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COP16 Cancún: Shifting Goals of Climate Negotiations

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Synopsis

The COP16 meeting in Cancun has revealed a fundamental shift in the near-term objectives of the UN's annual climate gatherings. What is this shift and what are its consequences?

Commentary

THE 16th CONFERENCE of Parties (COP16) concluded global climate change negotiations in Cancún, Mexico on 10 December 2010 with renewed momentum overcoming the widespread disappointment with the disastrous talks a year ago at Copenhagen. The Cancun deliberations marked a pronounced shift away from the atmospherics surrounding the infamous 2009 meetings in Copenhagen. COP15 saw the overriding goal of reaching a legally-binding emissions reduction treaty slip away. That objective was immediately shelved in Cancún. There is uncertainty as to when it can be revived. As Timothy E. Worth, president of the United Nations Foundation, stated near the outset of COP16, “[t]here will not be a comprehensive climate agreement reached this year, or perhaps for years to come”.

Worth's sentiments were echoed by ministerial level negotiators. Singapore Senior Minister S. Jayakumar agreed earlier that a “big bang” approach to emissions control would not be possible. Importantly however, these limitations did not paralyse COP16. Rather they freed negotiators and other stakeholders to address issues where agreement appeared more likely.

Positive moves

This freedom of movement led to a series of agreements that, while not addressing the core issues that split the world over climate change, do appear to move the negotiation process forward. Several points of progress in Cancún are noteworthy. Firstly, negotiators formally supported the UN REDD+ mechanisms to help developing countries to prevent deforestation. (REDD+ is Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation, plus other measures such as conservation and land management) Secondly, COP16 codified a Green Climate Fund as part of the UN process to help poor and developing countries to adapt to the impacts of climate change and support low-carbon development.

Thirdly, a more advanced discussion on climate adaptation led to the adoption of the Cancún Adaptation Framework and the establishment of an Adaptation Committee to support state-level measures. Fourthly, agreements were reached to facilitate the flow of low-carbon technologies between developed and developing

countries. Finally, COP16 made progress in the sector of monitoring, reporting and verifying national emissions cuts through standardised self-reporting mechanism and international verification mechanisms.

By moving away from focusing solely on global emissions reduction, the Cancun climate talks were able to place greater emphasis on adaptation measures. They also recognise the importance of reducing vulnerability while building up resilience to the impact of climate change. Such movement is particularly relevant for Southeast Asia, where unique vulnerabilities across sectors such as disaster management, energy and food security, and sustainable development could all benefit from increasing international support for adaptation measures.

ASEAN has a role to play in bridging international and regional efforts, and could use the momentum from the COP16 to put its 2009 ASEAN Climate Change Initiatives (ACCI) into practice. Strong regional approaches to climate change could in turn help overcome impediments to wider-ranging international climate agreements.

Modest but Achievable Goals

In combination, the mitigation and adaptation measures of COP16 have energised the climate negotiation process. After the relative disappointment of Copenhagen in 2009, statements by participants to the Cancun meetings reveal the potential benefits of focusing on realisable objectives. In the words of Christiana Figueres, executive secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC): "Cancun has done its job. The beacon of hope has been reignited and faith in the multilateral climate change process to deliver results has been restored."

Outside of the direct UN structures, country leaders also voiced satisfaction, with US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton calling the COP16 outcome a "significant step forward" and European Commissioner Connie Hedegaard claiming that Cancun "helped deliver the outcome the world expected and needed".

However, despite these measures of progress and signs of renewed diplomatic vigour, the successes realised at COP16 remained relatively modest. The fundamental differences that separate many primary actors within the UNFCCC process remain pervasive. Diplomatically speaking, the situation is pressing. The Kyoto Protocol, which forms the foundation of contemporary international emissions regulation, is set to expire in 2012; the timeframe in which new measures can be implemented is rapidly closing.

Too Low?

The fact that delegates in Cancun elected not to address this elephant in the room demonstrates that past struggles have lowered the bar of what is perceived as possible -- at least in the near-term. One participant observer referred to this shift by stating that "[g]oing into Copenhagen last year, expectations were much too high. This year here in Cancun, they are too low".

It remains to be seen whether COP17 in South Africa next year will continue the incremental approach that enjoyed relative success in Cancun, or expand these expectations to refocus on the principle yet intractable issues. What is clear, however, is that 2011 will be a year of redoubled efforts in climate change diplomacy. The outcome of these efforts will be crucial for the future of international climate cooperation.

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