

The Copenhagen Accord limps past first milestone

Summary

The Copenhagen Summit in December was almost universally judged to be a failure: at least if your measure of success was that it should have sealed a Kyoto-style treaty for regulating climate change after 2012 when Kyoto runs out.

Although modest, the Copenhagen Accord did set out some ambitions, including that by 31 January 2010 developed countries will have pledged quantified emissions cuts and developing countries will have set out their proposed climate change mitigation measures. Despite the fact that Yvo de Boer, the UNFCCC Executive Secretary regards the 31 January deadline as “flexible”, 55 countries have responded to the call for pledges. Below we look at pledges made by the major developed and developing countries as well as what might happen next in the ongoing debates on international climate regulation.

Background

The only formal document to come out of the Copenhagen Conference in December 2009, the Copenhagen Accord (“**the Accord**”) reflects a political agreement on the long-term, multilateral response to climate change. It includes a deadline for signatories of 31 January 2010 for Annex I countries (developed countries) to submit pledges to cut their GHG emissions by 2020, and non-Annex I countries (principally developing countries) to submit their proposed climate change mitigation actions.

Commitments

The tables below show the headline pledges relating to reduction in carbon emissions under the Accord made by both Annex 1 countries (developed countries) and non-Annex 1 countries (principally developing countries).

Pledges by Annex 1 countries (i.e. developed countries)

| Annex I Parties (i.e. developed countries) | Emission reductions by 2020 | Base Year |
|--|---|-----------|
| Australia | 5-25% | 2000 |
| Canada | 17%, to be aligned with the US emissions target | 2005 |
| EU | 20%, rising to 30% if developed countries commit to similar targets | 1990 |
| Japan | 25% | 1990 |
| New Zealand | 10-20% | 1990 |
| Russian Federation | 15-25% | 1990 |
| US | In the range of 17% | 2005 |

Pledges by Non-Annex 1 countries (i.e. principally developing countries)

| Non-Annex I Parties (i.e. principally developing countries) | Nationally Appropriate Mitigation Actions by 2020 | Base Year |
|---|---|-------------------|
| Brazil | Reduce carbon emissions by 36 - 39% | Business as Usual |
| China | Reduce carbon emissions per unit of GDP by 40 - 45% on 2005 levels | 2005 |
| India | Reduce carbon emissions per unit of GDP by 20 - 25% | 2005 |
| South Africa | Reduce carbon emissions by 34% against business as usual ^[1] | Business as Usual |

Some environmental groups have greeted these announcements with dismay. It is claimed that the commitments would mean an average global temperature increase of more than 3 degrees compared to pre-industrial times, setting the world on a path towards catastrophic climate change. Greenpeace's Bernhard Obermayr stated that "the Accord's 31 January deadline was no more than a cynical public relations exercise allowing Governments to recycle existing pledges and dress them up as effective action." However, David Doniger of the U.S. Natural Resources Defense Council said the accord "should give swing [U.S.] Senators the assurance that U.S. is not acting alone, without emerging economies" and "is a significant breakthrough that signals a new era of effective cooperation between all major emitters, and opens the door to finally enacting U.S. climate and energy legislation" in 2010.

The British Government, among others, is more optimistic; it says the Accord provides the basis for significant country-by-country carbon cuts. Commenting on 2 February, Ed Miliband of the Department for Environment and Climate Change stated: "Just one month after Copenhagen, countries accounting for nearly 80% of global emissions have shown they're pushing ahead with domestic action on climate change. With countries including the USA, China and India setting out what they will do, this is a significant change compared with just twelve months ago. There is now a world-wide recognition that cutting emissions and moving to a low carbon economy is the right thing to do. The change is irreversible."

What next?

The next major UNFCCC conference is in Mexico in November 2010, with an interim meeting in Bonn in May 2010.

However, views are being expressed world-wide that a deal on climate change is impossible whilst the impasse within the UNFCCC remains. One of its key problems is the fact that it requires all 192 countries to agree on an issue which has provoked such dissent.

One solution might be for a representative group of countries (including China, India, the US and the UK amongst others) to agree to take matters forward, although this is likely to be fiercely resisted by countries, such as some of the small island states, who wish to retain their veto on any deal they see as weak.

A significant barrier to a UNFCCC climate "deal" is how to fashion a legally binding agreement when the negotiation process is divided among two tracks – one to adopt new Kyoto Protocol commitments and one under the Convention pursuant to the Bali Action Plan. The developed countries have urged a merger of the tracks, but the developing countries have resisted and the subject was not openly debated at Copenhagen. Jonathan Pershing, the deputy U.S. negotiator, recently said that "the question ultimately is what form . . . would be acceptable to the major players", noting that "you could imagine" one "that doesn't have any consequences" and would be unsatisfactory or one with "substantial consequences that countries couldn't ratify". He added that this is "something we are beginning to really work aggressively on", while observing also that "it is impossible to imagine a global agreement in place that doesn't have global buy in".

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Footnote

- 1 By 2025, South Africa also pledges to reduce carbon emissions by 42% against a business as usual baseline.