

Reaching a new climate change deal in Copenhagen: renewed political commitment needed

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It is now very clear that governments will have to show renewed commitment and act promptly to speed up negotiations, if an effective international deal is to be reached at the impending United Nations Climate Change conference at Copenhagen, Denmark in December.

A new climate change deal will have to emerge at all cost in Copenhagen to replace the first phase of the Kyoto Protocol of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) which expires at the end of 2012.

The UNFCCC, the first international measure to address climate change, was adopted in May 1992 and came into force in March 1994. So far about 192 governments – almost all governments of the world have ratified it. The convention's goals are to stabilize Green House Gases (GHG) emissions at a level that prevents human interference with the climate system.

By differentiating between industrialized and developing countries, the UNFCCC recognizes that industrialized countries are responsible for most of the current build up of GHG in the atmosphere, and must therefore lead in reducing emissions. The UNFCCC countries constitute the Conference of Parties (COP) that takes the highest decision and meet every year to review progress and discuss further measures. The Copenhagen conference (COP 15), will be the 15th edition.

The Kyoto Protocol: When they adopted the UNFCCC, governments knew that the commitments would not be sufficient to seriously tackle climate change. In December 1997, they took a further step to by adopting a protocol to the UNFCCC in the Japanese city of Kyoto: the Kyoto Protocol.

The protocol did not become international law until 2004. As of February, 2007, 168 countries have rectified the treaty with the United States and Australia as notable exceptions. Kyoto sets GHG reduction targets for the 37 industrialized countries and the European Union which the protocol identifies as being responsible for global warming, and are also responsible for reducing GHG emissions, and an international framework for addressing global warming through international cooperation.

Binding target for the 37 industrialized countries and the European Union, otherwise called Annex One countries, for reducing GHG emissions, enjoin them to do an average of 5.2 percent below 30 percent 1990 levels during the Kyoto commitment period from 2008 to 2012.

Developing countries are excluded from binding targets for reducing emissions, under Kyoto, which also makes provision for developing countries to be provided with financial and other resources to help them adapt to climate change.

However, the protocol has general commitments that reinforce the fundamental obligations of all parties, for both the industrialized and developing countries to tackle climate change. These include preparing national climate change mitigation and adaptation programs, taking steps to improve the quality of emissions data, promoting environmentally friendly technology transfer, cooperating in international scientific research and international climate observation networks, and supporting climate change education, training, public awareness, and capacity building initiatives.

Additional commitment periods and further negotiations: The Kyoto Protocol recognizes the need for additional commitment periods and calls for negotiations on further commitments from Annex One or the industrialized countries, to begin at least seven years (2005 onwards) which will produce a new legally binding emissions reduction agreement to replace the first phase of the protocol, after it expires in 2012.

It is well recognized that the protocol alone will not meet the objectives of the UNFCCC – the stabilization of GHG concentration in the atmosphere at a level that would avoid dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system.

UNFCCC is of the opinion that even if it was ratified by all industrialized countries, the Kyoto protocol will make only a small reduction in global GHG emissions, and that reduction will only be in force until 2012, the end of the first commitment period, and that is why a new agreement is needed to continue from there.

The proposed new agreement will be looking at four key areas to tackle climate change namely – mitigation, (whereby active measures are taken to change or reduce the human activities that drive climate change), adaptation, (whereby society increases its capacity to cope with the impacts of climate change), and technology and finance. In addition to these is a longer list of issues by which one or more countries was looking for agreement.

These include establishment of a long term emissions reduction goal to meet the UNFCCC objective of stabilizing atmospheric concentration of GHG, the important issue of Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation (REDD), expansion of the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) and Joint Implementation (JI), the issue of compensation for the effects of industrialized countries mitigation efforts on developing countries, control of emissions from fuel used in international aviation and marine transport, and easier mechanisms for voluntary commitments for developing countries.

The CDM, established under article 12 of the Kyoto Protocol allows the Annex one countries to obtain emissions credit for projects that reduce emissions in developing countries, provided that such projects also help developing countries to achieve their sustainable development goals

The credits are known as Certified Emissions Reduction, approval of all the parties involved, and must lead to emissions reductions.

