the mayors' summit and on climate change issues.

This interaction proved beneficial with useful exchanges between the city officials and their journalists' guests regarding the successful hosting of the summit and the way forward.

It will be interesting therefore for the City of Copenhagen to share its experiences with cities of the rest of the world during this august summit.