

Title The visible power; that is, the ability to make binding decisions at COP17 belongs to Parties. Parties are the 194 countries that have signed the climate agreement. Voting is rarely done, but if it were to happen, Non Governmental Organisations would not vote, since they attend these meeting as observers. But even the Parties do recognise the influence that the 'yellow badges' have. First, the sheer numbers of NGO attendees is enough to give you a clue that climate change is not just a government affair; it also belongs to the people. Among the 15,000 attendees, probably 8,000 are from civil society. And if governments represent the people, then NGOs *work* with the people, and are often closer to and feel the heartbeat of the people more than their governments. The 'yellow badges' at this meeting cannot be ignored. They display their messages in numerous stands at the Exhibition Centre, just after the creaky bridge opposite the Africa Pavillion. At one stand, a coalition of climate NGOs is giving out daily 'awards' to the 'Fossil of the Day.' A fossil is a country, usually a developed one, that is showing the least willingness to support progress at the talks. At the end of the COP, the country that consistently falls in this category will receive the unenviable 'Grand Fossil Award.' What a powerful way to motivate progress! At another stand, there is a big banner with the writing: 'STOP TALKING AND START PLANTING?'. It has hilarious photos of children blocking the mouths of government functionaries from their respective countries. The message to the governments here is that they must stop talking and start planting trees. NGOs also exercise their influence by quietly sitting through the negotiations. During week 1, most of the sessions were open and coalitions assigned point people who followed up progress in various themes. Some of the 'yellow badges' happen to be accredited governments, and with their pink badges, have access to all the venues. This way, their positions find their way in all deliberations. Another way that the NGOs use to pass their message is through 'side events.' These are meetings, away from the official programme, that are organized to discuss specific topics or themes. But side events are not a preserve of the 'yellow badges'; governments and donors like the World Bank have borrowed a leaf and do numerous side events. On Thursday last week, we held the BirdLife side event to show how we are helping natural areas and people to cope with climate change. We had prepared for the side event for a long time and were anxious about the attendance because the location was outside the main exhibition centre. But once again, the influence of the 'yellow badges' was demonstrated. Over 40 participants, including several directors of government agencies from across Africa, attended. The meeting exchanged useful ideas on how natural areas can be helped to cope with climate change. But you should not forget the noisy element of the NGOs. Last Saturday, thousands of demonstrators poured into the streets of Durban to press for an agreement in Durban. They came with posters, replicas of world leaders, colourful banners and all manner of costumes. One poster read 'Listen to the people not the polluters?' urging the COP delegates to pay attention to the needs of the poor and not the rich. And only yesterday, some protesters were arrested for putting up a flag at a hotel where a meeting of big businesses attending COP, was taking place. It is unlikely the protesters will spend the night in jail, but it goes to show the high stakes and lobbying that has to go on before a deal is agreed. So next time you hear of a COP meeting, be sure that the NGOs will be there. And they will be there not only to add flavor to the proceedings but also exercise their often, underestimated power.