If the Annex one parties involved in a JI project is in compliance of all the kyoto protocol commitments, then they can approve the JI project and transfer the credit. If one or more of the parties is not is not in compliance, the project is subject to a review procedure similar to that developed for CDM projects.

Slow negotiations and lack of commitment: On the contrary, efforts at negotiations and dialogue aimed at arriving at a new agreement has rather been too slow due to some bottlenecks such as parties not compromising on delicate issues, or hold on to extreme positions to pursue their interests, slow commitment by some industrialized countries in meeting their mid-term set Kyoto emissions reduction targets, etc, which sometimes raises doubts about the prospects of a new agreement in Copenhagen.

Some countries seem to have shown very little interest on mid-term legally binding emission reduction targets set for them under the Kyoto protocol with impunity and are no where near achieving the prescribed 30 percent reduction target by 2020, while others are doing their best to cope with the situation.

This is in spite of the fact that all the mechanisms needed to facilitate negotiations and dialogue within the UNFCCC have been instituted such as the Bali Action Plan or Road Map, developed by the 13th Conference of Parties (COP 13) which calls for a two year negotiations to reach agreement on most of the cardinal issues in the new agreement, in panel with the Ad Hoc Working Group on commitments for Annex One Parties under the Kyoto Protocol (AWG-KP), whose mandate is limited to establishing targets for Annex One parties for the next post Kyoto commitment period.

There is also the Ad Hoc Working Group on Long Term Cooperative Action under the Convention (AWG-LCA) constituted by COP 11 to address some of these concerns, and also address climate change by enhancing implementation of the convention. The dialogue process was to hold a series of workshops over two years without prejudice to any future negotiations, commitments, processes, framework or mandate under the convention. Negotiations have also been carried out in the AWG-LCA.

Both the AWG-KP and AWG-LCA were tasked to hold four meetings in 2008 and four more meetings in 2009, however meetings held so far have not achieved the much expected positive results needed to move forward the negotiations and dialogue process.

The Bonn talks: The Bonn talks are the latest week long informal negotiations session for a new agreement. The meeting attended by 2400 participants managed to achieve limited progress, according to Yvo de Boer, Executive Secretary of the UN Climate Change Secretariat.

In a UNFCCC press release issued on August 14, after the meeting, Yvo de Boer was quoted as saying, "at this meeting only limited progress was made, although governments did get down to some practicalities in the areas of adaptation, technology and capacity building", adding "so

with only 15 days of negotiating time left before Copenhagen, negotiations will need to considerably pick up speed for the world to achieve a successful results at Copenhagen”.

According to the release, while some progress in Bonn was made in narrowing down options in the negotiating text, governments also discussed technical issues such as how mid term (2020) emissions reduction pledges of industrialized countries could be translated into legally binding targets as a key component of the Copenhagen deal.

After the Bonn meeting, work on the negotiation text continues on September 28 in Bangkok at a two week negotiating session. Delegates will then assembly for five days of pre-Copenhagen negotiations in Barcelona on November 2.

However, a major opportunity for all Heads of State and governments of the world to provide a clear political guidance to negotiations, ahead of the UN Climate Change conference in Copenhagen, will be the UN Secretary General’s Climate Change summit for world leaders on September 22 in New York, which will assemble 192 Heads of State and government parties to the UNFCCC.

Yvo de Boer also admonished industrialized countries to show greater level of ambition on agreeing to meaningful mid-term emissions reduction targets, pointing out that the present level of ambition can be raised domestically by making use of international cooperation.

“We need a clear indication of the finance and technology industrialized countries are ready to provide to help developing countries green their economic growth and adapt to the impacts of climate change”, the Executive Secretary also said in the release.

It is obvious that time is far spent as the count down to the Copenhagen conference is fast approaching. The September 22 UN Secretary General Climate Change summit should provide world leaders and delegates the opportunity to prove their determination that they are committed to a new post Kyoto emissions reduction agreement, and must cooperate with the Secondary General for the realization of such a noble objective. There should be smooth negotiations to pave way for progress.

Scientific evidence abound that global efforts at checking reduced emissions must be sustained at all cost to have a chance of keeping global warming beyond the two degree Celsius limit to avoid dangerous climate change, hence the need for a new agreement in Copenhagen to serve such a worthy cause in the interest of humanity.