

Climate Change After Copenhagen – Where Do We Go From Here?

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What did the Copenhagen Accord achieve? The most important outcome is that the US, in the person of President Obama, and China, in the person of Prime Minister Wen Jiabao, were there and active. Both countries account for well over half of global emissions and this share will rise over time. They have been outside the tent to this point, and their engagement is a crucial and essential pre-requisite for progress.

Secondly, there is an emphasis on, and commitment to, dealing with the challenge that poor countries in particular face in adapting to the effects of climate change that are inevitable – developed countries ‘shall provide adequate, predictable and sustainable financial resources, technology and capacity building to support the implementation of adaptation action in developing countries’.

Thirdly, there is agreement as to the monitoring, reporting and verification of actions to reduce emissions (mitigation) by both developed and developing countries ‘under clearly defined guidelines that ensure that national sovereignty is respected’, and actions seeking international support will be recorded in a registry. Fourthly, there is recognition of the necessity to address reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation.

Finally, there is commitment to achieve objectives at least cost, and use markets and provide incentives to developing countries to this end, and there is commitment to develop a ‘legally binding instrument’ for adoption at the next meeting a year from now. These are very significant achievements and, in fact, are essential if we are to have any hope of successfully addressing the problem.

What’s missing is a commitment to credible action to reduce emissions by developed countries and to a reduction in the rate of growth in emissions by rapidly growing developing countries. As regards the developed countries, the European Union is the only jurisdiction to have an obligation (-20 per cent by 2020 to 1990 base) adopted by legislation; others have made pledges or have options under legislative consideration, for example, the US (-14-17 per cent to 2005 base) and Japan (-25 per cent to 1990 base), but these have as yet no statutory status.

A number of rapidly growing developing countries have made voluntary pledges vis a vis 2020, including China (reduce carbon intensity by 40-45 per cent), India (reduce emission intensity by 20-25 per cent), Indonesia (reduce emissions from business as usual by 26 per cent and by 41 per cent with international support). There is a commitment to provide immediate funding over the 2010-2012 period for poor developing countries, led by Japan (US\$11 billion) and the EU (\$10.6 billion) and growing to \$100 billion a year by 2020 ‘from a variety of sources, public and private, bilateral and multilateral, including alternative sources of finance’. A Copenhagen Green Climate Fund and a Technology Mechanism will be established to support projects. In terms of ambition, Japan stands out, both in terms of its emissions reduction target and its proposed funding support.

For the developing countries, the key to rapid progress will be in delivering rapid decarbonisation while environmental quality and living standards rise. This seems feasible for China. Its citizens are already objecting everywhere to the worst urban air quality in the world, and this pressure will intensify – citizens demand clean air as their incomes grow – and clean air tends to be associated with cleaner fuels and lower emissions of all sorts. In Ireland, we went through this clean-up process about 20 years ago: with the banning of the marketing, sale and distribution of bituminous coal in Dublin, we got much better air quality, more efficient heating systems, and lower greenhouse gas emissions.

We can identify a number of benchmarks that have to be met, or the process is doomed to failure. The US must pass legislation capping its own emissions, using the framework of the emissions trading scheme which has already been approved by the House of Representatives, and which will come to a vote in the Senate in 2010. Without this, the US will have no credibility or *de facto* authority. It will be perceived as a free rider, and no one else will see the point in making sacrifices unless it is part of the effort.

And other rich countries – such as Australia, Japan and Canada – need to convert their targets into domestic laws that in turn will make their rhetoric credible. The proposals by China and other rapidly growing countries need to be converted into action plans and given legal status in domestic legislation. The immediate commitment of \$30 billion to help the poorest must be provided – without this, poor countries will have no reason to engage – and the funds must be seen to be effectively spent; otherwise the growth of such funds to \$100 billion annually will not materialise.

Systems of monitoring, reporting and verification that are simultaneously credible and politically acceptable will need to be in place, and emissions trading will need to adapt to integrate across the Atlantic and Pacific to link Europe, the US and Japan, and by 2020 with sectoral or other agreements with China and other rapidly growing countries.

What are the prospects of success? Given that the members of the European Union – who know each other well, and have a shared legal framework – take until midnight on the last day to re-negotiate cod quotas, it seems wholly unrealistic to expect 192 States with few shared traditions or legal frameworks to simultaneously agree on what needs to be done to save us from excessive global warming, how it is to be done, and by whom. But if, by December 2010, we have in place statutory action by the US and other leading emitters to cap emissions, and by China and others to meet their targets, with funds in place to help the poorest countries, which are effectively spent, and systems of monitoring, reporting and verification also agreed, there is a chance that we will be able to say to our posterity that, in the end, we did enough to leave them with a habitable planet.