

Emissions reductions Rich countries double duty to act

To avoid catastrophic climate change, the science says we must keep global warming as far below 2°C as possible – the threshold at which ‘tipping-points’ are likely to be triggered increasing the danger of runaway climate change.

As temperatures rise above 2°C scientists predict that an estimated two billion people will be affected by water shortages and most of Southern Africa will have to cope with year-round droughts. Global agriculture will be undermined and hunger and malnutrition will kill up to three million more people every year.

To have a decent chance of keeping below 2°C, scientists have calculated that rich countries as a group must reduce emissions to at least 40 percent below 1990 levels by 2020. But this is only half the story. Avoiding climate catastrophe is not just about how much rich countries cut their own emissions, but how they work with developing countries to curb theirs.

The double-duty

On their own, rich countries’ cuts of 40 percent below 1990 levels by 2020 will not be enough to keep temperatures from rising above danger levels – or to cover their fair share of global mitigation action. Emissions reductions will need to be made across the developing world too. This gives rich countries – which created the climate crisis and have the economic capacity to tackle it - a double duty to act: to cut their own emissions but also to support actions to reduce emissions in developing countries through finance and technology transfer.

Unfortunately, the global solidarity and cooperation required to tackle emissions in the developing world has been wholly absent from the negotiations. Rich countries argue that developing countries must commit to take action on. Developing countries argue that they should not be expected to take on actions until rich countries have made good their promises to cut emissions first and fastest and made available the finance and technology poor countries need to act.

Mitigation in the negotiations

Since Bali, UN negotiations have proceeded in two parallel negotiating tracks:

The KP track (Ad-hoc Working Group on further commitments for Annex 1 Parties under the Kyoto Protocol or AWG-KP) focuses on further emissions reduction commitments for rich countries (Annex 1) under the Kyoto Protocol. The Kyoto Protocol is a legally binding instrument under which parties agree national emissions reduction commitments. The current round of commitments (the first commitment period) expires in 2012, before which parties are required to agree a new round of emissions reductions for a second commitment period. Because it never ratified the Kyoto Protocol, the US does not participate in the AWG-KP.

The LCA track (Ad-hoc Working Group on Long-term Cooperative Action or AWG-LCA): emissions reductions or mitigation is considered both in terms of quantified emission limitation and reduction objectives (i.e. emissions targets) for rich countries, and nationally appropriate mitigation actions for developing countries, to be supported by finance, technology transfer and capacity building from rich countries. The LCA track applies to all countries including the US, and also includes negotiations on adaptation and other topics.

Rich countries would like to see the two negotiating tracks brought together. Developing countries wish to maintain the Kyoto Protocol track until there is something stronger with which to replace it. They are concerned that combining the two tracks will result in some or all of the Kyoto Protocol features – environmentally rigorous targets and global compliance mechanisms - being dropped in an attempt to craft a deal which appeals to the US.

Rhetoric versus (in)action

The distrust on the part of developing countries is certainly justified. Rich countries have an atrocious record of delivering on their promises, particularly where money is concerned. Rich countries originally pledged to spend 0.7 percent of their national income as aid as far back as 1970. Despite recycling the promise occasionally, they are currently only at 0.3 percent. Meanwhile a number of Annex 1 countries remain off course to achieve their modest reductions under the Kyoto Protocol, and Canada has even suggested it will not bother. And while rich countries say they are committed to 2°C – for example at this year's meeting of the G8 countries – this is not borne out by their current pledges to cut emissions. Only one country – Norway – has offered to reduce its emissions to 40% below 1990 levels by 2020 in the context of an agreement in Copenhagen. Analysis by the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) suggests that current targets is worth aggregate reductions in the range of 12 to 19 percent below 1990 levels by 2020 – less than half of what is required.

The inequalities of climate change: some facts

- Developed countries are responsible for about three quarters of greenhouse gases already released into the atmosphere.
- The average Australian emits nearly 5 times as much as the average Chinese. The average Canadian emits 13 times as much as the average Indian.
- About 100 poor countries, with a total population of nearly a billion people, but accounting for less than 3 percent of global emissions, are set to suffer first and worst from climate change.
- Developed countries, which became rich by burning fossil fuels over the last century, have far greater economic capability with which to tackle emissions.
- Per capita income in the US is about 10 times that of China and about 19 times that of India.

The need for rich country leadership

Even the most progressive rich countries – such as the European Union - are a long way off doing what is needed on emissions reductions. Europe's target of 30 percent reductions is contingent upon other rich countries committing themselves to 'comparable emissions reductions', otherwise it will only go as far as 20 percent – less than half of what is required. This is not leadership. Leadership requires that the EU moves unilaterally to an unconditional 30 percent cut, and table a conditional offer of 40 percent in the event of a fair, ambitious and binding deal. Analysis has shown that since the recession, the cost of achieving a 30 percent reduction is now considerably cheaper than the original costs of achieving the 20 percent target when it was adopted. And greater ambition from the EU need not result in free-riding elsewhere. Leadership from Europe would reduce the risk of collapse at Copenhagen by building trust with developing countries, and place the EU in a stronger position from which to demand greater ambition from others.

But at the moment, it's developing countries that are rising to the challenge. Rather than wait for mitigation finance commitments from rich countries, they are forging ahead with voluntary pledges to tackle emissions. For example in recent weeks:

- Mexico has committed to halving its emissions by 2050
- Brazil has announced it will pledge a reduction below projected emissions of 38-42 percent by 2020.
- South Korea has announced a target to reduce emissions to 30 percent below projected levels by 2020.
- Indonesia plans to cut its emissions to 26 percent below projected levels by 2020, with this figure increasing to 41 percent with sufficient support from rich countries.

Meanwhile China has announced a voluntary reduction in carbon intensity - emissions relative to economic growth - by 40 to 45 % by 2020 from 2005 levels. This opens the door to negotiations on what more China could do with finance and technology support rich countries have promised.

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