

Title This post shares thoughts and experiences from the Climate Change Conference currently going on in Durban South Africa. It is the 17th Conference of Parties – simply put, COP 17. Attending a COP meeting for the first time can be overwhelming, if not intimidating. You meet thousands of people moving in different directions. You see many advertisements for hundreds of meetings on boards and electronic panels, everywhere. You see people sitting in small groups, some under tents, some under trees and others in hundreds of rooms spread across the conference venue. Here you see a ‘pavillion’ on this, and a ‘hub’ on that, there. Even deciding where to eat is not easy because, there are so many food courts selling all manner of dishes. You really have to know what you want before you make the order. To be honest, I think there more food stands here than there are exhibitors. People are given badges to distinguish the category of organisations they represent. At COP 17, you meet people with pink badges written ‘PARTY.’ But this has nothing to do with a bash. It simply means they represent a country that has signed the climate agreement. Those of us in the NGO fraternity have yellow badges, and it seems there are more of us than those of the ‘party.’ Fortunately for me, this is not my first COP; it is my third. I went to Changwon, South Korea, for the Wetlands conference in 2008 and Nagoya, Japan, in 2010 for the biodiversity (CBD COP10) conference. But it is my first climate change COP, so I still have many things to learn, and being my first time to Durban, a new experience all together. Security at these meetings is taken seriously. Having a badge, of whatever colour doesn’t exempt you from a mandatory security check every time to come into the conference venue. You remove your laptop, shoes, coins, phone and belt as hawk-eyed UN security agents watch your every movement, with their ceskas hanging from their hips. I honestly don’t like this aspect of the COP. After the scanner, your badge is screened and your photo appears on the screen; only then are you let in. Behind the apparent confusion for a casual observer, the COP is a very structured process. Negotiations over various texts go on in the small and big groups that you see. Every negotiator wants to ensure their point of view is included in the final ‘decision.’ Some of those negotiators have been in more conferences that they can count. You will know them by their reference to ‘decision 8/5.3 of COP 8’ held in this and that place. Durban has been great. Since I arrived on 28th November, the weather has oscillated between hot and cool. On Saturday, our BirdLife team visited Paradise Valley Nature Reserve outside Durban and it was actually quite cool. It was a welcome break from the now familiar surroundings of Durban International Conventions Centre. These are the COP veterans. If you are used to Nairobi, Lagos or other African metropolis, traffic in Durban looks quite unbelievably organized. There is no hooting, revving and shouting touts. The usually notorious public transport mini-buses seem tame compared to their counterparts in our other African capitals. Even the Metro Police standing at the ‘robots’ (that is what Durban residents call traffic lights) don’t seem to interfere too much. By the way, I have always wondered why ‘robots’ should be manned by police who should be chasing after criminals. So as the COP days go by, you have to device your pathway and programme. Or you will find yourself in the wrong room attending the wrong meeting, or just find yourself at Pick and Pay shopping mall, which is just a stone throw from the COP venue. More in the coming days!