

From Copenhagen to where?

Stuart Parkinson assesses the outcome of the Copenhagen climate negotiations, and asks whether meaningful global action will follow.

Even despite the low expectations, the outcome of the Copenhagen climate negotiations in December was extremely weak. Commentators and politicians used a range of colourful language to criticise it, from 'Brokenhagen' to 'a suicide pact' (the latter being a comment from the Sudanese delegation).

The event's final output – the three-page Copenhagen Accord¹ – was hammered out at the eleventh hour by the USA, China and a handful of other countries, after negotiations on a much more detailed text broke down. The full conference of nearly 200 countries then only agreed to 'note' the text, rather than 'accept' it, as is the standard practice.

What the Accord said

The key aspects of the Accord are:

- To "reduce global emissions so as to hold the increase in global temperature below 2 degrees Celsius", with industrialised countries to submit voluntary targets, and developing countries to submit lists of voluntary "actions";
- Independent scrutiny of emissions accounts and emissions reduction actions;
- Industrialised countries to provide new funding for measures in developing countries to curb emissions and adapt to impacts. \$30 billion is to be provided for the period 2010-2012, with a goal of "mobilising" \$100 billion a year by 2020;
- The setting up of funds and mechanisms to ensure that this new finance supports action including reducing deforestation, transferring cleaner technologies, and adapting to climate change.

The flaws in the agreement are stark. National emissions targets are voluntary rather than legally binding, with no overarching limit, either globally or for industrialised countries. While the commitment to keep below a 2°C temperature rise is very important, without a timetable of when global greenhouse gas emissions are to peak, it is a very limited pledge.

Further serious problems can be identified in the commitments over funding for developing countries. \$10 billion a year for 2010 to 2012 is argued by many to be inadequate, while the sources of the proposed \$100 billion a year funding by 2020 are left unspecified.

There is also a lack of a clear process or timetable specified for solving any of these problems, let alone

dealing with the myriad complex issues – such as curbing deforestation or regulating carbon trading – that only received brief mentions in the Accord.

What went wrong?

Recriminations swiftly followed the conclusion of the conference, with the USA and China bearing the brunt of the criticism. Looking beyond the rhetoric it is possible to highlight several key factors:

- China's massive coal reserves and newly acquired economic strength made it more resistant to explicit curbs on emissions. According to an observer at the final round of negotiations², China insisted that emissions targets, both globally and for industrialised countries, be removed from the final agreement. India, it seems, also supported this.
- The USA's high consumption culture and powerful fossil fuel lobby continue to make it difficult for its government to commit to major cuts. The proposed US emissions target amounted to only a 4% cut from 1990 levels by 2020.³ This was considerably less than, for example, the 20-30% proposed by the European Union and 25% by Japan. Even this proposed cut is under threat due to lobbying efforts being pursued within the US Congress.
- Over 100 countries – including most African nations and the members of the Alliance of Small Island States – argued that the maximum target for global temperature rise should only be 1.5°C, as they are vulnerable to major impacts even at this level. However, it was estimated that the combined effect of targets proposed by countries at the conference would only constrain the global temperature to no less than 3.5°C.⁴
- Proposals on funding fell far short of the demands of many developing countries.
- The conference procedures required that any proposal put to the meeting could only be accepted by consensus.

Can a solid deal be salvaged?

World leaders tried to put on a brave face at the end of the talks, but the considerable weaknesses of the agreement were hard to hide. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind a number of positive aspects that can be built upon in the coming weeks and months.

Firstly, there *was* a deal. Many forces – including oil-rich nations, some industrial lobbies and climate deniers – sought to scupper any agreement. They failed. Secondly, the deal included a commitment to keep global temperature change below 2°C, which is

the first time this has been officially recognised in UN climate negotiations.

A further positive sign was that the conference attracted over 100 heads of state, including those of the world's most powerful nations. It is hard to point to any previous conference – on *any* issue – that has attracted such high-level involvement, which demonstrates an important level of commitment for dealing with the problem.

A fourth reason is that, in January, nearly 40 industrialised nations, including the 27 countries of the EU, the USA, Japan, Russia and Australia, signed up for voluntary targets (similar to the proposals made at Copenhagen).⁵ Furthermore, for the first time, many developing countries signed up for action to curb their growth in emissions, including China, India, Brazil and South Africa.⁶

A final promising sign is that the renewable energy and other low carbon industries are growing in influence, and – because they offer such good employment prospects compared with many other industries – they represent an important constituency that can combine economic, social and environmental goals.

These foundations must be built upon. The most worrying thing in terms of the formal negotiation process is the current lack of a clear timetable, against a rapidly closing window of opportunity for keeping below the 2°C threshold. Hence, we must keep the pressure up on policy-makers to deliver a much more comprehensive deal in the months ahead.

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References

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