action time

by Monique Barbut

December was a banner month for the overarching issue of climate change. In the space of just five days, the issue was the real star at the Nobel Peace Prize award ceremony and the world's governments signed the Bali Action Plan as a new roadmap towards solutions. Together, the two events helped to shift global discourse exponentially.

The Bali meeting marks a major turn in the international community's effort on addressing how we adapt to climate change. Communities have adapted to climate variability for centuries, using indigenous knowledge and ingenious makeshift solutions. This type of approach falls far short of what is now required in the face of global warming. The evidence of people around the developing world who can testify firsthand about its ravages is overwhelming. They have watched helplessly as their farmlands flood, their coastlines erode, and their crops, homes, and livelihoods are destroyed.

Such outcroppings of climate change have quietly, but fundamentally, reshaped the policy debate. For more than a decade, the global community has battled over requiring industrialized countries to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. These "mitigation" strategies, including the Kyoto accord, are invaluable, if still too timid. But the new policy thrust is "adaptation"—changing how things are done in order to minimize global warming's effects on food supplies, drinking water, irrigation and public health, particularly in the developing world. Adaptation has long been the orphan child of the climate change movement. Real and significant action on it can go a long way toward solving the present and future ills of global warming.

Adaptation's painful paradox is that the poorest developing countries bear almost no responsibility for climate change since their emerging economies emit small amounts of greenhouse gases. Yet they are often those hit hardest by global warming and least able to pay for adaptive measures like crop insurance, malaria and dengue fever treatment, new crop varieties more resistant to drought and flood, and infrastructure protection against natural disasters and floods amplified by climate change.

One of Bali's most awaited decisions was an agreement immediately to bring to life the Kyoto Protocol's Adaptation Fund that had been in the planning stage for several years. The Global Environment Facility (GEF) was selected to serve as its secretariat, and its organizational work has already begun operating under the authority of the Conference of the Parties/Meeting of the Parties of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The secretariat will assist the Fund's board, facilitating its work in developing operational policies and guidelines, deciding on projects, and allocating funds in line with the Adaptation Fund principles, criteria, modalities, policies and programmes.

Uniquely, the Fund will obtain most of its finance from a two per cent share of the proceeds of the Clean Development Mechanism where industrialized countries trade emission rights with less polluting developing ones. This will give developing countries a stronger voice in managing it as they take a special interest in how the resources they are contributing are used.

The Fund also differs from previous GEF practice in that countries will now be able to submit their proposals directly to its Board — which will decide precise modalities and conditions — without necessarily going through an implementing or executing agency.

The immediate challenge is to make the best use of resources. Fortunately the GEF has over a decade of experience in funding adaptation. In February 1997, it provided $6.8million for implementing the Caribbean Planning for Adaptation to Climate Change project — the first such project funded by the GEF and one of the first worldwide to include both action and capacity building in this field. As the issue became more of a priority for many developing countries, the GEF responded to UNFCCC guidance by establishing the Strategic Priority on Adaptation worth $50million. This has supported numerous projects worldwide. focusing on pilot and demonstration ones that generate real benefits on the ground: examples include:

- The Kiribati Adaptation Programme;
- Integrating Vulnerability and Adaptation to Climate Change into Sustainable Development Policy Planning and Implementation in Southern and Eastern Africa,
- Participatory Coastal Zone Restoration and Sustainable Management in the Eastern Province of Post–Tsunami Sri Lanka and
- The Integrated National Adaptation Project in Colombia.

In 2001 the UNFCCC established the Special Climate Change Fund and the Least Developed Countries Fund, requesting the GEF to manage them, with adaptation the top priority. These funded many National Adaptation Programmes of Action in Least Developed Countries, along with such concrete action as the Conservancy Adaptation project in Guyana. Work is under way on a project for Reducing Climate Change induced Risks and Vulnerabilities from Glacial Lake Outburst in the Punakha-Wangdi and Chamkhar Valleys in Bhutan. This process has attracted over $270 million in additional funding for adaptation projects and programmes worldwide.

All this is good: but is it enough? After Bali we must start the equally important and demanding task of anchoring the Adaptation Fund in a much broader international architecture to deal with the fundamental changes to life on earth brought by climate change. This touches the livelihoods of developed and developing countries and of rich and poor people and all sectors of society and the economy.

One recent World Bank study estimated that, globally, the annual incremental costs of adapting to projected climate change are likely to lie in the range of $10-40 billion. Many developing countries simply will not be able to manage this on top of their existing development challenges. Additional support will be needed. Another study estimated that nearly 40 per cent of all development projects demonstrate some form of vulnerability to climate change: the significant costs of changing them will prove a burden for many poorer developing countries. So new innovative policies must be put in place, and further resources will be required.

Financing adaptation to climate change requires three things. First, it requires us to re-examine the nature of conventional development through the prism of vulnerability to work out how and where we need to do it differently. "Climate-proofing" existing development programmes is essential to make future growth more resilient. Developing countries will have to incorporate adaptation to climate change into all their developmental policies and priorities. This will reduce both their vulnerability and the cost of adaptation, while increasing their resilience.

Second, adaptation will require new investment and financing for activities that would not previously have been needed. For example, vector-control programs will have to be implemented in areas where changing temperature and rainfall patterns create a new environment for such diseases as malaria and dengue fever. Similarly, new investments in flood management will be required when a flood that has been recorded every 50 years begins to occur every five, or settlements may have to be abandoned and populations re-located.

Third, since the entire world will have to learn to adapt, joint and coordinated action will be necessary: isolated initiatives will not achieve the objectives desired. International cooperation will have to put less emphasis on who contributed what, and more stress on the actions that — if undertaken as a joint endeavour — will neutralize negative effects on the people's lives and livelihood. The balkanization of world climate change efforts must be avoided.

These perspectives must be entrenched firmly in the Post Kyoto institutional arrangement if the world is to make a dent in dealing with climate change.